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Lawrence Wright. *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State.* New York: Knopf, 2016. 384 pp. $28.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-385-35205-5.

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In *The Terror Years: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State,* Lawrence Wright joins together disparate people, places, and events to create a singular portrait of this generation's defining conflict. Wright describes his book as "a primer on the evolution of the jihadist movement from its early years to the present, and the parallel action of the West to attempt to contain it" (p. xiii). Yet the book is much more than that. Composed of ten articles previously published in some form in *The New Yorker*, *The Terror Years* provides an intimate look at the course of events that culminated with the emergence of ISIS. Wright lends emotional weight to the often detached headlines from the time period, and real dimensionality to the people that populate his stories. He also captures the moods, the intellectual and religious concerns, and the fears of many different peoples across many different countries. As a result, *The Terror Years* is less like *The Looming Tower* (Wright's Pulitzer Prize-winning book on al-Qaeda, 2007) and more like Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War, 1890-1914*, highlighting a wide range of events, personalities, and societal concerns, but always with an eye to the underlying conflict.

The first three chapters tell the story of the early years of al-Qaeda and the US government's growing (but still lagging) concern with the organization. Al-Qaeda during this time period seems rather quaint in retrospect, when their most important goal was the withdrawal of US troops from the Arabian Peninsula. With the tortured history of Egypt since the 1950s providing the backdrop, "The Man behind bin Laden" examines the life of Ayman al-Zawahiri and his relationship with Osama bin Laden. Like much of *The Terror Years*, the people and events depicted here often raise more questions than answers. Wright, for example, traces Zawahiri's path to extremism, but his initial motives remain a puzzle. Apart from brief implications about suffering abuse at school and growing up in the shadow of wealthy Europeans in Egpyt's Maadi district, there are few clues as to why this medical doctor chose such a brutal direction for his life. What is clear, however, is that Zawahiri was responding at some level to the perceived dysfunction of Egypt's society and the repressive tendencies of its government, much like Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb before him (Zawahiri actually formed his militant group when he was fifteen years old--the same year that Qutb was executed). Such grievances form one of the elemental themes of *The Terror Years* (as well as much scholarship on the roots of terrorism): state repression breeds and exacerbates extremism.

"The Counterterrorist" and "The Agent" profile the challenges facing two important FBI counterterrorism professionals: John O'Neill and Ali Soufan. O'Neill's management of the FBI's ragtag counterterrorism efforts during the 1990s demonstrates just how little importance was placed on the al-Qaeda threat (according to Richard Clarke, it was a time when they constantly had to deal with the "dolts who didn't understand," p. 53)). O'Neill and Soufan's investigations of the major attacks against US interests, including the 1993 World Trade Center attack and the 2000 bombing of the ***USS Cole***, also cast a glaring light on the dysfunction and shortsightedness of the agencies that were tasked with countering the threat. Soufan, for instance, was one of only eight FBI agents who spoke Arabic at the time of the ***USS Cole*** attack. And the adversarial relationship between the CIA and the FBI is front and center here. Wright alleges that 9/11 might not have happened if the CIA had shared pertinent information with the FBI.

Wright then shifts his focus to larger societal issues, first by examining the role of the media in Saudi Arabia in "Kingdom of Silence." Wright recounts his experience when he was hired by a Saudi Arabian newspaper to train local journalists. He quickly becomes frustrated with the country's repressive institutions, as well as the societal norms which seem to acquiesce to that repression. In his struggle to bring true investigative journalism to the paper, he uncovers many of the factors that likely influenced the men who flew planes into buildings on 9/11. Saudi Arabia is depicted as a country where legal repression is often unnecessary because social tradition accomplishes that job. A local journalist, for instance, tells Wright, "traditions say that eating alone with your female relatives is shameful. Where in our religion does it say that sitting with your own family is forbidden?" (p. 110).

From Saudi Arabia, Wright moves on to examine two other countries central to the evolving story: Spain in "The Terror Web" and Syria in "Captured on Film." "The Terror Web" demonstrates that the ineptitude of early counterterrorism efforts was not unique to the United States: at the time of the Madrid train bombings in 2004, Spain did not even have a single Arabic-speaking intelligence agent. The chapter also depicts the ever-changing nature of jihadist goals. Al-Qaeda's stated goal for the attack on March 11, 2004, was to prompt the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, which was achieved. Three weeks later, they tried (and failed) to attack the same train system again. Wright asks, "if the bombings of March 11 had accomplished the goals set by al-Qaeda, what was the point of April 2?" (p. 155). Combined with a resurgent nostalgia for al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) among jihadist leaders, the movement now seemed to be driven by something very different than bin Laden's original frustrations over the Persian Gulf War. Throughout the book, Wright depicts a movement that has grown increasingly out of sync with the intentions of its founders. The Syrian film industry is the ostensible focus of "Captured on Film," but the chapter really serves as a companion piece to "Kingdom of Silence," emphasizing the insidious repression by the Syrian government, as demonstrated in its censorship of the country's art. As with Saudi Arabia and many other countries in the Middle East, Wright finds that "abuse--and the consequent sense of helplessness and victimhood--had shaped their lives in defining ways" (p. 182).

Wright takes some time out in "The Master Plan" to further reflect on how al-Qaeda's goals, strategies, and tactics developed over the years. Al-Qaeda member Abu Musab al-Suri seems to have predicted the changing dynamics when he saw a movement towards a "leaderless resistance" (p. 191). But rather than validating some master plan, Wright points to the ***lack*** of any such plan. The chapter highlights the intense disagreements and divisions among the key leaders of al-Qaeda, including the often heated arguments between al-Suri and Osama bin Laden. These

schisms are also examined in "The Rebellion Within," which focuses on "Dr. Fadl" (Sayyid Imam al-Sharif), an early spiritual leader of al-Qaeda. His renunciation of the organization after 9/11 seems to have stemmed, in large part, from a personality clash with Zawahiri.

In "The Spymaster" Wright returns to the US bureaucracy tasked with defeating al-Qaeda and the terrorist threat and notes that it, too, has undergone an evolution. He interviews Director of National Intelligence (a position created after 9/11) Mike McConnell, who offers an impassioned defense of the country's new surveillance techniques, as well as so-called enhanced interrogation. Juxtaposing this with Senate committee reports and other testimony undermining his arguments, Wright suggests that al-Qaeda was not the only one engaged in soul searching during this time period.

The final two chapters of the book examine the fallout from two very different hostage crises. "The Captives" details Israeli efforts to bring back captured Israeli Defense Force soldier Gilad Shilat. Although the chapter focuses on the hostage negotiations and armed conflict between Israel and Hamas, Wright uses it to paint a tragic portrait of the Gaza Strip following the Israeli disengagement in 2005. Surprisingly, this chapter seems more out of place than any other in the book. Palestinian suffering in the Gaza strip and Israel's deep sense of insecurity seem almost entirely unrelated to the subjects covered in the rest of the book. Yet the Palestinian issue is an important raison d'etre for many terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda. As the Islamist agenda evolved after 9/11, however, it seems to have become further and further detached from Palestine. Like the Gaza Strip itself, the Palestinian cause seems wholly cut off from the rest of the world, relegated to another time.

"Five Hostages" covers the far more private efforts of five American families to earn the freedom of their children, all of whom were held by ISIS in Syria. Even though we know how the story will end for some of them--including James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, and Kayla Mueller--Wright still offers an emotional account of how these families bonded together while secretly fighting to save their children. His coverage of the Shilat crisis seems almost clinical by comparison. Appropriately, the book ends by showing a resurgence of US counterterrorism turf wars--this time between the FBI and the State Department--that appear to have prevented or at least delayed the resolution of the Syrian hostage crises.

ISIS is really not addressed until this final chapter, and then only briefly (the chapter focuses more on the personal stories of the hostages and their families). This emphasizes one of the book's weaknesses. While it certainly stands on its own merits, the subtitle of the book is somewhat misleading (***From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State***), as the book focuses more on the former at the expense of the latter. The book does not make much effort to actually connect the lineage of these two important terrorist groups. But that has been done effectively in other works (notably, William McCant's ***ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,*** 2015), and ***The Terror Years*** makes its own distinct contributions to the story. The epilogue to the book also seems unnecessary. Wright offers insightful observations throughout the book from a journalistic point of view, but the epilogue relies heavily on academic research to make points that have already been articulated much more effectively. And yet Wright seems to undersell a common thread in this academic research, which is also an underlying theme in many of the stories in the book: repression drives violence. The way governments treat their own people seems to be a key determinant in whether those people choose to use violence. Wright encounters one man in Saudi Arabia, for instance, whose cousin was killed fighting in Iraq. He captures the dynamic perfectly when he tells Wright, "It's when you have this power inside you--and in this closed country you

can't get it out--that you go to such places" (p. 143).

The Terror Years is an impressive work that truly captures the breadth and depth of the struggle between Islamists and the West since the 1990s. Wright has a knack for identifying the irony in almost every situation (and there is plenty of irony in this monumental conflict). He also tells the most important stories of this time period through the experiences and words of people who actually lived it. Although it covers seemingly disparate topics and a vast territory across many years, *The Terror Years* offers a comprehensive and meaningful picture of a conflict that has shaped our world.