

## Morten Storm with Paul Cruickshank & Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: My Life Inside Al Qaeda and the CIA*

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Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

In the 1949 book “The God That Failed: A Confession,”[1] prominent ex-communist intellectuals recounted their disillusionment with and abandonment of communism. What also made that book noteworthy was its running concept of “Kronstadt” as the defining moment in which these ex-communists decided not merely to leave the Communist Party, but to actively oppose it as newly fledged anti-communists.

“Agent Storm: My Life Inside Al Qaeda and the CIA” is Morten Storm’s authoritative account of how he was radicalized as a young Danish convert to Islam into ultimately becoming a trusted member of al Qaeda’s inner circles in Yemen and elsewhere and how his subsequent disillusionment with its genocidal ideology and violent tactics led to his own “Kronstadt” moment, in which he decided to become a double agent on behalf of the Danish, British and American intelligence services against al Qaeda, its affiliates, and his brethren in Europe.

Although there are other examples of European Muslim extremists who lost faith with jihadi Islam and al Qaeda and its affiliates and became prominent critics of radical Islam, Mr. Storm’s is the most recent case. Moreover, while the others were at the margins of al Qaeda’s operations, Mr. Storm represents the most high-level Western intelligence penetration of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—considered al Qaeda’s most dangerous affiliate—as well as other al Qaeda affiliates, such as the Somali al Shabaab. His assistance to American intelligence, according to his account, helped lead to the targeted killing in late September 2011 of Anwar al-Awlaki, one of al Qaeda’s top spiritual and operational leaders in Yemen. Al-Awlaki had inspired many Western jihadi terrorists, such as Major Nidal Hassan (the November 2009 Fort Hood murderer), Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (the unsuccessful 2009 Christmas Day airliner underwear bomber, who had been trained in Yemen), and the Tsarnaev brothers (who conducted the Boston Marathon bombings in mid-April 2013).

The book is filled with dramatic accounts of Mr. Storm’s involvement in numerous Western intelligence penetrations of al Qaeda and its affiliates, whether in Yemen or Somalia, as well as with its extremist adherents in Europe, especially in Denmark, Sweden, and Britain. Written by Mr. Storm and his two collaborators, Paul Cruickshank, a top CNN investigative journalist on al Qaeda, and Tim Lister, who has worked for CNN and the BBC in the Middle East, the book reads like a first-rate spy thriller, but it is in fact a stunning and true inside account of the workings, personalities and mindsets of the leaders and operatives of al Qaeda, its worldwide operations, and extremist Islamist constituencies.

In one of the book’s most dramatic segments, in September 2009 Mr. Storm was asked by al-Awlaki, his long-time “mentor” (whom he had befriended while living in Yemen in 2006)—who had a history of procuring prostitutes while earlier living in America and at the time in Yemen was married to two wives, one older and the second much younger—“to find him a wife in the West.” (pp. 195-196) Mr. Storm, who had divorced his first Muslim wife and was living in England with his second, found in a radical Muslim Facebook forum a suitable potential bride for al-Awlaki: a beautiful, blonde 32-year old Muslim convert from Croatia named Aminah, who was willing to travel to Yemen to meet and marry the already married al-Awlaki, whom she had greatly idolized. At this point, no one in Mr. Storm’s family knew about his double-agent status.

What neither Aminah (real name Irena Horak) nor al-Awlaki knew was that this “matchmaking” was being orchestrated and financed by the British and American intelligence services who had planted tracking devices in her suitcase and an electronic Arabic pocket dictionary that they hoped would lead them to al-Awlaki’s whereabouts in Yemen’s lawless tribal areas. The details of how Mr. Storm arranged for Aminah’s travel to meet al-Awlaki, how American intelligence eventually located al-Awlaki’s whereabouts (this time via a different courier in a later meeting arranged by Mr. Storm) to kill him, and her ultimate fate in Yemen (she was unaware of Mr. Storm’s involvement in setting the trap for al-Awlaki) are riveting. These accounts are backed up by extensive evidence in the form of travel and financial documents and videos Mr. Storm provided to his co-authors, including the actual video of al-Awlaki proposing marriage to his prospective Croatian bride.

Aside from bringing readers close to the workings of high-stake intelligence operations, Mr. Storm’s book is important for other reasons. It is a first-rate account of how a troubled young Danish Christian, with a history of petty criminality, incarceration and drug use was drawn to convert to Islam and was radicalized into its most extremist jihadi circles in Denmark and Britain. It illustrates how recruiters in such jihadi circles in Europe identify and send their promising convert adherents to “study” at jihadist religious schools such as the extremist Dammaj Institute in Yemen, where, upon their return to their countries of origin, they are expected to further radicalize others into pro-al Qaeda violent extremism and martyrdom terrorist operations.

In what is the book’s most telling and hopeful segment, Mr. Storm discusses his “Kronstadt” moment in early 2007, when he rejected radical Islam’s “justifications made for the murder and maiming of civilians,” (p. 118) and the steps he took to contact PET, the Danish intelligence service, to offer his services to counter and betray his former comrades in European jihadi circles and al Qaeda around the world because, as he writes, “I knew the murderous worldview of al Qaeda, and I wanted to play a part in stopping them.” (p. 122)

While today Mr. Storm is relieved to have given up jihadism (as well as Islam) and is proud of his previous work in support of Western intelligence in fighting al Qaeda and its sympathizers, these undercover activities took a toll on him and his family. He currently resides in undisclosed whereabouts in England under the protection of British authorities (or others in the private sector operating on their behalf) because of constant death threats against him by his former jihadi comrades.

The drama of “Agent Storm” will no doubt attract Hollywood’s attention (it’s already an hour-long CNN documentary), but bright lights aside, the book is an indispensable guide to how the West can counter the appeal of violent jihadism and its al Qaeda terrorist groupings. Today, when so many young Western Muslims are flocking to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of genocidal insurgents such as the al Nusra Front and ISIS/ Islamic State, this book’s insights could not be more important.

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#### Note

[1] See Richard Crossman (Ed.), *The God That Failed: A Confession*, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949.