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ABBOTTABAD REVISITED

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Osama bin Laden evaded the world's greatest manhunt for a decade. The Exile reveals for the first time exactly how. What makes this account unique is the unprecedented access that the authors, the renowned British investigative journalists Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, secured to bin Laden's four wives and his surviving progeny; an astonishing array of al-Qaeda commanders, foot soldiers, ideologues, and lackeys; and the American and Pakistani officials, soldiers, and intelligence officers respectively responsible for hunting or sheltering him. The Exile, accordingly, provides the most definitive account available of bin Laden's increasingly fraught existence in an over-crowded, ramshackle villa just a stone's throw from Pakistan's version of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

The book's main argument is that neither bin Laden nor the movement he created could have survived without the active support of persons at the apex of both Pakistan's and especially

Iran's intelligence services. The critical roles played by both countries in sheltering and protecting key al-Qaeda leaders and their families has of course long been known. But no other publicly available source comes as close to *The Exile* in presenting this familiar story either in as much detail or from the first-hand perspective of the key dramatis personae. New York Times reporter Carlotta Gall's 2014 book, *The Wrong Enemy*, for example, had forcefully advanced the same claim regarding Pakistan's complicity. *The Exile* goes considerably further: both in fleshing out the story and providing additional substantiation through the new information from multiple first-hand perspectives that Scott-Clark and Levy rely on.

In Pakistan, officers in the ultra-secret S-Wing of that country's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) protected bin Laden, his family, and his minions: providing advance warning of military raids and, when necessary, facilitating their unmolested movement from one hiding place to another. This special unit, according to Scott-Clark and Levy, "dealt directly with armed Islamist outfits without referral back to headquarters to ensure plausible deniability for the ISI chief." It was the apotheosis of the Islamist "deep state" in Pakistan — as evidenced by the longstanding, close relationship that bin Laden enjoyed with former ISI Director Gen. Hamid Gul.

Gul, who ran the intelligence service from 1987 to 1989, "cultivated deep ties with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other jihadists fighting in Afghanistan." The authors continue:

After the Soviets were defeated, Gul had become one of Osama's most outspoken advocates ... They met twice in Sudan, with Gul later bragging about these get-togethers — although sometimes he denied them.

The self-proclaimed "Godfather of the Taliban" and close friend and ally of his country's many outlawed jihadi groups, Gul constructed the "ring of security" in Abbottabad that had so effectively safeguarded bin Laden for six years. His ability to navigate effortlessly between Pakistani officialdom and that country's putative terrorist enemies was evidenced by the ISI's request in 2010 that he negotiate a peace deal with bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Those negotiations were in full swing when U.S. Navy SEALs swept into Abbottabad on May 1, 2011 and killed bin Laden. *The Exile* lamentably never completely explains how precisely Gul assumed his position as bin Laden's intermediary to the ISI or for that matter what specifically his relationship was with the service he once led. The implication is that Gul maintained close ties to the ISI and especially to its S-Wing and functioned as a useful cut-out and conduit: preserving the necessary "plausible deniability" for the ISI's senior command, cited above.

Gen. Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iranian and Shia forces deployed against ISIL in Syria and Iraq today, was Gul's Iranian doppelgänger. As commander of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp's (IRGC), Suleimani was similarly responsible for the safekeeping of bin Laden's family and the al-Qaeda leaders and their families who had fled from Afghanistan as a result of the American invasion. Reverentially referred to as "Hajji Qassem" by bin Laden's sons, Suleimani provided accommodation for them, their siblings, and mothers as well as their father's closest confidants and their families at a clandestine Quds Force training headquarters in Tehran.

This tale of Iranian connivance provides additional evidence debunking the popular misconception that extremists do not cooperate across sectarian lines. Rather, it demonstrates how when interests overlap, they have repeatedly shown a remarkable ability to cast aside their otherwise rigid differences to work together. The ancient proverb that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” has long characterized the shifting and sometimes inexplicable alliances formed across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia since the war on terrorism commenced 16 years ago. In this instance, the intensity of the shared enmity between Salafi-Jihadi Sunnis and Shia militants against the United States can never be prudently forgotten.

Although The Exile is undeniably bin Laden’s and al-Qaeda’s story of survival against formidable odds, the lynchpin of the saga is undoubtedly a former colonel in the Egyptian Army’s special forces named Saif al-Adel. Today, Al-Adel manages al-Qaeda’s interests and operations in Syria. His qualifications for this senior position are unimpeachable. One of the plotters of the 1981 assassination of Egypt’s president Anwar al-Sadat, al-Adel fortuitously avoided the mass incarceration of militants that followed. Arriving in Afghanistan, his martial skills secured him employment training mujahideen to fight against that country’s Soviet occupiers. A decade later, when bin Laden relocated to Sudan, al-Adel accompanied him as al-Qaeda’s security chief. He returned to Afghanistan with bin Laden following al-Qaeda’s expulsion from the Sudan in 1996 and was put in charge of the group’s “House of Martyrs” in Kandahar. There, Scott-Clark and Levy explain, “suicide bombers were bullied into submission using psychology, isolation, and brute force.” Al-Adel next assumed command of al-Qaeda’s special operations committee, overseeing the movement’s ambitious efforts to develop both chemical and biological warfare capabilities. He is also wanted by the United States on charges stemming from his involvement in al-Qaeda’s simultaneous bombings in 1998 of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

When the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, al-Adel headed for Iran rather than Pakistan. His longstanding ties to both Hizballah and the IRGC from his time in the Sudan assured al-Adel a warm welcome. Indeed, before long, he was “shuttling between Al Qaeda cells hiding in Mashhad, Zahidan, Shiraz, Tehran, and small towns on the Caspian Sea” maintaining group cohesion and providing for their variegated needs.

This flow of al-Qaeda operatives from Afghanistan was facilitated by one of al-Adel’s most trusted protégés from the pre-9/11 era — an uncouth Jordanian thug named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The collection of senior al-Qaeda personages who al-Zarqawi shepherded to safety in Iran ranged “from bomb makers to former camp commanders, biological weapons specialists, operational planners, and financial chiefs.” Their survival was imperative if the movement was to survive.

As a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq grew increasingly likely, al-Adel decided that al-Qaeda “should begin building up a force on the Iran-Iraq border, ready to take on the Americans whenever they arrived.” He entrusted al-Zarqawi with this important task. Thus, the seeds were sown for the Iraq-based jihadist terrorist organization that would emerge over a decade later calling itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Hamzah bin Laden, Osama's eleventh son, also features prominently in *The Exile*. Hamzah was just 12 years old when he and his father parted at an olive grove in the Melawa Valley in November 2001. "I want to be beside you, Father," the boy tearfully pleaded. "I wish to fight the infidels with you." Osama refused, ordering his family to Iran while he remained in Pakistan. Hamzah spent the next decade preparing for jihad. Under the tutelage of both al-Adel and Mahfouz Ibn El Waleed, also known as "Abu Hafs the Mauritanian," his father's spiritual adviser, Hamzah yearned for the day when he would "march with the mujahideen legions." As Scott-Clarke and Levy note, "Born into jihad, Hamzah had never known peace." Briefly united with his father on the eve of the fateful raid on the villa by U.S. Navy SEALs, Hamzah boasted to his father of having been "forged in steel" during their long separation. For security reasons, their reunion, however, was painfully brief. Hamzah spent only the night of April 29, 2011 with his father. He slipped away before dawn the following morning, narrowly escaping the U.S. raid that would have surely resulted in his death or capture. Instead, since 2015, Hamzah has emerged as an increasingly prominent voice in al-Qaeda's outreach and recruitment efforts, promising attacks against the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The Exile's main value, however, is in the new light that it sheds on the day-to-day Herculean efforts required simultaneously to protect bin Laden and his family while maintaining open lines of communications to his deputies, acolytes, financiers, and factotums dispersed across Pakistan, Iran, and more distant battlefields. Although ever-vigilant about his and his family's security, the al-Qaeda leader adapted quickly to his new surroundings. By the summer of 2005, he was comfortably ensconced in his Abbottabad lair. "Osama began to regrow his beard for the first time since 2001," Scott-Clarke and Levy write,

and he organized his work, filing hundreds of audio- and videotapes in immaculate rows, hanging his gold thobe on the back of the door, ready for his next recording. He spent many hours locked away, watching news from Iraq and Afghanistan on Al Jazeera or composing speeches to "my Muslim Ummah" and letters to commanders out in the "mother area" of Waziristan.

Bin Laden thus remained in contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri, his deputy, who had married into a local tribe and lived happily in Damadola as well as with Sheikh Saaed, the movement's financier, who was based in Mir Ali. Indeed, bin Laden felt so secure under the ISI's protection that he could assure his beloved third wife, Khairiah, who he arranged to be brought to the villa from al-Qaeda's sanctuary in Iran, that "she would be safe inside Pakistan."

As invaluable as *The Exile* incontestably is, this exhaustively researched 600-page book is not without flaws or omissions. While the authors' routine use of quotations to dramatically convey often decade-old conversations ensures a smooth and riveting narrative, it raises questions about accuracy and recollection — especially when discussions are recalled from the heat of battle or from times of undeniable personal stress, general confusion, and profound uncertainty. More problematical, however, is the absence of any significant discussion of the myriad of failed international terrorist plots and successful attacks, including such highly consequential ones like the 2004 Madrid commuter train bombings, the 2005 simultaneous suicide attacks on the London transport system, and the unsuccessful 2006 "liquid bombs" scheme targeting passenger aircraft departing from London's Heathrow Airport. Even more mysteriously, the 2005 London tragedy,

in which 52 persons were killed and more than 700 wounded, is inaccurately portrayed as al-Qaeda “inspired but not commissioned.” Nor is there any mention of al-Qaeda’s important operational base in the Malakand district of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Agency — where a succession of British Muslims was trained and dispatched back to their homeland on a variety of terrorist missions.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, Clark-Scott and Levy are to be commended for broadening the aperture of the story they so effectively tell to illuminate both the Bush and Obama administrations’ whitewashing of Pakistani complicity in sheltering bin Laden; the Obama administration’s contradictory assertions of the al-Qaeda leader’s patently evident ongoing strategic and tactical direction of the group’s operations until his death; its attendant efforts to block multi-agency analysis of critical documents seized at the Abbottabad villa and then to suppress their public release; and the controversy over the role that torture played in the hunt for bin Laden.

Like the authors’ previous authoritative book, *The Siege: 68 Hours Inside the Taj Hotel*, about the simultaneous 2008 attacks in Mumbai, *The Exile* is destined to become a classic. Indeed, its publication could hardly be better timed. It provides a salutary reminder of the determination and resiliency of an enemy that has thus far not only survived the greatest onslaught ever directed against a terrorist movement in history, but has somehow continued to grow and expand despite the exertions of the world’s remaining superpower. In this respect, a comment by Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the infamous mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, that appears early in *The Exile* is worth highlighting. “We like to terrorize disbelievers,” he told a Pakistani journalist. “That is what we do for a living.” There are alas many others today plying that same vocation — in Manchester, London, Tehran, and Paris, among other places.

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