

Review of Nasser al-Bahri, *Guarding Bin Laden: My life in al-Qaeda*

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‘Just before sundown, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Hafs al-Masri went to the garden to recite verses from the Qur’an and say their evening prayers. Sheikh Osama had stayed alone in his office, on the first floor of a safe house in Kabul that the al-Qaeda leadership moved into after the 1998 attacks on the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam. He saw me passing and beckoned me in, smiling: “Abu Jandal, come in! I want to tell you a secret.” I went up to him and he brought a handgun out of his *thawb* (traditional tunic). “I hope that God never wills it, but if 1 day the enemy traps us, and we are certain to be arrested, I want to be shot twice in the head rather than be taken prisoner.” “Oh Sheikh, may God never give me a reason to kill you.” As I was leaving, I felt the weight of responsibility that would stay with me from now on. My adolescent dream of devoting myself to the cause of Jihad, conceived 10 years earlier in Jeddah, where I grew up and first found God, had come true.’ (p.9)

Widely praised as a ‘goldmine of information’ offering ‘an intriguing glimpse of life inside the al-Qaeda chief’s lair,’ *Guarding Bin Laden* is the story of Nasser al-Bahri, Osama bin Laden’s chief bodyguard from 1996 to 2001. He gives a vivid, credible, and highly readable account of his journey towards jihad, his time inside al-Qaeda and his life after leaving the group. The book is the most detailed ever to be based on the narrative of a former senior al-Qaeda member, and thus is an obvious must-read for anybody with an interest in terrorism and the global jihad, as well as those interested in the current state of Islam.

It would be misleading, however, to approach the book with the expectation of uncovering the ultimate and unquestionable truth about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Although the emir of al-Qaeda entrusted al-Bahri with his life, he seemingly did not share many of his thoughts and plans with him. During his heyday with the

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organization in 1999, al-Bahri may have trained the members of the ‘Hamburg cell,’ yet he had no idea of the mission they were about to carry out on 9/11. Instead, he claims to have learned about the 9/11 raids while in prison in Sanaa, Yemen, when he heard the imam in a nearby mosque celebrating the ‘strike’ on the Americans. ‘I did not know exactly what was going on, nor what the targets had been. I did not know that the twin towers had been demolished. I would find out more, a week later, when the FBI interrogators started to question me’ (p. 185). Al-Bahri’s profound respect and admiration for bin Laden and his insistence on the mutual trust between them appear somewhat superficial when he suddenly, and seemingly without prior contemplation, decides to leave al-Qaeda, a decision he says he made when bin Laden accused him of having failed on a mission without giving him a chance to explain his version of the events. “You were sent to Yemen on a secret mission but you were not up to it. You revealed the operation, you failed in your task.” “I cannot believe you are criticizing me like this,” I said in tears. I wanted to explain myself but the Sheikh left the room. It was the first time in 3 years that he did not want to hear my arguments. Deeply disappointed, I decided to leave Afghanistan within 48 h’ (p. 165). The decision to walk away from bin Laden marked the breaking of his oath of allegiance, an act with profound religious significance that he regarded as a cardinal sin. Did al-Bahri really break with al-Qaeda in 2000? His detailed recollection of post-9/11 arguments between bin Laden and other senior leaders would appear to contradict this claim.

That some aspects of al-Bahri’s account appear inconclusive is not entirely surprising: *Guarding bin Laden* tells the story of a wanted man stuck in Yemen struggling to provide for his family, someone who was interrogated by U.S. intelligence, considered a traitor to the cause to some and a security risk to others. Furthermore, it is a story he chose to tell a French journalist, who in turn wrote in French for a Western audience preoccupied with a specific set of questions about bin Laden and al-Qaeda. This would explain the lengthy sections given over to listing the names of a variety of individuals in charge of specific tasks within the group, or al-Bahri’s promise to reveal details about bin Laden’s relationship with his wives.

Yet a focus on these predictable themes might only divert attention from the real issues exposed in this book: a fascinating set of insights into what drove al-Bahri to join the jihad, and his description of the characteristics of the new generation of jihadis. In reading his memories about the socio-political realities of growing up in Saudi Arabia, one is continuously struck by the interplay of political and religious themes, a separation that he himself does not make. ‘By the time I was 16 years old, my religious commitment was firmly established. I intended to die a martyr. “I have to achieve this dream,” I was always telling friends. I wanted to take up arms against the enemies occupying the lands of Islam or the Moslems.’ (p.16) The way in which he perceives political action as religious duty renders the (in terrorism studies circles) hotly debated question of whether it is religious or political extremism that lies at the heart of the global jihad redundant. The fact that he claimed to despise the Saudi authorities for their un-Islamic ways seems suddenly irrelevant when he explains that the same authorities were encouraging young men to join the holy war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. In hindsight, al-Bahri admits that he was naïve, all too keen to find a meaningful future for himself—thereby exemplifying what Eickelman and Piscatori have described as the ‘objectification of Muslim consciousness’: the increasingly difficult pursuit of deciding what it means to be a good Muslim in a world

marked by an unprecedented plurality of religious interpretations that bear no resemblance to the early beginnings of Islam. It is precisely this phenomenon that comes to mind when al-Bahri describes the new generation of jihadis as ‘young’ and ‘ill-educated’, set on their very own mission and oblivious to the guidance of the older generation: ‘One of the main problems the al-Qaeda movement has today is that young people join, for example, the Yemen branch but don’t really follow the ideology of the central group. In fact, they are totally ignorant about it’ (p.197).

With the recent attacks in Boston and Woolwich still fresh in people’s minds, the popular assertion that al-Qaeda continues to pose a serious threat to security may seem superficially convincing. Yet al-Bahri’s assessment of the movement’s new recruits suggests a different reality. In a twist on Hannah Arendt’s words, the new generation of al-Qaeda might best be described as the evil of banality.

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