

Michelle Shephard. Decade of Fear: Reporting from Terrorism's Grey Zone.

London: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011.

Reviewed by Richard Phelps.

Reporting on international events in the decade of the “war on terror” since 9/11 with a particular eye on Canada may not seem like an obvious approach. Yet such an approach was placed upon journalist Michelle Shephard as she reported for a Canadian readership from various warzones for the *Toronto Star*. Her experiences as a journalist in Somalia, Yemen, Guantanamo Bay and the US, have now made it into book form in *Decade of Fear*. The result is as much a reminder of the role that Canada and Canadians have often played throughout various events of the “war on terror” than it is an account of a foreign correspondent’s experiences.

Like many who have come to write on the subject in the past decade, Shephard was thrust into reporting on Al-Qaeda and its sister organisations having had almost no background on the topic. “*I knew more at the time about the Bloods and Crips than Osama bin Laden*”, she writes. But after moving to the US to cover the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, she quickly became immersed in unfolding events during a series of overseas postings. Her lack of background surfaces at times when she resorts to clichés, but this detracts little from a lively and readable adventure across the international landscapes of the *jihād*.

Starting in the US, Shephard describes the horrific aftermath of the attacks. The US she describes at the time now seems so distant: the smouldering ruins, the bereavement, the fear, the reaction, the Sikh gas station owner who was shot dead in Arizona for looking “Middle Eastern”, the Pakistani store clerk killed in Dallas, and the Yemeni shot in Indiana. Yemenis and Somalis in turn come to feature as central characters in their own right, as Shephard travels to report back on countries that acquired a transfigured international significance in the post-9/11 world.

“We have not been persuasive in enlisting the energy and sympathy of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims against the extremist threat”, two of the authors of the 9/11 Commission later wrote. True perhaps, but “the extremist threat” remains as distant from the lives of most of those 1.3 billion as it does from most non-Muslims. It does not seem distant, however, from the lives of those who Shephard encounters in the later sections of her book - in Somalia, Yemen, and Guantanamo. In Somalia, she describes those who live in fear of the Shabab militia, and the mutilation and intimidation that is meted out upon its victims: extortion, beatings, and public stoning. Later in Toronto, she talks to those whose lives were disrupted by extremism as they became caught up in “home grown” terror plots.

What is most unusual about this book is that Shephard highlights the involvement of Canadians in the many events of the decade. After all, a Canadian child soldier, Omar Khadr, became a child prisoner of the “war on terror” after he was captured in Afghanistan by US troops in 2002 and was subsequently transferred to Guantanamo Bay. Likewise, with the CIA's rendition programme, it was an innocent Canadian, Mahir Arar, who found himself diverted from the flight he intended to take at JFK in New York, only to end up delivered into custody to a Syrian prison. Elsewhere in Somalia, Shephard describes how the Canadian Abdullahi Afrah (aka “Asparo”)

emerge as a leader of the austere Islamic Courts Union movement which rose to power in 2006. Each step on her path, Shephard comes across Canadians.

The book follows Shephard on her travels across the globe and the attention she pays to a topic changes as she moves. The result is that the book is part description of her travels and part examination of the issues she encounters, yet it is neither a political study nor a travel memoir. Shephard herself concedes as much, writing that it is "not a memoir or an exhaustive analysis" since the result - flitting from one topic to the next with little closure - is as much a reflection of her lifestyle as a journalist as it is a shortcoming of the book. The book's style is chatty and wide-ranging but she offers some prescient observations. In particular, the book offers some thoughtful passages that reflect on the use of language in the "war on terror" – such as prison administrations labelling toothbrushes as "comfort items" and force feeding as "enteral feeding" – and the idea that the "Arab Spring" or "Awakening" is just as much a *Western* "Awakening" in the way that regimes in the Middle East are viewed as it is an *Arab* "Awakening".

Decade of Fear chronicles the evolving atmospheres and developments of the past decade and Shephard places them into a narrative. As the reader follows her travels, what is striking is the speed in which an industry built up around the fear of terrorism in the West – from the T-shirt and toilet paper vendors to the academic and corporate profiteers. Likewise, Shephard, raises some important and searching questions: how can the apparent threat "remain so dire when billions had been spent, new laws enacted, laws fought" to combat it? This, she does not seek to answer.

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