



Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State

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To eliminate the scourge of terrorism, we must first know who the enemy actually is, and what his motivations are. In *Anatomy of Terror*, former FBI special agent and *New York Times* best-selling author Ali Soufan dissects Osama bin Laden's brand of jihadi terrorism and its major offshoots, revealing how these organizations were formed, how they operate, their strengths, and—crucially—their weaknesses. This riveting account examines the new Islamic radicalism through the stories of its flag-bearers, including a U.S. Air Force colonel who once served Saddam Hussein, a provincial bookworm who declared himself caliph of all Muslims, and bin Laden's own beloved son Hamza, a prime candidate to lead the organization his late father founded.

Anatomy of Terror lays bare the psychology and inner workings of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their spawn, and shows how the spread of terror can be stopped.

Winner of the Airey Neave Memorial Book Prize

Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State Details

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From Reader Review Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State for online ebook

Felicia says

I should have bought this book instead of borrow it from the library since I pretty much took notes on every sentence over the last half of it. His editorial section of the book is absolutely fascinating, eye opening, terrifying, and hopeful all at the same time. Hopeful because Ali Soufan has proposed a complex, long-term (and, to some, obvious) solution of how to stop terrorism growth and bring about its eventual death. Unfortunately still terrifying as he confirms the Trump administration's Muslim ban and other poor decisions are continuing to make the terrorist groups' narrative only stronger to recruit and destruct, and the West's fear of Muslims grow at a heartbreakingly alarming rate.

By the time you come to know the terrorist leaders from the pages of Soufan's encounters and research, you begin to ask yourself, is this really even about religion anymore? Do they even believe in God? The choices and rhetoric suggest they are atheists without a conscience on a power trip. That's because there's nothing Islamic about terrorism.

The real-life terrorists of this book haunted my dreams for the grueling three months it took me to read and digest it, but if this topic interests you at all, it is a must-read. Fingers crossed the leading governments of the world consider this expert advice.

The Hydra Analogy:

"Under our current approach, it seems that, no matter how many times we defeat al-Qaeda on the field of battle, it keeps coming back to life stronger than before. Hercules faced a similar test when he fought the Lernaean Hydra. After a few rounds of lopping off heads, he realized that the sword alone would not get the job done. So he called for help, not from another mythological hero like himself, but from his humble charioteer, who wielded a brand to cauterize the neck and prevent another head from sprouting. Al-Qaeda's "neck," the attribute that, more than any other, allows it to keep growing new heads ad infinitum, is its narrative: the message it uses to attract new recruits from all over the world. When I heard the news of bin Laden's death, I was determined that the United States should not assume that al-Qaeda was finished."

Murtaza says

Ali Soufan was an FBI agent at the forefront of the U.S. government response to al Qaeda in the years both before and immediately after 9/11. This book provides a rundown of the changes in the global jihadist movement since the death of Osama bin Laden, and the general growth of jihadism as a phenomenon during the years of the "War on Terror" - an endeavor that can only be described as a massive moral and strategic failure. For those who follow these issues closely there may not be that much new here, but Soufan's work is always useful because of the insights and credibility he has gained from his experience as an FBI case officer dealing with AQ members firsthand. A lot of the information here is secondary sourced so it is not as groundbreaking an account as *The Black Banners*, but as a whole it is still valuable.

Much of the book is framed through the biographies of a number of leading jihadist figures. The accounting of the lives of al Qaeda leaders Ayman Zawahiri and Saif al-Adel (both children of relative privilege) was useful and provided some interesting background on their paths to militancy. There are similar short

biographies of Bin Laden and Zarqawi, but those will likely be familiar to anyone who has read similar books on this period.

Much more useful was Soufan's exploration of the contrasting historical origins of Islamic State and al Qaeda, groups that are often incorrectly yoked together but which in fact began as separate organizations all the way back to the Taliban period in Afghanistan. Islamic State, Abu Musab Zarqawi's group, formed in late-90s Afghanistan as Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad, at a camp that Zarqawi himself ran near Herat. Zarqawi, a heavily tattooed drug user and convicted rapist, once met bin Laden in Afghanistan but refused to pledge bayat to him in a meeting that apparently did not go well. Zarqawi's group did not associate with al Qaeda central until 2004, when Zarqawi finally gave bayat (allegiance) to bin Laden. This was early stages of the Iraq War, when Zarqawi was seeking to promote his group's profile and attract funding and recruits. Although the two men still did not get along, Bin Laden accepted Zarqawi's bayat as a means of gaining a foothold within the crucial theatre of the Iraq conflict, which al Qaeda had no presence in.

Hence Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad became for a time "Al Qaeda in Iraq." This agreement turned out to be a fateful mistake for al Qaeda, one from which it has never really recovered. Zarqawi indelibly associated the al Qaeda brand with attacks on Shia Muslims, brutalization of civilians and general depravity, something that al Qaeda leaders were unable to curtail despite several attempts to rein him in. This transformation of al Qaeda's image in the Muslim world has permanently associated it with genocidal sectarianism and atavistic practices like beheadings, alienating the vast majority of people in Muslim societies and making the group palatable only on the fringes. For their part al Qaeda's denunciations of these abhorrent acts were quite insufficient considering the scope of what was happening, and Bin Laden's posthumous praise for Zarqawi further tied his group to such practices. Ironically, it seems as though Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, another man whose barbaric acts helped build the group's image for depravity, was not even an al Qaeda member and was quite widely loathed by the group, except, vitally, Bin Laden himself.

Although both al Qaeda and Islamic State are proponents of jihadism and share the long-term goal of creating some kind of Caliphate, Soufan explains how their approaches differ. Al Qaeda, also called "Khorasan" (the way the CIA might be called "Langley") is a more careful organization that tries to keep a tighter control of its operations and franchises, instructing them to find ways to win the support of local populations before imposing political changes over them. Groups like al-Nusra clearly reflect this model in their actions, with Soufan describing that group in particular as being animated by the ideas of the professorial Syrian jihadist ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri. ISIS on the other hand has always reflected the thuggish violence and bellicosity of Zarqawi himself and has been forthright about imposing itself violently on populations whether they had been "won over" or not. Although the two groups briefly intersected in Iraq and may one day again reconcile, they have different histories and characteristics. Accordingly, their approaches to jihadism and remaking the Middle East are different as well. Al Qaeda is patient and methodical, whereas Islamic State is reckless and seemingly motivated by pure bloodlust, though both groups are Salafi-Jihadist at core (they both differ even more from groups like Hamas, which also use "jihad" to support popular public causes). It's a sign of our binary thinking about the subject that we tend to aggregate an entire galaxy of groups as simply "Islamic terrorists" and "al Qaeda," a ludicrous framing that al Qaeda itself benefits from and seeks to promote.

The best parts of the book are when Soufan chooses to editorialize a bit and places jihadism in perspective, given his long history of counterterrorism work. He is an ardent opponent of the global Salafi-Jihadist movement and correctly identifies it as a problem that is growing. But unlike many other analysts, some of whom tend to be extremists and ideologues themselves, he is realistic and sober about the subject. He explains the mechanics of how these organizations operate and seek to grow their franchises through aggregating disparate movements, and he persuasively identifies global jihadism as a product of chronic

misgovernance in the Middle East. He disputes that terrorism is driven by Islamic beliefs and explains how political grievances are used to mobilize extremists; through manipulating theology, conspiracy theories (which themselves grow in places where education is inadequate) and the vengeful feelings that inevitably exist in regions that have experienced widespread violence. He is diplomatic in his criticisms of the U.S. government as a longtime civil servant, but makes clear how much the Iraq War and other disastrous policies have helped grow al Qaeda and jihadism generally.

At the time of 9/11 only around 400 people were members of AQ. After years of the "War on Terror" the group is now stronger than ever and has turned into a true movement, as has its competitor Islamic State. This is a disaster that should give us pause and make us reflect on the need for new ways to tackle this threat, rather than engaging in mass violence that has only aided the jihadists narrative and motivated legions of young men and women to support their case. It's hard to identify an obvious solution at this point, particularly given the United States own descent into (relative) irrationality and extremism, but Soufan makes a few attempts here at the end to argue for a sort of "Marshall Plan" for the Middle East. Hopefully his book will be viewed by some policymakers as a chance to take a sober second thought about their approach to this subject.

(Relevant link for Mora quote on effect of Abu Ghraib and GTMO on War on Terror:
<https://thinkprogress.org/mora-abu-gh...>)

Steven Kaminski says

I follow National Security issues pretty closely and even I have to admit that the details in this book in a lot of ways stunned me. Like him or hate him President Obama got Bin Laden. Now he could have killed him in an airstrike. But he chose to send the seals instead. I had NO idea. NONE...how much intelligence came from Operation Neptune Spear. Killing Bin Laden was small compared to what the seals took out of that compound.

I thought from what I had read that Bin Laden had been marginalized in Pakistan. Wrong. He was communicating and giving orders to every single terrorist group that had organized throughout Africa and in many ways the globe. He would write his orders out onto files with hard drives or thumb drives and then have them sent directly by courier. So getting those drives, papers and intelligence was like cutting the head off a snake. It allowed US intelligence to roll up some serious bad guys.

But Soufan gets into greater detail and because of his position within FBI circles it is very likely he debriefed the rest of Bin Laden's family after they were arrested following the raid. He goes through how the terrorist group came together and now in many ways how they have fallen apart as the vehicle Zarqawi created (ISIL).

Bin Laden before he went forward with the 'Planes Operation' (9/11) he held a council of the senior members of Al-qaeda. With the exception of KSM every member of the council opposed the operation and didn't want to go forward. Bin Laden over rode all of them to go ahead. A lot of fascinating nuggets in this book that is a worthwhile read...

Michael D. Kanner says

This author provides a unique view of AQ showing it is not the focused organization that the popular press portrays it.

With great detail, Soufan shows that like any rapidly expanding organization, AQ suffers from splits due to personalities and goals for the organization. It also lays out the way in which AQ morphed into a 'philosophy' that was adopted (and changed) by other groups until the result is ISIS and the other groups involved in the Syrian Civil War.

My one criticism is that with all that detail it is easy to lose track. I would have liked a timeline and an appendix listing key figures with small biographies to include their real names and nom de guerre (this was an issue in keeping track).

This will be on my recommended reading list for courses in security and the Mideast.

Bajro Nuhanovi? says

The book contains an expert's summary of how al-Qaeda developed in its organisation, strategy and ideology. Though at times the prose appears replete with long Arab names, the reader sees the point of each explanation and with some concentration can follow easily the thread of the story. The author has called it "a novel" on one occasion and certainly at times it takes a prosaic and narrative rather than explanatory turn. Such passages in the book I've found among the most captivating. The career of Usama bin Laden is expounded with clarity, up until his death and then it is resumed, as the other characters' jihadists careers enter in contact with Usama. The reader gets to understand who al-Zawahiri is and how he came to be Usama's successor, or how a violent thug by the name al-Zarqawi came to lead a private jihadist army in Iraq and finally how that army mutated into present-day Islamic State. Ali Soufan's book is a treasury of information and clarifications, especially for someone like me, who took off with the reading with a superficial knowledge of jihadist ideology and ISIS' history.

Fully recommended to anyone interested in coming to grips with the meaning of ISIS and its future, and the reasons why ISIS will have a future beyond its incumbent military defeat.

The author is an ex-FBI member with significant experience in contact with Islamist terrorists and interrogation of Islamist captives.

David Galloway says

Found this at the public library and recognized the name due to "The Looming Tower." Not a bad read--he does his best to make it comprehensible, though I can see how numerous names can sound similar and make that difficult. Might check out his earlier "Black Banners" at some point.

Mlg says

For those who can't tell one jihadist from another or who don't quite understand the difference between Al Qaddafi, the Taliban and Isis, this book really helps you sort them out.

Basically most Arabs are horrifically undereducated and easily swayed by religious arguments that usually involve the establishment of a caliphate in the Middle East. The groups who come to power all have different

leaders and often different aims, but are just the heads of the hydra. Cut off one, and there are others ready to fill the empty space.

Bin Laden, the great mastermind behind 9-11, emerges as a more charismatic figure than a bright one. The attacks on the US were not favored by the majority of his organization, because they knew the US would retaliate. The attack forced most of the leaders into hiding and disrupted their communication. The way Bush retaliated just drew more jihadis to the cause, believing that the US was at war with Islam. Obama was smarter, taking out leader after leader in drone attacks. The most notable being Zarqawi, who was more psychopath than religious zealot. He was responsible for many of ISIL's beheading videos, a tactic Bin Laden was against.

Many of these groups make the same mistakes over and over, persecuting the people in the areas they take over, destroying religious shrines and enforcing Sharia law on those who dislike it. They aren't winning friends or influencing people. Then along comes the current idiot president who kicks the hornet's nest with his Muslim ban and starts everything up again.

Hamza, Bin Laden's son is now the heir apparent. The best thing we could do is to vacate the Middle East, get the world off oil, and their means of financing the jihad would disappear. Simplistic, but a whole lot cheaper than war.

Cecil W Rhodes says

Should be required reading for all Americans

Extremely readable. It is a concise history of al Qaddafi, its ideology, and how it continually metastasizes. The Hydra analogy is genius. When will we learn that having the best hammer does not mean we must see every problem as a nail.

Mike says

Read in stops & starts, and skipped some of the middle, having recently read Lawrence Wright's book The Terror Years. Wright and Soufan are invaluable in understanding the Middle East.

This is a great explanation of the personalities that shaped various terrorist factions. He concludes with thoughts on how to overcome these groups.

1. al-qaeda and its progeny are resilient. Elevation of Hamza bin Laden could lead to reunification of AQ and IS.
2. Sectarianism is a central feature of conflicts
3. Starting to provide government services
4. This is intra-civilizations conflict, outsiders can do little to affect the outcome

Need to build institutions necessary for lasting peace - US never looks past the military phase. Need to

expose hypocrisy of these groups that claim to be pious but bomb mosques. Messengers need to be former terrorists. Dearth of educational opportunities must be rectified. Rehabilitation must be an option, not just prison.

His main point: there is nothing Islamic about terrorism. Uses example of the troubles in Ireland to prove his point. It is about nationalism, tribalism, sectarianism.

Ailith Twinning says

Meh -- just so much meh. Including actual scenes, dramatization, cheerleading, and an absolute refusal to ask the literal founding question in regards to all of this -- Why?

Also, the author pulls a New Testament on the reader, disregarding the formative years of the central character, Bin Laden, and skipping to when he comes in as the character he is known as.

Add to that some seemingly random data assembly, and that damn scene thing, just no.

This book will give someone with no knowledge about the topic some loose familiarity with things. . .if they read it three or four times, as well as a couple dozen other books. It's not just about reading more to prove this book isn't lying, you have to read dramatically more just to know anything -- which is odd considering how hard this book tries to feel fully fleshed out.

I won't go on my "America is the gold standard of terrorism" rant here, because you legitimately don't need to believe it going in. Ask "Why do they hate us" -- and don't bullshit yourself with "Democracy and free speech." You'll find all those facts on your own and prove it to yourself far better than any rant I could give.

This writer literally gives the same answer spoonfed to George Bush as the cause of Islamic terrorism, and even Islamists in general. Which is . . . good God man. Grow a pair.

Uwe Hook says

Ali Soufan was an FBI agent at the forefront of the U.S. government response to al Qaeda in the years both before and immediately after 9/11. This book provides a rundown of the history and changes in the global jihadist movement since the death of Osama bin Laden, and the general growth of jihadism as a phenomenon during the years of the "War on Terror" - an endeavor that can only be described as a massive strategic failure.

Excellent book well researched. The fractured communities that rely on religion for their every day living and the different interpretations of Islam by the jihadists and their followers will mean this problem of cooperation between East and West is going to take generations to resolve much like the Irish troubles. Patience and trust and acceptance and understanding of the views of all is the key to peace. Not violence history has shown that time and time again.

Chris Jaffe says

Ali Soufan is a former FBI agent who personally interrogated al-Qaeda members (using traditional methods, not “enhanced interrogation methods) so he is someone who really knows his shit.

This book, as the title indicates, is about the war on terror after the death of the man who is most responsible for it. But, in order to explain what’s happened since bin Laden’s death, the book spends a lot of time on what al-Qaeda and terrorist networks prior to then.

Short version: with bin Laden, you had a charismatic leader with authority that other terrorists looked up to. He was someone whose word had authority. After 9/11, that started to change because he had to be such an extreme background figure in hiding. His #2 in al-Qaeda, Ayamal-Zawahiri, lacked the personal charisma or authority to keep the group so centralized. It’s membership went up, but became more a confederation of organizations rather than a tightly controlled organization. And with al-Qaeda in Iraq led by al-Zarqawi, you had a real problem child. In fact, there was always friction between that group and central al-Qaeda leadership.

After bin Laden’s death, things became even more fragmented. (The last chapter’s title calls terrorism the hydra, because multiple heads grow when you cut the big one off). Al-Qaeda formally denounces al-Qaeda in Iraq, but that group keeps going. Between the violence in Iraq and the Syrian fandango, it transforms into ISIS. It claims to be a new caliphate, going a step further than even the Taliban. But they were too violent. They made an effort to win local support, but they were also so violent that they never had that much support. They often preferred foreigners fighting for their cause because they’d have less qualms about using violence against locals. Soufan notes that a lot of these terrorists religious convictions are more cultural and nominal than real or heartfelt. Some are gangsters who feel they can justify their ways by using the rhetoric of jihad. ISIS had their rise but then started losing land. Al-Qaeda itself seemed to be making a comeback as Iran had released a lot of their older senior leadership. It’s decentralized nature now makes it harder to pin down, as does its statelessness. Their new strategy is less about antagonizing the west and more about building up resources and territory in places like Syria, Yemen, and Libya while the world is distracted by ISIS. But when ISIS falls, Soufan predicts than al-Qaeda will strike back and strike hard.

He has some conclusions. First, these groups are resilient. Second, sectarianism is a central feature of Middle East conflicts, as al-Zarqawi’s violence against Shiites shows. Third, the Arab Spring shifted al-Qaeda’s thoughts. It has a less singular focus on the US and more about building trust with locals. Fourth, the Syria war exposed the ISIS/al-Qaeda conflict. This isn’t a fight between civilizations, but mostly a fight within a civilization. He also concludes it takes more than just military means to win this war, otherwise a new snakehead will always appear on the hydra. Al-Qaeda says the US is hostile to all Islam and many normal Middle Eastern Muslims believe this. The 2003 invasion of Iraq helped spread this belief, as did Abu Ghraib. We can’t let that narrative spread. We must expose their hypocrisy and craft a true story, for which we need a focused narrative, not just some bumper sticker slogan. We need quality messengers, ideally clerics. And while most jihadists are in it for life, we should leave the door open for those who want out and offer rehabilitation programs.

Random info: this book has some stunning info on pages 111-112 on the Middle East. Conditions there are great for creating angry young men. There is an impressive disregard for education as Arabs 25+ have just six years of schooling on average. Whereas an average western child spends 200 hours a year reading, an Arab child spends six minutes a year reading. Adults in the west average 11 books a year, but in the Middle East the average adult does a fourth of a PAGE a year. 100 million Arabs are illiterate. There is little

intellectual openness to the outside world. Greece, with a population of 11 million, translates five times as many books annually as the entire Arab world.

It's a really good book. I probably would've gotten more out of it had I not just finished reading *The Exile* a little before picking up this one, but it's really good.

Leftbanker says

Ali Soufan first came up on my radar in a 2006 *New Yorker* piece about his investigation of the U.S.S. Cole bombing. As a native speaker of Arabic and very knowledgeable about Islam he commands a sizeable advantage over most American intelligence operators specializing in the Middle East. As an FBI agent who interrogated many known terrorist suspects he was vehemently opposed to torture or "enhanced interrogation" or whatever other filthy euphemism you choose. Torture doesn't work. I was taught that torture is an ineffective tool in my USAF prisoner of war training. So Soufan is both knowledgeable and honorable which means trustworthy, an important qualification for a writer on security matters.

This book is truly an anatomy of today's leading Muslim terror organizations and valuable reference book for anyone who wants to better understand the problems and challenges the West now faces with regards to radical Islam and the Middle East.

I've read a LOT on this topic and I've never come across anything with remotely the same depth on the subject matter as presented in *Anatomy of Terror*. If you don't know much about this subject you may want to back up and read a few primers before delving into this examination of Al Qaeda and ISIS.

It was much too brief but I was fascinated on his take on the lack of education in the Muslim world and how there are more books translated into Modern Greek than Arabic. Imagine spending a life without ever reading a book and imagine how easy it would be to manipulate such a poorly educated soul. Ignorance is our true enemy and this isn't a problem we can kill our way out of with our military might.

I wish that he had spent more time on his conclusions but it's always infinitely more valuable to ask the right questions (as he does, again and again) than to offer dubious solutions.

Andrew Tollemache says

Ali Soufan is an Arab-American former FBI agent who featured prominently in Lawrence Wright's "The Looming Tower" as a highly capable and vital member of the FBI team led by John O'Neill who was in pursuit of Al-Qaeda in the 1990s and "Anatomy of Terror" (AoT) is his 2nd book on the subject of Al-Qaeda and the global sunni-salafist insurgency movement. In AoT Soufan focused on the evolution of that movement after the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011.

Soufan spends 1st fifth of the book giving a quick summary of the pre-911 history of AQ and gives great insight into how the seeds of the ISIS/AQ rivalry were sown in that period. While although Colin Powell made great hay of Zarqawi being a vital AQ figure whose presence in northern Iraq gave proof to Saddam's links to AQ, the truth was far different. (1) Zarqawi as a Jordanian was never trusted by AQ leadership (Jordanians were suspected of being moles for the Jordanian intel) (2) Zarqawi was a younger brash man

than Bin Laden and company and pissed OBL in their one known meeting. (3) The AQ leader or two who liked him sent him to northern Iraq to join an AQ affiliated kurdish rebel group to prepare to fight the US in the expected invasion to come.

Another key point in the early point of Soufan's book is to note how many key AQ leaders got captured and imprisoned in Iran in the months after the Taliban fell in Afghanistan. Some of these leaders like Saif al-Adl were some of AQ's most seasoned and experienced commanders and would spent the better part of a decade detained in Iran. only around 2010/2011 did the Iranians start to let these guys go as their utility to Tehran had faded.

While that was happening the much more ferocious counterpart to AQ, Zarqawi's ISI (now ISIS) had been largely defeated and defanged in Iraq. Zarqawi and much of the leadership was dead or in jail and become persona non grata among Iraqi sunnis. Developments over the border in Syria changed that as a hoi polloi of former Saddam secret police and military guys linked up with the remnants of ISI to combine ferocity with decades of operational success in military and intelligence planning. Couple this with a Shite Iraqi govt hellbent on being shitty to the Sunni minority and the seeds were sown for ISIS to be born.

Soufan concludes by noting that the once seemingly eclipsed AQ has regained its best leaders like al-Adl and gained a charismatic leader on OBL's son Hamza to replace the feckless ZaWAHARI.

Gordon Larsen says

Very informative and readable, though the title didn't quite describe the book. Anatomy of Terror is a series of profiles of al-Qaeda and ISIS leaders, going back to the 1980's when Bin Laden was fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The author—a former FBI counter-terrorism agent—interrogated some of these men and knows his stuff. I was impressed at the level of detail we know about the lives of men who do their best to hide, and that level of detail gives me confidence in the abilities of U.S. intelligence agencies. However, I had expected the book to discuss the ideology/theology that underpins and motivates Islamic terrorists, and it's a bit thin in that respect. To the extent Soufan offers thoughts about the causes of Islamic terrorism, he refers mostly to lack of education, poverty, etc., the politically correct narrative that certainly plays some role but which ignores the role of a political ideology embedded in Islamic beliefs. I found Ayaan Hirsi Ali's writing more compelling in this respect.

I also was a little skeptical when Soufan stepped away from the profiles to offer thoughts on larger U.S. strategy in the Middle East. That seemed to be outside his expertise.
