



Book review of the audacious ascetic: what the bin Laden tapes reveal about al-Qa'ida

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on empirical rigour some may consider unnecessary. The book's analysis centres around a discourse analysis of policy documents and parliamentary debates to uncover how these two issues of human rights and counterterror security are framed in each case. Ultimately, the book's conclusions draw on a number of well-thumbed themes in critical terrorism studies: examining definitions of terrorism, the securitisation of dissent, indefinite detention of suspects, and the impact of counterterrorism legislation on ethnic minorities. Yet, where the book contributes most strongly is its forensic examination of two fascinating case studies. The virtue of the book is in the detail.

Yet, the book is not without its weaknesses. Demirsu frames human rights and counterterrorism as requiring "balancing" – placing each concept on opposite sides of a fulcrum. The two appear to be thus mutually exclusive: where one goes up, the other goes down. This zero-sum framing can be problematised through exploring cases where human rights narratives have supported modes of counterterrorism that while presented as a defence of human rights are evidently an abuse thereof. In this regard, the isolation of domestic counterterror strategy and the exclusion of counterterror abroad from the study, particularly in the British case, demonstrates a missed opportunity.

In this sense, this book may frustrate some critical scholars for not being critical enough. In particular, the book appears somewhat naive in its approach to human rights. More than once the book makes statements such as "Despite the fact that the UK has historically been the heartland of rights and liberties" (Demirsu 2017, 70), which seems to disregard the British colonial legacy in its entirety, alongside Britain's military campaigns in more recent years, particularly in the invasion of Iraq. The book would have profited from some critical examination of the nature of human rights more broadly. The book projects a conventional narrative of the universality of human rights as inalienable and virtuous, yet concedes the necessity of their curtailment to counterterrorism. This leaves the book with something of a normative lacuna. In the book's desire to illustrate *how* these two concepts weave themselves together in political discourse, one is left unsure as to the particular world Demirsu is projecting as a better one. The question of whether one could counterterror *without* curtailing rights or liberties is left unaddressed.

Overall, the book offers useful depth to the vital question of human rights in the context of countering terrorism. It is a strong debut that should offer utility to a wide range of scholars, in particular through its compilation and narrating of post-9/11 counterterror legislation in both countries, Turkey and the UK.

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Book review of the audacious ascetic: what the bin Laden tapes reveal about al-Qa'ida, by Flagg Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 459 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-026436-9

Critical Terrorism Studies has, since its inception, expressed frustration at the lacuna of research that attempts to understand terrorism from the perspective of those engaged in political violence. When over 1500 cassette tapes – the entire audio library from bin Laden's

former home in Kandahar – landed at the office of Flagg Miller, the Professor of Religious Studies had the chance to make amends. These tapes – a vast collection of lectures, sermons, speeches and informal conversations spanning four decades – offered Miller a unique opportunity to place the theology, foundational frameworks and commonplace (mis)conceptions surrounding al-Qa’ida under a microscope. This incredible resource was in fact nearly lost. They were discovered in the hands of a Kandahari cassette shop owner, about to tape over the collection with Afghan pop music in the wake of the fall of the Taliban in 2001. This book is the culmination of a lengthy task – the analysis of countless hours of material, producing insightful findings into al-Qa’ida, bin Laden and militant Islamism. His findings are both important and nuanced: through a forensic analysis of this audio archive, Miller demands we replace the dominant discourse of al-Qa’ida as a transnational, anti-American terrorist network with a complex heterogeneity of understanding.

Miller’s route into a project that seeks to challenge dominant discourses surrounding a notorious militant organisation such as al-Qa’ida is perhaps unusual and in stark contrast to the approach undertaken by many Critical Terrorism Scholars. His book does not adopt methods of research that dominate this field, such as Foucauldian or discourse analysis. Instead, Miller’s expertise arose through studying the impact of audio technology on Yemeni culture and poetry in particular. His professorship sits in religious studies, and this background ensures his analysis crosses between the anthropological, the theological and the biographical.

Miller’s work reads solely as a biography neither of bin Laden himself nor of al-Qa’ida as an organisation, but focuses on the importance of al-Qa’ida as a concept: in Miller’s terms, its role both as “discourse” (p. 5) and as a “relation to state power” (p. 371). Miller summarises this claim: “Al Qa’ida is less a single organisation, network, or set of affiliates united by a common ideology than it is a tactic for winning battles within Muslim-majority societies” (p. 376). Having said this, Miller does also offer important biographical contributions into bin Laden as a person. Bin Laden developed a militant form of asceticism, incorporating both military strength and religious discipline. It was bin Laden’s reputation as an ascetic, Miller argues, that was key in enhancing his reputation amongst his followers. Miller uses this emphasis to challenge the commonly-held notion that al-Qa’ida’s main enemy has always been the US, rather than having a greater focus on the Muslim world. Furthermore, Miller is keen to assert that bin Laden’s focus on America as a primary target was in fact a product of western narratives – narratives that bin Laden then built upon when he understood that there was political capital in doing so.

The book begins with three chapters that build both an understanding of bin Laden as an ascetic and a biographical context of bin Laden’s childhood. Each chapter begins with an (at times lengthy) excerpt of the archive of taped material, allowing the reader to situate themselves as one of the many individuals who might have explored this audio library in the Kandahari guest house. Miller’s narrative pauses as chapter 4 examines the role of the cassette tape as a device for the dissemination of ideas in the Islamic world of the past 50 years. Following chapters then build an understanding of a series of tensions or antagonisms evident from the tape archives: the image of al-Qa’ida as developed by western security officials, in contrast to the tapes; the tensions between bin Laden’s personal emphasis on seeking change in Muslim countries or in fighting America as target number one and finally the tensions that bin Laden’s later emphasis on fighting America provoked amongst other al-Qa’ida commanders.

The depth of understanding that Miller offers is quite outstanding. Miller’s positioning as a scholar of religious, rather than political, studies ensures there is a humility to attempting to understand the theology of bin Laden and al-Qa’ida in much greater depth than many terrorism scholars might. The layers of theological and anthropological insight that Miller

offers give readers a far greater understanding of who bin Laden was, and the context in which his reputation grew, than security reports have, as yet, offered the academic community.

The book is not without its faults. It is clear that a primary objective that Miller has for his book is to challenge dominant understandings of both bin Laden's relationship to al-Qa'ida and bin Laden's focus on the US as a key enemy. Yet, the image of bin Laden on the front, and the book's title, is in danger of misleading readers. The tapes are not in themselves uniquely an archive of bin Laden's own oratory – though he does feature heavily – but are instead a collection of various speakers who made their way into this audio library. There is a tension within the book, surrounding what these tapes can, and cannot, reveal. They cannot, as Miller admits, inform us in great depth about bin Laden's character. In fact, it remains uncertain if bin Laden ever listened to the tapes at all. Yet, they can inform us about the culture within which bin Laden was operating. Miller attempts to bridge a divide between this book being a biography of bin Laden and an ethnography of the theological and organisational foundations of al-Qa'ida. One weakness of the book is that at times it is hard to tell which of these two aims Miller is attempting to achieve.

Miller's greatest achievement is to complicate, rather than clarify. Terrorism scholars rarely, indeed perhaps never, engage with the subjects about which they write. It is not a field in which empirical data is king. Miller offers a creative, insightful and provocative challenge to this. Saved from a new life as the vehicle for Afghan pop music, these cassettes breathe new life into our understanding of Al-Qa'ida and bin Laden. Miller's work should prove invaluable to scholars of terrorism and to regional specialists of both South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. In the book's epilogue, Miller offers an aspiration that the book will also prove useful to counterterrorism policymakers. In Miller's words, he "offers guidance [to counterterrorism officials] by exploring the intellectual and institutional mechanisms that have given al-Qa'ida resilience" (p. 371). It is perhaps too early to tell whether this level of complexity and nuance is audible for such ears.

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Infatuated with martyrdom: female jihadism from Al Qaeda to the "Islamic State",

by Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, Amman, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017, 456 pp., Translation by Banan Malkawi. ISBN: 978-9957-484-75-0

Infatuated with Martyrdom: Female Jihadism from Al Qaeda to the "Islamic State" aims to answer the frequently asked question of why women join extremist groups. For the authors, the field of jihadism, and female jihadism in particular, has been addressed through a reductionist and orientalist approach that has led to a confused picture of the phenomenon and of the individuals taking part in it.

In order to come up with an answer, the book tackles two main points: the first is how the recent developments and changes in the role of female jihadists can be understood in the framework of the jihadist narrative and doctrinal perspective. The second questions the