

Inside The Global Jihad: How I infiltrated Al Qa'eda and was Abandoned by Western Intelligence

Omar Nasiri

Reviewed by Tony LeRay-Meyer

I was drawn to this book by apparent ringing endorsements from former senior CIA officer, Michael Scheuer, and noted terrorism author, Ahmed Rashid. Scheuer described "... a ground breaking account ... a micro-level description of the whole training process within the camps". Rashid was just as effusive: "A chillingly detailed portrait of life inside the Afghan training camps." Verifying the authenticity and therefore the worth of Nasiri's account is obviously an issue for any intelligence professional. Unless you embrace Nasiri as a credible source this book cannot occupy the 'ground-breaking' profile ascribed by Scheuer or the 'insider' status of its title.

Nasiri does not help here by providing sufficient detail or many in-depth insights. His story skims too quickly across a variety of subjects, reading more as a life story rather than an analytical account. The book is really just a good introduction for those beginning their study of the evolution of trans-national Islamist terrorism – particularly its pre-9/11 development.

He does, however, want the reader to understand what he believes his Western intelligence handlers did not really grasp: the threat from trans-national Islamist terrorism transcends linear premises based on the supposed omnipotence of Al Qa'eda. He emphasises that the 'war on terrorism' is in essence 'a war of ideas', and one he argues both sides appear to be losing.

Nasiri, a Moroccan petty criminal who emigrated to Belgium in his late teens, was drawn into the world of counterterrorism espionage in order to protect family members from criminal prosecution. He claims to have served as an agent for the French, British and German security and foreign intelligence services throughout the 1990s, infiltrating the violent and burgeoning European networks of the Algerian *Armed Islamic Group* (GIA) and then Al Qa'eda's training camps in Afghanistan.

The authenticity question is exemplified by admissions he makes concerning his early work as a DGSE operative infiltrating and disrupting a GIA cell in Belgium. He claims to have confessed his treachery to the cell's leaders before their arrest without really knowing why. Nasiri also claims he did not subsequently admit this to his case officers. Throughout the remainder of the book his obvious vulnerability due to this duplicity both ways is barely addressed. This is a major inconsistency for a story premised on Nasiri's supposedly successful and insightful exploits as an agent.

While quite readable as a story, the style of this 'personal memoir' is also a weakness. The reader is warned in the introduction that this personal chronology approach may provide an 'incomplete picture'. But the value of the overall account is reliant on it being the 'unique perspective'

offered by his experiences as an infiltration agent. Though the book certainly provides tastes of such insight, the 'personal memoir' style where personal life experiences are mixed with mujahid ones is often distracting and unsatisfying. The short 'snapshot' structure of each chapter amplifies the problem. Whether it was his weapons training in Khaldan, his infiltration of the Finsbury Park and Four Seasons mosques in London for MI5, or the danger of his cross-border exfiltration as a GIA car bomb courier between France and Morocco, the reader is provided with brief discussions of usually less than two pages and with little detail.

A feature of the book, if true, is the description of his Mujahid training in Afghanistan in 1995, including the sophisticated nature of the training in both weapons and insurgency tactics. He was also exposed to some of Al Qa'eda's most senior trainers and recruiters, such as Ibn Sheikh and Abu Zubayda. As a 'European Arab', his claimed mentor, Ibn Sheikh, allegedly prepared him as part of a broader structure being established to "...destroy the West with its own weapons". He was sent back to Europe as a sleeper and, after being given up for dead, was reunited with his French handler. Nasiri was subsequently run jointly by the DGSE and MI5, within the United Kingdom, to monitor Algerian extremist networks, and the emerging threat from Islamist clerics such as Abu Hamza at the Finsbury Park Mosque in London.

Again if true, Nasiri's account provides some interesting insights into what he thought was his inept handling as an agent although, based on his duplicity, this might also have been due to operational security measures by his handlers. Nasiri does appear to accurately highlight the apparent lack of understanding by Western intelligence agencies, and the West generally, of the evolving Islamist problem and particularly its cross-border and cross-jurisdictional nature. He argues that the West failed to appreciate 'why' Islamism emerged as a threat or anticipate 'what and who the adversary really was' prior to 9/11. Nasiri believes that the institutional culture of Western intelligence services limited the intellectual frameworks and creative thinking needed to recognise, scope and combat the Islamist threat.

Inside the Global Jihad is certainly an interesting contribution to the study of trans-national Islamist terrorism. Nasiri's most useful message is that the West did not, and perhaps still does not, really understand its Islamist adversary. For that alone the book is well worth the read. ♦

Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad: How I infiltrated Al Qa'eda and was Abandoned by Western Intelligence*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006, Softback, 337pp., RRP A\$32.95.

