

**Mitchell D. Silber. *The Al-Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West.***

**Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.**

**Reviewed by Richard Phelps.**

The destruction of the Afghan camp network that Al-Qaeda and its sister organisations had developed during the late 1990s prompted a radical change in the way the movement functioned in the decade since. The movement's shift from a globalised network to regionally-orientated franchises has become established as orthodoxy almost to the point of cliché. Yet the material impact that the loss of the camps has had on the life-cycle of terrorism plots in the West has been little explored. With reference to sixteen plots in Europe, North America, and Australia, Mitchell Silber's book *The Al Qaeda Factor* examines the main plots case by case, before drawing conclusions from this dataset. His presentation is unusual, but the book nevertheless serves as a useful reference work in addition to making a convincing argument.

Silber structures his presentation of each of the sixteen plots the same way. Following an introduction to the background, he describes the radicalisation of the protagonists, then profiles each plot's core members, followers, and peripheral figures one-by-one, before finally moving to describe the plots' development towards maturity/disruption. In so doing, the lack of narrative and structural rigidity makes for somewhat frustrating reading by the time of the sixteenth repetition. On the other hand, such a structure provides enduring value since it makes the book the first biographical dictionary of the "War on Terror".

Among the dataset one plot is pre-9/11: the first attack on the World Trade Center. Another of the sixteen is the 9/11 plot itself, while the remaining plots reached their climax over the decade since 2001. Helpfully, the author allows each case to speak for itself. In so doing, the approach is subtle: by dint of repetition, the reader is able to discern his/her own conclusions regarding the trends shared between the plots. Though low on analysis and narration for most of the book, the author does analyse the trends in a concluding chapter.

In terms of the picture that emerges, many of the plots involved one or more of the protagonists travelling to an overseas theatre of jihad. Yet far from being groomed in the West and urged to train overseas, most who travelled were "self-starters" who sought such training themselves. In many of such cases, however, the eventual plotters travelled overseas with a different intention to when they returned: the 9/11 ringleaders went to Afghanistan to prepare for fighting in Chechnya, the 7/7 ringleader Mohammed Siddique Khan did not intend to return, and the 2009 attempted New York truck bomber Najibullah Zazi had wanted to fight with the Taliban. Al-Qaeda here appears resourceful and opportunistic. Highlighting the impact of the loss of Afghan bases, the 9/11 attacks are an outlier in terms of the extent that the Al-Qaeda leadership became involved. In most cases since, the Bin Laden network provided neither funding, weaponry, or dictation regarding targets – though it did often provide technical advice for the assembly of explosives.

Another strong theme that emerges is the role of small group dynamics. Silber's dataset clearly favours the interpretation of Marc Sageman and Scott Atran, who present terrorist plots as usually the product of small group dynamics. Again and again, the characters central to the

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sixteen plots are shown to have grown up together, lived together, married one another, or regularly hung-out together. As such, the plots tend not to emerge from random individuals who are put in touch either by a centralised organisation or through a medium such as the Internet – though such cases of course do exist. Rather, the plots emerge organically as a product of like-minded actors urging each other on, as well as being driven by charismatic figures.

Introducing the sixteen plots, Silber describes them as “what could be argued were the most important al Qaeda and al Qaeda-like plots against targets in the West between 1993 and 2009” (p.5). Whilst this undoubtedly holds true for the 9/11, 7/7, Madrid, and “shoe bombing” plots, the same cannot be argued in one case he presents. The author himself concedes in the case of a cluster of Yemeni-Americans arrested in 2002, who had completed training at Al-Qaeda camps before 9/11, that despite having links and contact to senior Al-Qaeda figures “the men did not conduct any actions that could be judged to be part of any operational cycle” (p. 270) – there was no “plot”.

Critics may attack either the author’s choice of dataset – in terms of what he leaves out – or the way he presents his material. Yet whereas narrative descriptions of individual terrorist plots abound, a plot-by-plot reference work that profiles the characters involved represents a significant contribution. Likewise, in most of the cases presented, the severity of the plots presented is genuine: where the plots failed, the threat is diminished usually by the plotters’ ineptitude in executing their plans – rather than the threat itself being exaggerated. The author allows his evidence to do much of the talking; in so doing, his subtle approach enables significant insights into the changing nature of the life-cycles of terrorist plots over the past decade.

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