

Book Review: Osama Bin Laden

Matthew Partridge finds **Michael Scheuer's** work to be extremely useful as a guide to the motivations of Osama Bin Laden, and the extent to which Al-Qaeda was different from more conventional terrorist groups.

Osama Bin Laden. Michael Scheuer. [Oxford University Press](#). February 2011.

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While doing research in America five years ago, I came across a letter in President Truman's correspondence file offering \$50,000 for the opportunity to display a live Hitler in a cage around the country. While it was clearly preserved as an example of the facetious correspondence the White House regularly has to deal with (other letters in the file included a schoolteacher volunteering the services of her and her pupils as mediators between Truman and Stalin), this illustrates the problem of how both governments and historians deal with history's monsters.

Of course, as insurgents, rather than rulers, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates were responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and New York, rather than the millions killed by the Nazis. Nonetheless, the attempt to downplay Bin Laden's significance, by anonymously burying him at sea and releasing claims that he was addicted to pornography, risks obscuring the gravity of his crimes, his ideological underpinnings and the fact that Islamism did not die with him at *Abbotabad*. As Michael Scheuer, the former head of the CIA's Bin Laden unit notes in his biography, entitled simply *Osama Bin Laden*, "Washington did not chalk off Lord Howe as a fool and a womanizer".

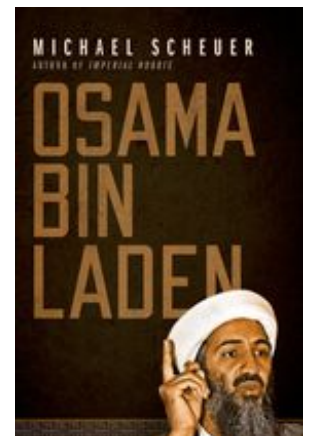
Indeed, in the opening chapter Scheuer makes a convincing case, backed up by logical evidence, against Saudi (and Western) claims that Osama was "an effete Saudi ne'er-do-well" brainwashed by al-Zawahiri (now his successor as leader of Al-Qaeda). In the rest of the book Scheuer painstakingly goes through Bin Laden's life, emphasising that his decision to become, what the author terms, a "Salafi Jihadi" was not the result of a sudden change, or a desire for attention, but the result of a deeply held ideological beliefs held of his own free will.

Unfortunately, Scheuer's works suffers from some flaws. While he is clearly correct when he states that "if you are going to analyze someone's thoughts and actions by using the words of his rivals and enemies, you will need to balance them with what he himself has said about them", he goes to the opposite extreme, taking Bin Laden's words, and the words of his supporters, at face value, without any criticism or analysis. One would have thought that an experienced CIA analyst would have been able to find other, more objective sources than Bin Laden's relatives and ex-cronies, whose memoirs he quotes from extensively.

More uncomfortably, Scheuer's respect for Bin Laden's military and organisational skills occasionally turns into an ill-concealed admiration for Bin Laden the person. In the introduction he describes his as "...brave, generous, intelligent, charismatic". Later on, in the chapter dealing with Bin Laden's education and early life, Scheuer claims that "as a young man Osama also devoted much time to charity work...as he grew he steadily developed a reputation for quiet generosity". Most ludicrously, it is suggested that after the death of al-Zarqawi, the then leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Bin Laden attempted to move the organisation in a less nihilistic direction, even though the next year would be the most brutal of the war, with 32,827 civilians dying in the twelve months after June 2006.

Although he states in the epilogue that "if we do not win outright and irrefutably, we will surely lose in the same manner" and quotes Lincoln's famous declaration that, "between him and us the issue is distinct, simple and inflexible", Scheuer seems to think that some of Bin Laden aims are legitimate. Indeed, he lays the blame for September 11th on American foreign policy, stating that Afghanistan was "a war caused by U.S. interventionism". The author also characterises plans to "destroy Israel, overthrow rulers who do not govern by Shariah law; and to recover...Palestine, Spain, southern Thailand and Mindanao" as a "defensive Jihad". This moral ambivalence leads him to deride those who object to Israel being destroyed as "Likudites". Similarly he argues that those who believe that human rights are universal are guilty of "hubristic militarism and democracy-mongering".

Overall, *Osama Bin Laden* is extremely useful as a guide to the motivations of Osama Bin Laden, and the



extent to which Al-Qaeda was different from more conventional terrorist groups. As such it serves as a useful wake-up call to those who seek to whitewash the ideology out of Islamic terrorism. Unfortunately, the one-sided use of sources, and Scheuer's isolationist leanings, mean that it cannot be read in isolation.

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