

***The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight***

Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark (Bloomsbury, 2017), 640 pp., brief bios of major characters, notes, bibliography, index.

**Reviewed by Randy Burkett**

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The premise of the book *The Exile* is tantalizing. The authors promise to fill in the blanks and tell us exactly where Usama bin Ladin (UBL) was and what he was doing from the time he disappeared in the mountains of Tora Bora in December 2001 until his death in Abbottabad in May 2011. Was he ever living in a cave, as so many commentators assumed? Did the government of Pakistan know anything about his whereabouts? Who helped him? And, of utmost importance, how can the authors know the answers to these questions when their main character is dead?

A nonfiction book is only as good as its author—or, in this case, authors—and the veracity of the sources who provide the details. In this instance, the authors are two highly respected investigative journalists. Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark were already award-winning writers who had proven their ability to obtain insights in the dangerous and complex environment of South Asia through their previous books on A.Q. Khan and his nuclear weapons network, *Nuclear Deception: The Dangerous Relationship between the United States and Pakistan*; on terrorism, *The Meadow: Kashmir 1995—Where the Terror Began*; and on the Lashkar-e-Taiba attacks in Mumbai, India, in *The Siege: 68 Hours inside the Taj Hotel*. *The Exile* was endorsed by, among others, CIA counterterrorism expert Bruce Reidel, who called the book “a riveting account of Osama Bin Laden’s last decade.” (back cover)

Given the authors’ solid credentials, both in the region and in discussing terrorism, attention must be focused on their sources—who were they, how did they know these details, and why did they share this information with two Western journalists? The answers are amazing. The authors interviewed a wide variety of sources, including two of Bin Ladin’s wives, Amal and Khairiah, who were with him at the end in Abbottabad and UBL’s spiritual advisor from the pre-9/11 al-Qa’ida training camps, Mahfouz Ibn el Waleed (aka Abu Hafs the Mauritanian), who witnessed many of the key events in the book. Although many

others were interviewed, these three individuals provided many of the best insights.

But how did the authors find these people and persuade them to share their stories, particularly when the two women were discussing their husband and knew their words would affect his legacy? Also, how did they gain the confidence of Abu Hafs, who was living openly in Mauritania and certainly was aware that his account of what he knew—or, more accurately, what he claimed he did or did not know—might imperil his future freedom? Reidel interviewed Scott-Clark at a Brookings Institution event in June 2017 and asked the first question about the UBL wives. She answered,

*The first step, I think, was I was working in Pakistan a lot in 2011 and '12. I was there when he was killed. And my immediate thought was, what about the family and the children who remained in Pakistan for months and months afterwards? I really wanted to hear what they had to say about the years on the run with him, the years in Abbottabad, whether they agreed with what he'd done. And I was lucky in that they were held [by] the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence], the Pakistani intelligence, for almost a year afterwards. And the brother of Amal, who was the youngest wife, came from Yemen to try and get his sister and her five children. And he didn't have a clue how to work the system in Pakistan. He only spoke Arabic. He didn't have any money. He'd spent—the family clumped together all their finances to get him the ticket to Islamabad. And so I gave him some assistance in terms of directing him, kind of this is how the court system works. And in return, when he finally got them freed, he then introduced me to his sister and her kids. And then we kind of went from there onwards, but it took a long time. I mean, five years altogether to get full confidence of certain members*

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*of her family, and there are certain members of her family I haven't talked to.*<sup>a</sup>

Having secured part of the story from UBL's wives, the authors searched for others who had been with him.

*And we gradually went through that quite short list of people. And one meeting led to another meeting, so going to Mauritania to meet Osama's former spiritual advisor kind of gave us some, I guess, brownie points with other people, who then said, well, if he meets you then we'll meet you. So then I met people in Jordan, like Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, who is a huge jihad theologian. And so, yes, it was a very slow, gradual process of creeping forwards and gaining confidence.*<sup>b</sup>

The ties developed with the surviving Bin Ladin family members provided the bulk of the information about UBL's travels. Abu Hafz was the source for the materials about Iran's giving shelter and virtually imprisoning al-Qa'ida members who fled there as well as some new perspectives on UBL before 9/11. Several named and unnamed Pakistan military and even ISI members, including notorious former ISI Director Hamid Gul, granted interviews and leaked stories. Several American national security personalities either provided interviews or wrote books that were cited. Finally, the plethora of documents seized at Abbottabad and later released by the US government provided the authors additional material. The result is a book that is often fascinating, occasionally insightful, sometimes enraging, and in several cases just plain wrong when it comes to details (discussed below). The entire book should be read with the understanding that many of the sources may have been trying to shape the Bin Ladin legacy through their words. The sources undoubtedly were more interested in influencing the authors than informing the reader.

The biggest flaw in *The Exile* is the authors' willingness to accept the story as each source told it—they apparently made no effort to check the accounts one source gave with those of another. For example, they did not ask Amal to confirm if UBL was absent during the numerous

trips he is reported to have taken during their time in Abbottabad. This reviewer finds the frequency and reasons for these trips to be questionable. The authors made no claim that the civilian government of Pakistan, the Pakistan Army, or the leadership of the ISI had any knowledge of UBL's location, but the book alleges UBL made many trips to contact ISI-supported terrorist groups. According to an unsourced story, UBL met with "shoe bomber" Richard Reid in Karachi in January 2002. (107–108) In 2008 he supposedly traveled to Mansehra to meet Lashkar-e-Taiba head Hafiz Saeed to consult on the planned terrorist attacks in Mumbai. (374) "In August 2009, he traveled to Kohat to meet up with Qari Saifullah Akhtar, the leaders of the banned . . . Harkat ul-Jihad al-Islami" to help plan attacks on the Pakistani Army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi. (374) Finally, in the summer of 2010, UBL allegedly traveled to Pakistan's tribal areas to meet Pakistan Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud to "discuss TTP-Al Qaeda differences face-to-face." (375) While this reviewer believes it was possible for UBL to survive by keeping himself in isolation in Abbottabad from 2005 to 2011, it stretches the imagination that he could have made all of these trips and that the multitude of people involved could keep his visits secret. This may be a case of sources close to UBL trying to build the myth that he remained an active terrorist leader rather than an impotent, trapped, and wanted man in hiding.

The book has numerous errors that undercut its reliability:

- The authors say the 9/11 attackers had two political and two military targets. Because we know the targets were the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Capitol building, it is unclear which of these they count as a second "military" target. (48)
- They claim that CIA senior officer Robert Grenier "drew up the basic war plans two weeks" before the first aerial attack on Afghanistan after 9/11 (51). Grenier is talented but did not create the plans for aerial strikes. They further compound this error by citing "Author interview with Robert Grenier, also his book *88 Days to Kandahar*. Author interview with William Murray, former CIA director, Virginia, October 2014." (538). Grenier did not make this claim, as written, in his book, and no one named William Murray has ever been a CIA director.

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a. Catherine Scott-Clark, "The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda in Flight" (Brookings Institution presentation, Washington, DC, 5 June 2017), 4; [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/20170605\\_alqaeda\\_exile\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/20170605_alqaeda_exile_transcript.pdf).

b. Ibid.

- The authors claim, without citation, that “300 vials of sarin gas hidden in an outhouse” were found in Jalalabad. (54) This reviewer contacted a former member of the unit responsible for looking at al-Qa‘ida biological and chemical programs at the time and was told that these “vials” did not exist. Sarin can be stored in liquid form, but under very controlled conditions. Given the climate and conditions cited, the sarin would have evaporated fairly quickly.
- They refer several times to Guantanamo detainee and former al-Qa‘ida member Abu Zubaydah as a “planner.” Abu Zubaydah was a safe-house keeper and travel facilitator—never a planner. (68)
- Jose Rodriguez is mistakenly identified as CIA Counterterrorism Center’s (CTC) “chief of staff” instead of its director. (139)
- The authors discuss UBL’s alleged kidney problems, information that they source to “Bin Laden family members.” Although UBL was known to have suffered from kidney stones at times, rumors of his need for an operation or even dialysis are a myth. (182 and 551)
- The depiction of the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is inaccurate and unsourced. (192)
- Amal’s details of the night UBL was killed were very contradictory, which is understandable given the traumatic event she was recalling. However, the authors appear to just accept and report her story without trying to sort out its inconsistencies. On page 417, she said she was “playing dead;” on the next she was “screaming hysterically;” and on page 420 she said she was left in the bedroom with her son Hussein after everyone else had been taken out to the courtyard. This confusion makes Amal a questionable source as the primary eyewitness to UBL’s final minutes. She definitely was not left alone (or with her son) in the third floor bedroom but was taken outside with the rest of the family. The authors also strangely wrote, “Any plan [the SEAL team had] to take the Bin Laden family with them had been abandoned the moment the first Black Hawk went down.” (420) Of course, no such plan ever existed.

Despite these problems, the book is valuable for several reasons. It tells us many things about UBL and his willingness to lie to others, to put his own comfort first, and to make poor decisions. Lawrence Wright, in

*The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, had already discussed how UBL lied to Taliban leader Mullah Omar in July 2001, when he swore that al-Qa‘ida would launch no more external attacks. Omar had already tried to rein in UBL by forcing him to relocate from Jalalabad to Tarnak Farms. In July 2001, the two met again, and Mullah Omar told UBL that he and his people “must go.” UBL nagged Omar for more time and swore he would cause no more trouble while secretly knowing the 9/11 hijackers were training in Florida for the “Planes Operation.” *The Exile* not only confirms Omar and the Taliban were “blindsided” by this operation (35–36) but expands on the story that this project was closely held by UBL and Khaled Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) that the al-Qa‘ida leadership council did not know about it (45). While many people talked about “a big plan” in the summer of 2001, very few knew any of the details, “and the ones in the know were frantic,” according to Levy and Scott-Clark’s sources. (46)

UBL’s willingness to lie and put others at risk while pursuing his own safety and comfort are documented throughout the book. From his decision to hide in a cave right after the 9/11 attacks, leaving his family, friends, and followers exposed to potential retaliation from the United States, to his unreasonable demands on the two brothers who hid him in Abbottabad, UBL was a man who put himself and his own desires first. Even when his Abbottabad hosts were doing their best to protect him, UBL thought nothing of bringing more and more family members to the compound and never paused in producing more children despite the medical and safety risks to all three families living there. He kept one son, Khalid, virtually captive because he could not stand to be without a private secretary. His decision to prevent Khalid from traveling until Khairiah, his “favorite wife,” (23) could arrive from Iran to take up his administrative duties not only resulted in Khalid’s death in the SEAL team raid but created the continuing suspicion by the surviving Bin Ladin family members that Khairiah’s arrival was the reason UBL was found.

The book also sheds new light on Iran’s role during the decade between the attacks and UBL’s death. Readers are likely to be surprised by Iran’s offer to assist the United States after 9/11, including offering intelligence on key Taliban locations. (34) This cooperation ends with President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech (116), and Iran becomes the safe haven for much of UBL’s family

and a large number of other surviving al-Qa'ida members and their families. Iran allowed the al-Qa'ida refugees in, in part to prevent the group from launching attacks there, and then allowed various members to travel out either intermittently or permanently based on whether these trips would be in Iran's interest and often influenced by the potential harm the traveler could do to the United States. According to the authors' sources, Gen. Qasem Suleimani, the head of Iran's external intelligence operations, "took personal responsibility for Bin Laden's family and Al Qaeda's military council." (520)

In summary, the book has flaws but is worth reading, even at a lengthy 640 pages. It provides new insights into UBL and al-Qa'ida and will likely make the reader question the US government's past and present relationships

with Pakistan and Iran. Although we know how UBL's story ends, one final frustration is the lack of accountability of other characters in the book. The Bin Ladin family members who are not still engaging in terrorism fly first to Jeddah on a private jet to rejoin other relatives and then move to Doha, Qatar, to live a life of luxury with UBL's estranged son, Omar. Mahfouz Ibn el Waleed (aka Abu Hafs the Mauritanian) also remains free, even though he admits he knew of the coming 9/11 attacks and was an al-Qa'ida insider. Based on the book, Iran and Pakistan are likely to continue to harbor terrorists with impunity, providing safety and support while they plan their next attacks. Filling in the blanks on where UBL was and what he was doing is satisfying, but the broader story revealed is far more troubling.



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**The Reviewer:** Randy Burkett serves on the CIA history staff. His past assignments have included service on the faculty of the Naval Postgraduate School.