



Jihadism in a Post-Cold War World

Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader ed. Donald Holbrook.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. xiv, 291. ISBN 978-0-19-085644-1.

Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement by Alexander Thurston.

Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018. viii, 333. ISBN 978-0-691-17224-8.

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Two years after the Berlin Wall came down, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned his post as president of the Soviet Union (26 Dec. 1991) and Boris Yeltsin assumed the office of the presidency of the new Russian State. The hammer-and-sickle flag of the now thankfully defunct USSR was replaced by the Russian tricolor. Not surprisingly, scholars all over the world celebrated that seeming victory with paeans to a new world order. The prominent political philosopher, Francis Fukuyama, proclaimed¹ that the fall of the Soviet Union presaged the victory of liberal capitalist democracy as the final stage in humanity's sociopolitical evolution.

In this triumphal, post-Cold War geopolitical context, little attention was paid to the bombings of US embassies in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Nairobi in Kenya on 7 August 1998; they were deemed the cowardly acts of an obscure Islamic jihadist organization known as al-Qaeda, "the Base" or "Fortress" in Arabic. Al-Qaeda directed its operations from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, a far off region of little interest to Americans after the failed Soviet occupation of the country in 1979-89. While the US intelligence community was well aware of al-Qaeda, the typical American knew nothing of the organization. That all changed forever on 11 September 2001, when al-Qaeda ideologues crashed three commercial airliners into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in suburban Washington, DC. Brave passengers aboard a fourth aircraft forced it to crash in rural Pennsylvania before it could reach the White House or the Capitol building.

The works under review here help to explain the nature of Islamic militancy. In the first, political scientist Donald Holbrook (Univ. of Lancaster) has gathered many speeches and internet writings by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded to the leadership of al-Qaeda after the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011. In the second, Alexander Thurston (Wilson Center) offers an impressive scholarly study of the militant movement, Boko Haram, in northeastern Nigeria, which first captured the world's attention by kidnapping a group of over two hundred schoolgirls and holding most of them prisoner ever since.

Al-Qaeda has deep ideological roots in the Muslim world. It was founded in 1988 by, among others, Osama bin Laden, a black sheep of a wealthy, well-connected Saudi family. It drew inspiration from the Salafi Muslim tradition that extolled the early stages of Islam, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, his first converts, the Quran, the sayings and actions attributed to Muhammad (*hadith*), and Islamic (*sharia*) law. The Salafis believed Islam deviated from its early tra-

1. In his *The End of History and the Last Man* (NY: Free Press, 1992).

ditions and lost out to Western materialist capitalism and godless communism. For them, only a return to its pure traditions could save Islam and, indeed, the whole world.

Al-Qaeda faithful also espoused the use of terror against unbelievers, sounding a call to jihadist militancy. They took their inspiration from ideologues whose teachings legitimized attacks on godless and materialist rulers, both in the West and throughout the Muslim world. Two especially influential such writers were the Pakistani journalist and theologian, Syed Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79), and the Egyptian firebrand and Muslim Brother, Sayyid Qutb (b. 1906), who was executed by President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966.

Bin Laden was charismatic; Zawahiri shy and scholarly. Under bin Laden, al-Qaeda was the primary militant Islamic organization; nearly all other Muslim jihadist groups came under its big umbrella. But bin Laden's death was accompanied by the Arab Spring movement that overthrew longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen and triggered a revolt against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, Shiism gained greater influence not only in Iran but in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. In this radically altered Muslim world order, Ayman al-Zawahiri felt it his duty to ensure the continued viability of al-Qaeda and its message.

Born in 1951 on the wrong side of the tracks in Maadi, a wealthy suburb of Cairo, Zawahiri excelled in school, joined the Muslim Brotherhood at age fourteen, and graduated from Cairo University Medical School in 1974. His view of Islam's role in the world, shaped by the writings of Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), took him to Pakistan and the campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Here his ties with bin Laden led him to merge his own jihadist group with al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, he always believed his homeland, Egypt, would be instrumental in the triumph of a purified Islam.

The first eighteen items in *Al-Qaeda 2.0* are statements Zawahiri made soon after the death of bin Laden. Fulsome in his praise for bin Laden, now called by God to a higher place, he stresses al-Qaeda's continuing commitment to its founder's goals and to uniting the whole Muslim community (*ummah*). Despite changing circumstances, the overarching goal of al-Qaeda remained the same: to fight for the Palestinian cause until "the disbelieving [American] armies withdraw from the lands of Muhammed" (23). The organization must persist "until [bin Laden's] message reached the east and the west of the world and all Muslims and every oppressed one in the earth responded to it" (24). Zawahiri cites four jihadist blows against America—"the blessed attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania," the defeat of the American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ousting of "America's corrupt cronies in Tunisia and Egypt and the shaking of their seats of power in Libya, Yemen, and Syria" (26). The ultimate goal remained "to see all the lands of Muslims free from external domination and internal deviation ... [and united] under a single caliphate" (35). He reproached the leaders of the Arab Spring for "keeping Israel secure and supporting it against our people in Palestine and facilitating its threats against the security of Arabs and Muslims" (36). Like bin Laden, he denounced the West's imperialist divide-and-rule tactics, as seen in the British-French partition of the Arab world after World War I and the severing of Bangladesh from Pakistan, Timur from Indonesia, and Kashmir from India. He excoriated the United Nations for unduly empowering the United States, Russia, China, Britain, and France, and creating the state of Israel.

By 2014, the Arab Spring had become, in Zawahiri's view, a failure. In his own Egypt, the new military dictatorship of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi marked the triumph of "the secularist, Americanised military man who stood higher than everyone else" (81). Even worse for the future of Islam was the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which caused a rupture in a once unified militant Islamic movement. Originally loyal to al-Qaeda, ISIS later broke away and proclaimed a new

Islamic State, a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. Zawahiri loathed the Islamic State, describing al-Baghdadi as “clearly not a caliph who deserves the right to be obeyed and listened to; on the contrary he is of all people the least worthy of obedience and respect since he is himself a rebel” (196). He regarded the Islamic State as a case of *fitna*, a war within the Muslim world. He maintained that ISIS atrocities only intensified American resistance. He also reminded his followers that the goal of the jihadist movement was not yet to found a caliphate but to throw off American domination.

The title *Al-Qaeda 2.0* alludes to an earlier collection of the writings and proclamations of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri,² evincing a movement on the rise, certain of its ultimate triumph and enthusiastic embrace by Muslims. The al-Zawahiri of the present anthology is less optimistic; al-Qaeda, faced with challenges by other movements within the Arab and larger Muslim worlds, must proclaim its continuing relevance and righteousness. Both books provide essential readings for anyone interested in radical and militant Islam.

Since Boko Haram is much less familiar than al-Qaeda outside Africa, Alexander Thurston’s well-researched study of the Nigerian jihadist movement is a welcome addition to our knowledge of terrorist organizations. Although the author claims the movement did not arise solely or even mainly out of sociopolitical conditions in Nigeria, he nevertheless portrays it as a very flawed state, the creation of British colonial conquerors who combined diverse geographical, ethnic, and religious regions for mainly financial reasons. Specifically, the better-off south had to support the poorer north, with near-catastrophic results since the country gained its independence in 1960. The federal government suppressed a breakaway Biafran quest to create a new state in a bloody civil war (1967–70). Since then, it has weathered countless other storms. Among the first were protests and violent actions by the peoples of oil-rich southeastern Nigeria, who recognized (and resented) that their region gained little of the enormous wealth generated by its oil exports. For decades, they resisted all federal government efforts to bring law and order to the area. More recently, northeastern Nigeria, particularly the state of Borno, also grossly neglected by the central government, made its discontent painfully visible in the form of an Islamic jihadist movement calling itself Boko Haram.

In the Hausa language, “Boko Haram” means that Western learning, indeed Western civilization, is prohibited as wholly antithetical to Islam. Emerging around 2000, its founders had grown up in northeastern Nigeria, a strong Muslim territory, during the 1970s and 1980s. Many had studied in Western schools and, finding few outlets for their talents, established a branch of the worldwide jihadist movement in their region.

The sources for *Boko Haram* were as hard to assemble and interpret as those in Holbrook’s *Al-Qaeda 2.0*. The organization’s own videos, audio recordings, and written sources were, naturally, designed to attract recruits and present an unassailable image to the outside world. Besides such internal documentation, the author has drawn on many sources produced by opponents of Boko Haram, chiefly Nigerian and US government reports and UN documents. Thornton has also diligently combed through local and international newspaper articles. The result is as balanced and comprehensive a treatment of Boko Haram as we are likely to see for many years.

The author concentrates on Boko Haram’s two leading figures: Muhammad Yusuf, its founder and leader until his death at the hands of the Nigerian federal government in 2009; and Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf’s successor, who made Boko Haram even more vicious and aggressive. Both men came from rural areas of northeastern Nigeria, but eventually made their way to Maiduguri, the

2. *The Al Qaeda Reader*, ed. Raymond Ibrahim (NY: Doubleday, 2007).

provincial capital and heart of the old Borno Islamic Empire. They became increasingly disillusioned by the Borno political elite, especially, the *Shehu* (ruler of the Borno Empire), the religious establishment, and the Sufi orders. Yusuf was initially close to the Salafi preachers but not yet fully committed to violence; he broke from them when they rejected his deep opposition to Western education and support for armed revolutionary activity. In time, he became an ardent adversary of democracy, constitutionalism, and party politics, affirming that these institutions had caused Islam's failures. Nigerian troops captured and executed Yusuf on 30 July 2009, before he could carry out a planned uprising against the state.

Nigerian authorities wrongly assumed they had killed Boko Haram along with Yusuf. But Shekau succeeded to its headship, stressing the Quranic verse that "chaos is worse than killing." Though it never gained much public interest or financial support from al-Qaeda or other jihadist groups, Boko Haram embarked on a campaign of total warfare in 2013 in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, compelling the Nigerian authorities to put them under a state of emergency. Boko Haram's most notorious action was the abduction of 276 girls from the government's Secondary School in Chibok, in Borno South, on the night of 14 April 2014. By mid-2014, Boko Haram's successes led Shekau to declare the formation of "a state among the states of Islam" in Gwoza, Borno, and, later, additional territory in Borno and Adamawa (228). Yet the movement's ambitions exceeded its grasp. A determined Nigerian military defeated it in battles and seized territory. The election of Muhammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, as president of Nigeria in 2015 strengthened Nigerian state leaders' (earlier lacking) resolve to rid the country of Boko Haram. Still, even today, Boko Haram retains its power and appeal in northeastern Nigeria.

The books reviewed here go far to clarify the motives of Muslims who rally to jihadist movements; they demonstrate, too, that those organizations will continue to attract followers despite crushing military defeats and the deaths of their frontline leaders. Both volumes will reward the careful reflection of anyone interested in jihadism in a post-Cold War world.