



The Terror Years: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State

By Lawrence Wright

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Reviewed by CPT Sam Wilkins

In *The Terror Years*, Lawrence Wright, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Looming Tower*, amalgamates searing portraits of terrorists, counter-terrorists, spymasters, dissident filmmakers, and hostages to create a powerful, gritty, and somber narrative of this complex era. Wright's deep experience in the Middle East began with what he describes "as an accident in history" when, as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, he performed alternative service at the American University of Cairo. *The Terror Years* captures that experience by combining 11 pieces which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* between 2005-2015. Taken together, they form an unconventional history of "the evolution of the jihadist movement and the parallel actions of the West to attempt to contain it."

The first three chapters trace the birth of radical jihadism through the 9/11 attacks and the West's indifferent and dysfunctional attempts to stop it. The work begins with "The Man Behind Bin Laden," Lawrence's profile of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda. Wright skillfully weaves the tale of Zawahiri's path to radicalization with the intellectual birth of radical jihadism under the repression of 1950's Nasserite Egypt. He shares the roots of Zawahiri's rage in the torture cells of the Egyptian deep state and while maintaining perspective of the horrible evil of his movement. He explores pre-9/11 Western responses with two profiles of remarkable FBI agents, John O'Neil and Ali Soufan. "The Counter-Terrorist" describes O'Neil, a legendary but ultimately disgraced FBI agent whose obsession with al-Qaeda ended with his death in the World Trade Center. "The Agent" describes the remarkable Soufan, a Lebanese-American, and how his investigation into the USS Cole bombings nearly prevented the 9/11 attacks.

"The Kingdom of Silence" and "Captured on Film" offer portraits into life under repressive regimes that led many young Sunni males to jihad. "The Kingdom of Silence" is a stunning portrait of life inside Saudi Arabia, informed by Wright's time as an editor with *The Saudi Gazette* from 2002-2003. Wright captures the Orwellian contradictions of the kingdom and the resulting anger and depression in its young men. "Captured on Film" follows the Syrian film industry's muted existence under the abusive Assad regime in the years before the Arab Spring. Syria's filmmakers explain how Assad's "throttling of democratic expression" created a culture of suspicion and violence that would explode in revolt in 2012.

The next chapter is "The Terror Web" in which Wright tells the story of the Madrid train bombings, one of the few terrorist attacks to achieve its political objective.

"The Master Plan" shows the evolution of al-Qaeda after 9/11 through the writings of Abu Musab al-Suri and the second generation of al-Qaeda leaders. They despair after 9/11, labeling it a strategic disaster that forfeited al-Qaeda's only safe-haven in Afghanistan. Al-Suri branded the Bin-Laden/Zawahiri model of an underground terrorist

movement “a failure on all fronts.” The invasion of Iraq, Suri noted, essentially saved the jihadi movement from popular defeat. In 2005, Suri outlined a phase of jihad characterized by “leaderless resistance” that would prepare conditions for the establishment of an Islamic state, “the strategic goal of the resistance.” Suri’s blueprint eerily foreshadowed the shift in strategic approach that gave rise to the Islamic State.

“The Rebellion Within” focuses on Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, popularly known by his nom-de-guerre Dr. Fadl. In 2008, Al-Sharif, formerly a top council to Bin Laden and Islamist author, wrote a lengthy screed denouncing al-Qaeda’s violence. At the time of writing, Wright and other experts within the Arab world saw the split as a symbol of “the group disintegrating.” While in many ways they were correct, they failed to foresee that an ultra-violent strand would soon eclipse al-Qaeda and establish a physical state under jihadi control in accordance with “The Master Plan.”

“The Spymaster” follows a series of interviews between the author and former Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell concerning the balance between security and freedom in the age of terror. “Captured” tells the tale of Gaza under Hamas, Operation “Cast Lead,” and the capture and eventual exchange of Israeli army Sergeant Gilad Shalit.

“Five Hostages” represents the book’s emotional climax. Wright tells the heartbreaking tale of the five American journalists and aid workers captured in Syria. It shares the tale of the families’ private efforts at rescue, led by media-magnate David Bradley, owner of The Atlantic Media Company. Bradley’s team effectively replaced a pattering U.S. government interagency process. With the assistance of Soufan (“The Agent” from chapter three) and the Qatari government, they secured the release of Peter Padnos from the organization formally known as the Al Nusra Front. Tragically, ISIS executed the remaining four captives.

Wright’s unadorned prose transforms his deep experience with terrorism and counter-terrorism into powerful but accessible stories. In the best traditions of journalism, he educates without sermonizing or advocating policies. This allows the reader to empathize with the subjects on both sides while simultaneously maintaining a moral perspective on the evils of al-Qaeda and ISIS.

In the epilogue, Wright ponders the future of ISIS, how terrorist organizations end, and the costs of the age of terror. He predicts with chilling realism that “the conflict that the Islamic State has provoked will ultimately bring about its destruction, but not without much more havoc and heartache.” Wright predicts that “this age of terror will end one day.” “Terrorism as a strategy,” Wright notes, “rarely succeeds, except in one respect: it creates repression on the part of the state or occupying power.” While Wright acknowledges the necessity of the “security state” created since 9/11, he ponders whether America, at the inevitable conclusion of this era, will even remember “the feeling of freedom that once was our birthright... if we fail to keep in mind the country we were before 9/11, we may never steer in that direction again. In that case, the terrorists really will have won.”