

Book Review

Michael Scheuer, Osama Bin Laden. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 288 pp. ISBN: 13:9780199738663; US \$ 19.95

Books and articles about Al-Qaeda and its figurehead Osama Bin Laden are published in great quantities. Yet the qualifications for the task of analysis among the authors are often meager. This is not the case for Michael Scheuer who previously published, while still working for the Bush administration, as “Anonymous” *Imperial Hybris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terrorism*. Between 1996 and 1999 Scheuer was the chief of the CIA’s bin Laden unit; he continued to work for the American government as counterterrorism analyst until 2004. Few people are more qualified to write on Osama Bin Laden than he is. This raises high expectations to which the book, however, does not always live up to. Spoiled by recent Wikileaks, one expects revelations, e.g. from the period when transcripts of Bin Laden’s intercepted satellite phone conversations ended on Scheuer’s desk. The reader who looks for such materials will be disappointed. It might be that Scheuer did not or could not share some such information. However, more disquieting is the thought that he and his colleagues of the counter-terrorist intelligence community did not know that much about him and Al-Qaeda. The book Scheuer wrote could have been written without access to classified materials. It is based largely on Osama Bin Laden’s own writings and speeches (159 documents totaling 791 pages (p.10)) and the commentaries and reminiscences of those closest to him (p.249). Scheuer has documented his sources well: there are no fewer than 688 notes and almost 15 pages of small-print bibliography.

The analysis of these documents forms the bulk of the book and is illuminating. Based on these materials, he constructs a portrait of the leader of Al-Qaeda that is at odds with much that others have tried to tell us. Before his construction of Bin Laden, Scheuer first de-constructs the dominant portrait of OBL as pushed by the Saudi propaganda machine - “good Saudi-boy-led-astray-by-evil-Egyptians”(p.91) - and propagated more or less unwittingly by those in the West who, in Scheuer’s view, fell for it (e.g. Lawrence Wright and Steve Coll - p. 13). The Bin Laden Scheuer reconstructs is not, as often portrayed a person “swaggering, boastful, threatening, disrespectful toward both scholars and princes” (p.83) but a “kind, humble man who lived a modest life”(p.87), “courageous”, consistent”(p. 25), a “workaholic”(p. 35), “Spartan”(p.37), “tolerant for religious diversity”(p.41), “like a businessman”(p.69), a Salafi, not a Wahhabi (p. 174)“comfortable with command, able to make hard decisions, hold an organization together”(p. 87), a “modern Saladin”(p.181), “fearless on the battlefield”(p.212) ,“ a master of media”(p.238) a man who “makes brilliant use of the intimacy of Muslims with Islamic history”(p.214). Scheuer’s Bin Laden is “ a pious, generous, and personally brave man, who behaves with integrity and speaks with an eloquence that can alternately comfort and inspire his listeners”(p. 167). Scheuer admits that “my view of bin Laden is far out of the mainstream” (pp. 185-6). His claim that “Bin Laden and al-Qaeda demonstrably attract the Muslim world’s most devout, who

also are often its best and brightest”(p.195) can be questioned as can many other of Scheuer’s assessments. Those who fight Bin Laden on the American side, the US soldiers in Afghanistan, are, in Scheuer’s view, “lions led by jackasses”(p.187). He has a special grudge against John Brennan, “the very former CIA officer who stopped plans to capture bin Laden in 1998-1999 [who] is now President Obama’s senior adviser on ‘extremism’, a word whose substitution for more accurate Islamic terms is emblematic of both ignorance and an eagerness to deceive”. (p. 186). Clearly, the author has some axes to grind but he also comes up with some uncomfortable (though debatable) insights such as that Bin Laden rhetoric and actions do not put him outside Islam (p.247) and that he is “seen as, a legitimate and good Muslims by his coreligionists”(p. 176).

While this book will be the standard biography for some time to come, one is left behind with an uncomfortable feeling that its author has been too close to his subject, writing almost a hagiography rather than a biography. Some of Scheuer’s judgments are, in this reviewer’s view, amazingly far off the mark: are we living, as he claims, in the “bin Laden era”(p.163)? Is it fair to say, as Scheuer does, “that he has had a greater impact on how Americans view their society, government, and security than any other individual in the past fifty years”? (p. 163). Are we really, as Scheuer believes, “fighting a war for survival”(p. 182) with Al-Qaeda? Is the Bin Laden who claimed, in 2000, that “there would be a holy war in every street of the United States” (p.227) not devoid of any sense of reality and, with his claim that he has religious authorization to kill up to ten million Americans (p. 215), out of his mind? Scheuer reprints a dialogue between OBL and his son Omar: “America and Israel are one bicycle with two wheels. The wooden wheel represents the United States. The steel wheel represents Israel. Omar, Israel is the stronger power of the two.(...)The Americans are weak. It is best to attack the weakest point first. Once we take out the weak wooden wheel, the steel wheel will automatically fail”(pp. 111-112). If Bin Laden is, as Scheuer claims “a man who has grasped the timeless truth that wars are only won by killing”(p.ix), he obviously does not understand that his camp will never be able to “overkill” either Israel nor the United States. Scheuer takes Bin Laden seriously. Paradoxically, that is both the strength and the weakness of his book.

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid