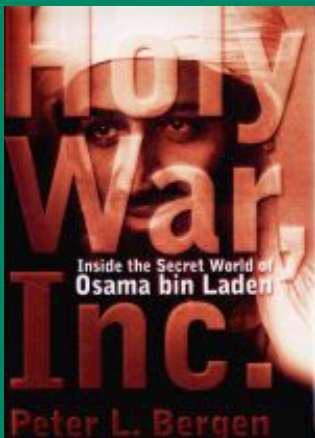




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Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, The Free Press, New York, 2001, 300 p.

The book of Peter L. Bergen, journalist and analyst of problems of terrorism for CNN, was intended to appear during the summer of this year, but the events of September 11 rushed its publication.

In the book approximately ten chapters we won't find a philosophical or sociological analysis of the international phenomenon called terrorism, but rather an exhaustive narration of the events provoked by terrorists and of actual encounters and interviews with members of different Arab militant organizations. The book is a sort of long news report involving political details, biographies of Islamic militants, and critical analyses of U.S. government decisions concerning the Middle East.

Indeed, one of the book's interesting qualities is its lack of a speculative perspective on terrorism, the departure point being the meeting and the interview that Peter L. Bergen had with Osama bin Laden in 1997 in Afghanistan.

The book's prologue is dedicated to this risky interview which took place several hundred kilometers from Jalalabad in an area controlled by bin Laden which is non-identifiable on the map due to precau-

tions taken by the members of al-Qaeda. It was then that, for the first time, bin Laden declared to Western journalists that American civilians could become targets in the war waged against them in the country of the two Holy places (Mecca and Medina), that is, in Saudi Arabia. The reason for this is that the leader of al-Qaeda was opposed to the American military presence on the Holy land of Arabia, which was a result of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and furthermore because he considered the Saudi monarchy as apostate after accepting the American presence. Bin Laden's purpose being the restoration of the ancient *khilafate*, beginning from Afghanistan, in which the community of Muslims (*umma*) would live under the rule of the prophet Muhammad like in the seventh century, any foreign presence, civilian or military, especially American, is intolerable, as even the prophet insisted.

The idea sustained by Peter L. Bergen in his analysis of the organization directed by bin Laden is that al-Qaeda can be regarded as a huge international company, a holding founded in 1989 (which marks the moment when terrorism becomes entirely private). This new kind of organization relies only on private funds, being therefore very different from Middle East terrorist movements in the seventies and eighties, which were under the patronage of a state.

In the first chapter, entitled "*While America slept*", we find a brief analysis of the September 11 tragic events, which revealed the fragility of the American defense system.

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The second chapter, “*The Afghan Jihad: The Making of a Holy Warrior*” describes the event that motivated the foundation of al-Qaeda, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when 25,000 Arabs from different countries came to fight the Soviet infidels. The meaning of the war wasn’t at all political for them, but rather spiritual, and the Muslims saw that the Russian super-power was not invulnerable. The help of Arab volunteers was in fact not so important, the number of the Afghan mujahedeens being between 175.000 and 250.000. It was the financial help that the Saudi Arabia and the United States offered, together amounting to about six billion dollars, which really bolstered the anti-Soviet effort.

It is this covert financing, and the CIA’s initial denial of any implication in the Afghan War, that is studied in the third chapter “*Blowback: The CIA and the Afghan War*”. Although bin Laden never met with the CIA and was never funded by the CIA, the United States did fund the Afghan war indirectly, the CIA using Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence Agency which decided what faction should get the money, the training and the weapons. The more Islamic and pro-Pakistan factions received the help, which eventually led the United States to conclude that it wasn’t in its best interest to keep financing anti-American Islamic factions. But the author suggests that the U.S. didn’t do anything about the situation. Like other Islamic organizations, in the early eighties bin Laden declared that his next enemy in his Holy war would be the United States. The American help turned against

America, which is the *blowback* from the chapters title. For example, the Stinger anti-aircraft hand-held missiles were not all used against Russians, and are even now in the hands of various anti-American organizations.

The fourth chapter treats the period which bin Laden spent in Sudan after the end of the Afghan war. He set up an extraordinary range of companies, transforming al-Qaeda into *Holy War, Inc.*, salaries for members ranging from \$ 500 to a top rate of \$1200. It was in Sudan that some members wrote the Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad, which also existed in a CD-ROM version, and which contained 800 pages about weaponry and 200 pages on how to mount terrorist and paramilitary attacks. In May of 1996 the leader of al-Qaeda returned to Afghanistan with his family because of the pressure put by the U.S. and Egyptian governments on the Sudanese authorities. The indirect consequences of this move will prove to be disastrous, especially for the United States.

These consequences are explained in the sixth chapter, “*Investigation and Retaliation: The Embassy Bombings*.” The nearly simultaneous suicide truck bombings of the American embassies in Tanzania’s capital Dar es Salaam and Kenya’s Nairobi were a result of the experience bin Laden gained in Sudan. The seventh chapter, “*The American Connection: From Brooklyn to Seattle*” describes one of the proofs of the international power and reach of al-Qaeda, in the person of the Egyptian Ali Mohamed, who managed to infiltrate the special forces of the U.S. army in Fort Bragg, North

Carolina. The U.S. can therefore be regarded as an operational base for al-Qaeda, which recruited, raised funds, and even trained militants on American soil.

In the eighth chapter we find an explanation of the survival of al-Qaeda despite the American 1998 Tomahawk missile attacks after the embassy bombings and the U.N. sanctions on Afghanistan: the Taliban. The Taliban sheltered bin Laden and al-Qaeda because of their ancient punkhtunwali code in which unconditioned hospitality and asylum are two base concepts. He in fact needed not only the protection of the Taliban, but also their religious authority in order to legitimize his own attacks, since fatwas could only be delivered by mullah Omar. Even during the Second World War they protected several hundred German soldiers and didn't turn them in. Other terrorist acts committed by the so-called Afghan Arabs in Yemen are described in chapter nine, "*The Holy Warriors of Yemen.*" These were the Afghan Arabs who were brought by the Yemenites into their country after the end of the Afghan war in 1989: Syrians, Jordanians and Egyptians who would have been arrested in their home countries for fighting in Afghanistan. The most known attack and the first ever perpetrated on an American war ship, the U.S.S. Cole, took place in Aden, killing seventeen marines and causing losses totaling about a quarter billion dollars.

The final chapter, "*The Global Network: Around the World in Eighty Jibads*", brings the story to conclusion. Al-Qaeda was growing all the time and is probably still growing by englobing or supporting other organiza-

tions in countries such as Egypt (especially the Egyptian Jihad whose leader was Ayman al-Zawahiri, now a central figure in al-Qaeda), Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Philippines, and Cecenia, or by extending its bases even into Western countries. The interest of the book resides in this sequence of facts that traces the history of al-Qaeda from a very small supportive organization for the Arab warriors in the Afghan war to a multi-national "holding" which is one of the most important opponents of American capitalism and world securization since September eleventh.