

Brothers in Arms: The story of Al-Qaeda and the Arab jihadists by Camille Tawil

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In his book *Brothers in Arms*, Lebanese journalist Camille Tawil provides a detailed history of Al-Qaeda beginning with its 1988 inception and culminating with an overview of Al-Qaeda franchises across the region in the post 9/11 world. Tawil uses anecdotes and interviews to recreate the development of the loose web of affiliated jihadists across the Middle East and North Africa, with particular emphasis on the impact of movements in Algeria, Egypt and Libya. What the book lacks in offering political leaders more effective approaches for jihadist dealings, it makes up for by including unique first-hand accounts from fighters within these groups – valuable resources nearly impossible for Western journalists to obtain.

In this condensed English translation the original Arabic book, Lebanese journalist Tawil clearly outlines the more recent history of jihadist movements. He uses the Russian quagmire in Afghanistan in the 1980s as the starting point for illuminating the subsequent political and military conquests throughout the region that would ultimately explain the ideological transformations and infighting experienced across the Middle East and North Africa.

Brothers in Arms accounts for specific faction members as they join groups, capitalize on regional contacts, gain military training, and trek the globe to complete their jihadist duty, whether gaining new recruits in London or fleeing to foreign lands, like China, looking for safe havens. More particularly, it reveals the friendships, the military and family ties, and the cultural obligations to honour religion and uphold loyalties that have contributed to unsteady alliances. Though one word of caution: Tawil shifts quickly between separate Islamic movements from different countries, which can be difficult to follow for a reader who lacks substantial foundational knowledge of the area, the key players and recent political events. To that end, the explanation of abbreviations offered on page seven becomes a crucial reference while Tawil fleshes out the distinctions between the groups.

Historic grievances, clandestine trials, and shifting allegiances saturate the fluid dynamics of the Arab jihadist movements, a picture painted well by Tawil's incorporation of numerous anecdotes. For example, the tumultuous relationship between the Arab and Afghan mujahidin is explained through an account in which group militant members attempt to oust a top leader by bringing him to trial in absentia for gossip-inspired allegations of secular misconduct. As the book progresses, Tawil identifies the rationale behind the decisions of group leaders, offers hypotheses for the use of certain tactics, and gives a strong account of Osama bin Laden's actions and trans-regional movements through the early 2000s.

Though the links with movements in Algeria, Egypt and Libya are emphasized throughout, the overarching focus is on Al-Qaeda, the complexly networked group that lies at the center of the US's War on Terror. Though the fight against Russia had served to unite jihadist movements during the Cold War, efforts to merge the factions were unsuccessful in the post-Cold War era as leaders chose to concentrate on their own nationalist agendas and the nearby enemy. Tawil

connects the formation of the prevailing Al-Qaeda jihadist ideology directly to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) group's doctrine which condemned Arab governments that did not rule by Islamic law and other movements who refused to unite in the jihad. Publications by EIJ leaders served as key texts for training in Al-Qaeda camps. In the late 1990s, bin Laden's campaign for jihad to focus on the far enemy, or the US, began to take root and regenerate unity among the separated factions. EIJ and Al-Qaeda would in fact merge in June 2001, just months before 9/11.

Tawil is quick to point out that the shift in ideology from a defensive jihad, one in which the Islamic movements protected their homelands from invaders, to an offensive one, where they actively seek out enemies, did not appeal to all jihadists of the region. Some felt bin Laden corrupted the ideology, thus hindering their separate nationalist agendas which sought support under the same religious banner. Tawil criticizes the decision of US leaders in oversimplifying the identification of jihadists and lumping them all into the same category, which only angered them and prompted them to unite further against the US.

Additionally, Brothers in Arms provides a less-publicized account on the depth of the CIA's intelligence on bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and how the US neglected two opportunities to capture him and address the growing dangers his movement presented in the late 1990s. Tawil draws clear parallels between the War on Terror and the Russian presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s, stating that the problematic insurgency in Iraq gave Al-Qaeda the "breathing space it needed to regroup." Thus, in 2003 Al-Qaeda became an even looser franchise, with jihadist movements assuming the brand name without adhering to any centralized control. Tawil gives great detail to the struggles between Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and central figures within Al-Qaeda due to their disapproval of al-Zarqawi's alienating and overbearing tactics.

The book gains momentum near the end, as it barrels toward the dramatic events leading up to 9/11. It then takes the reader on a whirlwind tour of the Al-Qaeda franchises of the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Algeria and Libya. However, the conclusion – just over a page in length – is obviously lacking an element of synthesis. The Lebanese journalist, who has devoted much of his life to researching these issues and sourcing his information, somehow seems hesitant to lend his expertise in a final argument. With the known complications of Western counter insurgency tactics in Iraq, and the continued problems with the Taliban in Afghanistan, one would expect him to take more of a definitive stance on how anti militant operations could be improved.

Perhaps the lack of commentary is Tawil's attempt to provide an objective journalistic account of events, or perhaps it is an effort to allow the reader to form his or her own opinions. Either way, the book leaves the reader with a much deeper comprehension of the enigmatic Al-Qaeda, but with many lingering questions about the direction of Arab jihadist movements.

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