

## IV. Book Reviews

**Paul Cruickshank (Ed.) Al Qaeda.**

**New York: Routledge, 2012.**

**Five Volumes, 2,304 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-58174-5, \$1,280.00 (Hardback)**

**Reviewed by Joshua Sinai**

Compiled by Paul Cruickshank, a New York-based investigative journalist and one of CNN's top correspondents on terrorism, this monumental 5-volume collection of scholarly research and journalistic articles that were previously published in various publications by leading experts on Al-Qaeda is, to date, the most comprehensive resource published on the terrorist organization and its worldwide affiliates. Chronicled here are the acts of warfare against their own Muslim societies and the non-Muslim countries of Western Europe, America, and elsewhere.

Mr. Cruickshank introduces each of the five volumes with a 20-page editorial overview designed to place events in their historical and political context. On their own, his 100 pages of text constitute an invaluable information resource about these subjects. The collection's 108 chapters were written by more than 80 individual authors, with several of them contributing several articles each. Notable authors include Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman, Brian Michael Jenkins, and Marc Sageman.

The five volumes cover Al-Qaida's evolving threat, Al-Qaeda before and after 9/11, the spread of Al-Qaeda's affiliates (or "franchises") around the world, the root causes underlying its insurgency, the organization's aims and strategies as well as its administrative organization. Also included are analyses as to how it raises funds, how its ideology was influenced by extremist interpretations of Islam, and an analysis of its influential ideologues, led by the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (who also greatly influenced the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, currently governing Egypt).

Of particular note are articles that address the means Al-Qaeda uses to disseminate its propaganda via the Internet, how it radicalizes its supporters and recruits them into terrorist activities, the new trend of "homegrown" extremists in Western societies (many of whom have a loose affiliation with Al-Qaeda), the role of safe havens in maintaining Al-Qaeda's viability, and how it trains its recruits. Interestingly, as Mr. Cruickshank points out, with Al-Qaeda's safe havens under constant bombardment, its training programs in Pakistan and Yemen have become compressed, resulting in less capable operatives; many of whom (such as Najibullah Zazi, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and Faisal Shahzad) subsequently failed to successfully execute attacks.

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Numerous insights presented by the volume's contributors help us understand the magnitude of the threats posed by Al-Qaeda. First and foremost, the Al-Qaeda threat is defined as "the danger posed by Al-Qaeda, the Jihadist-terrorist groups affiliated with it, and individuals inspired by its ideology." (Vol. I, p. 1) Here, it is important to understand how Al-Qaeda has attempted since its inception, as explained by Vahid Brown's chapter on "Al-Qa'ida Central and Local Affiliates," "to position itself as a vanguard within the broader milieu of violent Sunni Islamism." (Vol. III, p. 27) As he writes:

"Defining itself as the forefront standard-bearer of global jihad, al-Qa'ida has worked for over two decades to rally disparate groups and individuals from throughout the Muslim world behind its vision of inter-civilizational conflict. Given this self-definition, al-Qa'ida's core organizational objectives have as much – or more – to do with influencing processes of violence as they do with initiating them. Since the early 1990s, al-Qa'ida has pursued this quest for influence through an aggregation strategy, an ongoing effort to enlist a variety of jihadist groups operating in different parts of the world under the al-Qa'ida banner and in pursuit of al-Qa'ida's global aims." (Vol. III, p. 27)

However, as Brown points out, this strategy of aggregating with other Islamist militant groups to form a unified vanguard under its leadership failed in the 1990s, with most of the groups with which it had a relationship choosing to go their own way and pursue their own localized agendas. Only one group, Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), moved "ever closer to al-Qa'ida's global jihad..." (Vol. III, p. 33)

While Al-Qaeda may have failed to achieve the "elite vanguard status it sought" prior to 9/11, as Brown and the other contributors to the volumes discuss, an important theme running throughout the volumes is that following the expulsion of Al-Qaeda from its safe haven in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 and additional setbacks, such as the killings of many of its top leaders, including Usama bin Laden, it nevertheless has succeeded in reconstituting itself as a viable transnational terrorist "corporation." One of the ways it has achieved this revival has been by franchising its "brand" to local organizations that act on its behalf in disparate places such as Iraq (AQI), Saudi Arabia and Yemen (AQAP), Somalia (al Shabaab), and the Maghreb (AQIM).

Its "franchises," in fact, even have succeeded in re-asserting its global "brand" by exploiting the revolutionary upheavals and weakening of the security apparatuses of previously autocratic "secular" regimes created by the Arab Spring in countries such as Egypt, where their fighters have reconstituted themselves in the Sinai Peninsula, and Libya, where they maintain strongholds in the ungoverned eastern parts of the country. In fact, according to Mr. Cruickshank, Al-Qaeda fighters have succeeded in moving weapons from Libya to their brethren in the anarchic Sinai Peninsula, in order to conduct warfare against Israel, one of Al-Qaeda's primary enemies, although their likelihood of mounting major attacks against Israel is considered minimal.

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Finally, the fall of former Libyan ruler Muammar Qadhafi also resulted in the well-armed Tuareg mercenaries previously employed by the Libyan government fleeing to Mali, where they ignited a Tuareg rebellion. The resulting upheaval was subsequently exploited by Ansar Dine, an Al-Qaeda-linked group, which took control of much of northern Mali by the summer of 2012, and poses a major threat to regional stability. Although this occurred after the compendium was published, in late January 2013 Ansar Dine's growing insurgency in Mali forced France to deploy troops against, with the United States reportedly providing logistical and other support.

In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, together with other foreign elements, has succeeded in joining – and even spearheading – the wider Sunni insurgency against Bashar Assad's regime, leaving many to wonder how they will be contained in the new government that might be formed once the Alawite-dominated regime is toppled.

At its initial center of gravity in the aftermath of 9/11, Al-Qaeda has succeeded in reconstituting itself in Pakistan's tribal regions (where the central government exerts little control) where its primary affiliate, the Taliban in its various configurations, are conducting a terrorist insurgency against the Afghanistan government and the U.S.-led military coalition. However, with the U.S.-led coalition scheduled to depart most of its forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Mr. Cruickshank writes that "The prospect of the Taliban entering a power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan or it again seizing control of southern provinces could offer Al-Qaeda greater opportunity to once again operate in the country and strengthen its position in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region." (Vol. V, p. 22)

Despite its ability to reconstitute itself in these parts of the world, however, Mr. Cruickshank and his contributors point out that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are still subject to critique by fellow Salafists and suffer from a popular backlash. In the Middle East, for example, the revolutionary forces unleashed by the Arab Spring may not "move their way" with their tactics not necessarily "winning the hearts and minds" of young Muslims, who may opt for other, more responsible, movements to lead them. Nevertheless, their operatives and supporters are still present in these societies, where internal disorder provides them space to operate with relative ease in which to launch their attacks, as demonstrated by the latest events in Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen.

At a time when multi-volume printed reference sets are disappearing slowly with the rise of e-books and at a time when younger generations are accustomed to finding content for free via online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia, where the content is uneven at best, there still is no substitute to reading reference sets such as Mr. Cruickshank's "Al Qaeda." With its carefully selected and definitive chapters, readers who crave comprehensiveness and accuracy and are willing to pay for it will not be disappointed.

*This is a revised and expanded version of a review that initially appeared in The Washington Times on January 4, 2013. Reprinted with permission.*

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*About the Reviewer: Joshua Sinai is a Washington-based consultant and educator, specializing in counterterrorism studies. His latest monograph is “Active Shooter – A Handbook on Prevention” (Alexandria, Virginia: ASIS International, 2013). Since January 2013, J. Sinai also serves as Book Reviews Editor of ‘Perspectives on Terrorism’.*