

Bin Laden on the run

Omar Waraich outlines a startling account of the hunt for Al-Qaeda's leader

The Exile

Cathy Scott-Clark and
Adrian Levy, Bloomsbury, £25

When a major news event breaks, a scramble ensues. News readers are interrupted to announce the first details that have been gleaned. A guest commentator or senior correspondent appears to offer informed speculation. Reporters board airliners and hasten to the scene. Over the next few days, the picture grows clearer. Just as the key facts are being established, the story moves on.

This is where Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy step in. Every few years, this pair of investigative reporters picks a major story to explore in pitiless detail. Having absorbed all the information out there, they travel to every location that may be relevant and speak to everyone they can contact. We are better informed because of their exertions.

Following exhaustive accounts of Pakistan's nuclear proliferation, the 2008 Mumbai massacre, and the insurgency in Kashmir, they have now turned to the story of Osama bin Laden.

Steve Coll's excellent *Ghost Wars* laid out the story Al-Qaeda, from its start during the Afghan war against the Soviets to the day before 9/11. Scott-Clark and Levy pick up the story where Coll left off. We learn, in startling detail, how bin Laden reacted to the 'planes operation', of the divisions within both

Al-Qaeda and his family at the time, and the story of his escape. While many of his key associates found sanctuary in Iran, he narrowly evaded death and capture, before crossing the border into Pakistan.

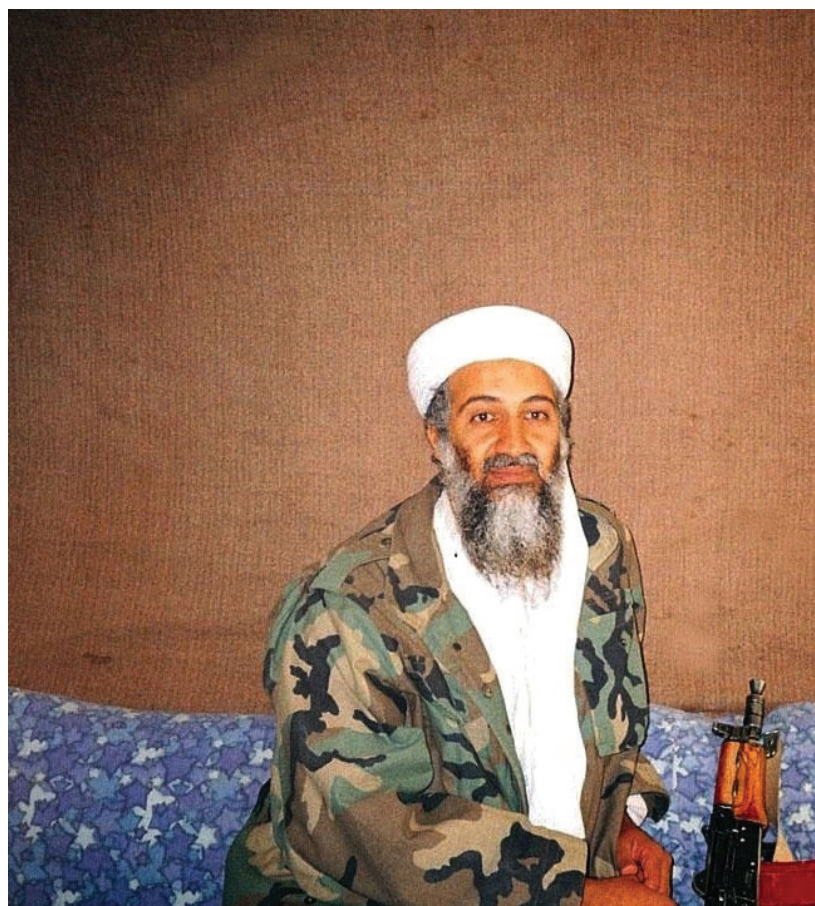
The prose takes some getting used to. The book often feels as if it has been forced to assume the shape of a thriller. The idea, the authors tell us, came to them on a 'dark Islamabad night'. There is no other kind, for the simple reason that the Pakistani capital routinely suffers power-cuts.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the embattled CIA station chief superfluously declares: 'It's going to be a long night.' We aren't just told what people said at the time, but also what they were thinking. The Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf, who has never visited North Korea, apparently mused that Islamabad felt like Pyongyang.

And the post-9/11 world dramatically hardens everything: there are 'fortresses within fortresses', 'fortified homes', terrorists who 'fortify' themselves with sweet tea and generals who predictably resort to a 'stiff drink'.

What the book lacks in style, however, it makes up for in startlingly rich detail.

Flush with the success of the attacks, bin Laden dismisses an aide's warning that America will seek revenge and grind Afghanistan into 'dust'. On his



way to meet Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, just a few weeks later, bin Laden narrowly eludes a US drone attack. When the US comes for him in Tora Bora, he makes his way to Karachi, for a discreet meeting with Richard Reid, the doomed shoe-bomber, whose failure was seen at the time as a sign that Al-Qaeda was in disarray. Bin Laden's close ally, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, known as KSM, is responsible for the grisly execution of journalist Daniel Pearl, setting a new standard for brutality that

later Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State group would surpass.

We also learn how top Al-Qaeda aides and members of bin Laden's family slipped into Iran and were given sanctuary there. Soon after the war in Afghanistan began, Iran had been discreetly working with the US against the Taliban. The Shia theocracy was opposed to the Taliban's sectarian creed, but at the same time, it turns out, they were happy to give succour to America's enemies, taking advantage of US



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The Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, pictured in November 2001 near Kabul

setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq to play a ‘double game’ even more expertly than the Pakistanis.

Bin Laden suffered a reversal when KSM, Pearl’s executioner, was captured not far from the Pakistani military’s headquarters in Rawalpindi. The much water-boarded architect of the 9/11 attacks had given bin Laden sanctuary in northern Pakistan, after a stint back in Afghanistan. Bin Laden feared that his whereabouts may have been revealed by KSM under torture. It was at this time that the Al-Qaeda leader decided to relocate to the quiet, mountain-ringed garrison town of Abbottabad, named after a British major, in the northern Hazara region – comfortably removed from both the conflict-scarred tribal areas along the Afghan border and the busy cities in Pakistan’s heartlands.

The fact that bin Laden had been living undisturbed in Abbottabad led many to the conclusion that Pakistan’s powerful military had been complicit. Only a week before bin Laden’s capture, Pakistan’s army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, had driven past the bolthole to triumphantly declare that his forces had ‘broken the terrorists’ backs’. Pakistan’s military establishment had cultivated an image as an omnipotent and omniscient force. Nothing stirred in the

country without their knowledge, as the generals liked to boast and as their critics tended to fear. But in the six years that have passed since the raid, no conclusive evidence has emerged of official Pakistani collusion.

On the night of the raid, Kayani spoke to his intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, the director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The call was monitored by US intelligence, which reported that the two men had reacted with genuine surprise. The only alternative was incompetence, something that didn’t suit the generals either. Internationally, they were assailed for alleged collusion, and at home for astonishing ineptitude. Scott-Clark and Levy split the difference. The senior generals did not know, but there was a former ISI chief who they say did.

The retired Lieutenant-General Hamid Gul, who died in 2015, spent his last few years as a rabble-rouser on Pakistani television and something of a bogeyman in the West, Afghanistan and India. He enjoyed promoting wild conspiracy theories, claiming that 9/11 was an ‘inside job’ and a pretext to attack Pakistan. ‘Nine-eleven is the justification, Afghanistan is a way station, Pakistan is their final destination,’ he liked to quip. He always opposed Musharraf’s decision to ally with the United States and support the invasion of

Afghanistan. Gul always struck me as a blowhard from a bygone era, eager to maintain some public relevance. He regularly spoke to journalists, affecting a preternaturally sinister air as he furnished lurid quotes. When bin Laden was caught and killed in Abbottabad, he declared as ‘an achievement’ the fact that Pakistan had kept bin Laden hidden away for so many years.

There is little doubt that Gul would have relished the role of an intermediary between his successors at the ISI and the Afghan Taliban. ‘Once a spy,’ as John Le Carré put it, ‘always a spy’ – although it is hard to see someone of Gul’s advanced years running an off-the-books operation of this scale undetected.

Scott-Clark and Levy didn’t manage to speak to either Kayani or Pasha. Their earlier books probably put the media-averse generals off. And some of the Pakistanis they contacted have an agenda, such as Husain Haqqani, the former ambassador to Washington, who now wants Trump to crack down on the army, or the low-credibility expatriate businessman Mansoor Ijaz.

Otherwise they have done as remarkable a job as possible, looking as far afield as Mauritania for clues. The result is a real-life tale more riveting than *Homeland*.

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