

Counterterrorism Bookshelf: 5 Books on Terrorism & Counter-Terrorism-Related Subjects

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

So many books are published on terrorism- and counterterrorism-related subjects that it is difficult to catch up on a large backlog of monographs and volumes received for review. In order to deal with this backlog, this column consists of capsule reviews and tables of contents of five recently published books.

Peter Bergen, *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 416 pp., US \$ 30.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-9821-7052-3.

The author was one of the first Western journalists to interview Osama bin Laden prior to 9/11, which produced his first book, the best-selling *Holy War Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (2001). As a CNN journalist, he continued to investigate bin Laden and al Qaeda. In *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden*, Mr. Bergen provides an updated account of bin Laden as a leader of a terrorist organization, a ‘family man’, as well as details about the U.S. government’s mission to kill him on May 2, 2011 in his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In the conclusion, the author writes that “Killing bin Laden didn’t kill his ideas, which lingered on among al-Qaeda’s affiliates in Afghanistan, Iraq, North Africa, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen; and they also lived on among Islamist militants around the globe, magnified by the internet, where bin Laden remained an inspirational figure to every new generation of jihadists” (p. 245). This authoritative, detailed and extensively sourced account includes interviews with family members and associates, including recently unearthed documents that shed additional light on bin Laden and his activities. The author is a veteran journalist who has written and edited previously eight books, including several on bin Laden. He is a vice president at the New America public policy research institute and a professor at Arizona State University.

Table of Contents: Bin Laden Family Tree Prologue: Hopes and Dreams and Fears; Part I: Holy Warrior; Sphinx Without a Riddle?; Zealot; Jihad; Al-Qaeda; Part II: War With the U.S.; Radical; “The Head of the Snake”; A Declaration of War; The U.S. Slowly Grasps the Threat; The War Begins; The Road to 9/11; Part III: On the Run; Striking Back; The Great Escape; A-Qaeda Revives; The Hunt; A Lion in Winter; Operation Neptune Spear; After bin Laden.

Ilan Berman, (Ed.), *Wars of Ideas: Theology, Interpretation and Power in the Muslim World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 172 pp., US \$ 50.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-5381-5547-9.

The contributors to this well-informed and important volume, examine, as the editor writes, “the current shape of the intellectual ‘battlefield’ in our struggle against radical Islam, and the substantive initiatives that potential partner nations from around the Muslim world are pursuing in this arena” (p. 3). The partner nations engaged in countering the violent Islamist narratives that are insightfully covered in the volume include those in Central Asia, Morocco, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. In the editor’s concluding chapter, he observes that “the most successful national responses to Islamist extremism catalogued herein all share the presence of a comprehensive national plan to identify, marginalize and counter extremist ideas” (p. 149). He adds that it is “most effective when it is a collaborative enterprise. The larger the number of ‘stakeholders’ (be they corporations, individuals or governments) that gravitate around a durable consensus regarding values and ideas in the religious sphere, the more robust the counter-narrative that can be deployed against extremist interpretations of the Islamic faith” (p. 153). The volume’s editor is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.

Table of Contents: Introduction; The Islamic State, And After; State and Religion in Central Asia; Morocco’s Answer to Religious Extremism; Understanding Indonesia’s “Third Way” Islam; The Emirates and the Struggle Against Islamic Extremism; Jordan Navigates the Intellectual Battlefield; Saudi Arabia: A Post-Salafist Trajectory?; Learning From Allies.

Carla Power, *Home, Land, Security: Deradicalization and the Journey Back from Extremism* (New York, NY: One World, 2021), 352 pp., US \$ 28.00, ISBN: 978-0-5255-1057-4.

In examining the trajectory of susceptible individuals into becoming violent extremists and the methods used by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deradicalize some of them, it is crucial to analyze how these processes play out ‘on the ground.’ This is one of the important contributions of this volume as Carla Power, a veteran England-based foreign affairs journalist, examines the causes and motivations that draw some young Muslims into religious militancy by traveling to countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and closely observing the programs established by these countries to deradicalize and, hopefully, reintegrate them into society. Some of the author’s findings are that extremism is the product of “people’s yearnings for belonging, meaning, and transcendence” (p. 271), and that for deradicalization programs to be effective “Training a lens on ‘violent extremism’ rather than on broader issues, like corruption or repression, can be risky in the long run” (p. 243). Such insights which are generated by the author’s ‘on-the-ground’ reporting on numerous cases of radicalized and deradicalized youth, make this book essential reading for those interested in understanding how young individuals might become radicalized and the measures required to persuade them to moderate their extremist views and reintegrate into society to achieve their objectives through non-violent means. The author is a veteran journalist and author, based in East Sussex, England, UK.

Table of Contents: Introduction; Part I: Children Who Leave, Mothers Who Wait; The Lost Boy, “You’re the Mother of a Terrorist”; The Godmother and Her Goddaughters; Part II: Change Makers; Trust Exercises; By the Book; The “Terrorist Drop-Off Center”; On Meeting the Beheader; Loss of Faith; Only God Knows the Human Heart; Great Games; The World’s Best Deradicalization Program; Part III: A Wider View; American Blowback; Quantum Entanglement; How to Deradicalize Your Town.

Mark D. Silinsky, *Empire of Terror: Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books/ An Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 328 pp., US \$ 34.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-6401-2313-7.

This is one of the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It focuses, in particular, on the Guards’ domestic security wing, the Basij, and their expeditionary arm, the Qods Force. As the author points out, both work in tandem with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The Guards, the author explains, consist of “intelligence and security personnel; paramilitary land, air, and sea forces; special operators; prison guards; and interrogators. They are morality police, cyber-warriors, university professors, and business operators”(p. xvii). One of the book’s unique contributions is its profiling of the Guards’ leaders and activities, as well as an itemization of their ‘enemies list’. In the conclusion, the author offers his personal reflections on the likelihood that Iranians will overturn their government in the next five years, how the Guards are likely to react if public opposition to the regime escalates, whether Iran will ever turn to Western-style reform, and whether the Guards are likely be brought to trial if their grip on power collapses. The author is a senior intelligence analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense, based in the Washington, DC area. He is the author of several books on terrorism, counterterrorism, Jihadism, and Pakistan.

Table of Contents: List of Illustrations; List of Tables; Introduction; Events and Ideas Behind the Guards; The Guards as a New Tool of Power; The Guards’ Domestic Policy; The People’s Militia; The Guards’ Foreign Policy; The Guards’ Unconventional Toolbox; The Guards, Inc.; Empire of Terror; Appendix: Important Personalities.

Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 368 pp., US \$ 30.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-9821-5900-9.

This is a groundbreaking investigative account of how three successive American presidential administrations managed America's longest war campaign in Afghanistan, from late 2001 to the 2020 [it does not cover the Biden Administration]. By coincidence, its critique of the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan foreshadowed the Taliban's surprisingly easy recapture of the country in August 2021. Considered comparable in its public impact to the *Pentagon Papers* on the future course of the Vietnam War, *The Afghanistan Papers*, which is based on hundreds of interviews as well as primary documents, contains numerous revelations from government officials who played a role in managing the war effort, with many admitting that the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign's strategies were badly considered and executed. To be fair, one criticism of such assessments is that the last Afghan government is largely to blame for its overthrow by the Taliban insurgents, since one of the rules for successful intervention by a foreign power is for the local government to be wholeheartedly committed to effective governance, with its military and security forces capable of fighting insurgent adversaries – factors that were largely absent in Afghanistan. This is an important contribution to helping us understand why and how the U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan had failed in so many ways. The author is a veteran investigative reporter for *The Washington Post*, who had covered the global war on terrorism for his newspaper since 2001.

Table of Contents: Foreword; Part One: A False Taste of Victory, 2001-2002; A Muddled Mission; “Who Are the Bad Guys?”; The Nation-Building Project; Part Two: The Great Distraction, 2003-2005; Afghanistan Becomes an Afterthought; Raising an Army from the Ashes; Islam for Dummies; Playing Both Sides; Part Three: The Taliban Comes Back, 2006-2008; Lies and Spin; An Incoherent Strategy; The Warlords; A War on Opium; Part Four: Obama's Overreach, 2009-2010; Doubling Down; “A Dark Pit of Endless Money”; From Friend to Foe; Consumed by Corruption; Part Five: Things Fall Apart, 2011-2016; At War with the Truth; The Enemy Within; The Grand Illusion; Part Six: Stalemate, 2017-2021; Trump's Turn; The Narco-State; Talking with the Taliban.

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