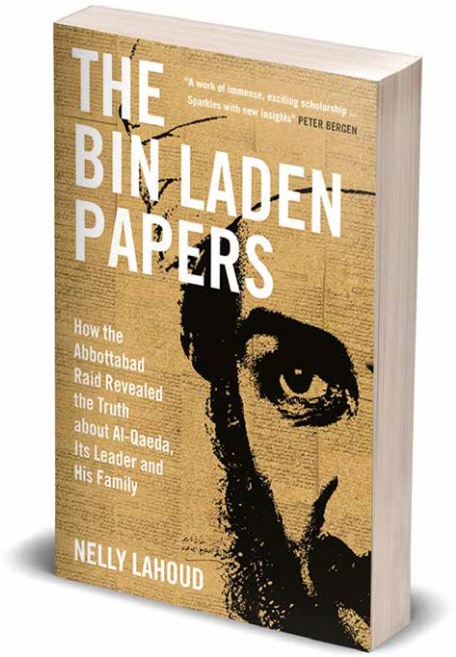

A New Look at al-Qaeda through the Bin Laden Papers

Yoram Schweitzer

Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) – Tel Aviv University

The Bin Laden Papers: How the Abbottabad Raid Revealed the Truth about al-Qaeda, its Leader, and his Family
by Nelly Lahoud
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382 pages

Dr. Nelly Lahoud's book about the al-Qaeda organization and its infamous leader, Osama bin Laden, is a riveting, challenging, and illuminating historical work based on primary sources. The book's central contention is that the West overestimated al-Qaeda's power, particularly in the decade following the September 11, 2001 attacks, due to its lack of awareness and understanding of the organization's dire situation, difficulties, and inability to wield substantial control and influence over its affiliates.

The book is among the most important published to date about bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Its main contribution lies in that it is based on some original 6,000 pages in Arabic from bin Laden's internal correspondence with his close advisers in the organization, with al-Qaeda's partners, and with his wife and two of his daughters, who were close advisers and partners in formulating his ideas and writings. These documents portray bin Laden's philosophy and worldview during the decade from September 11, 2001 until his death in May 2011 with respect to the strategic management of the struggle of his organization and its affiliates.

Bin Laden's documents were seized by a commando force of US Navy SEALs that killed the al-Qaeda leader in a raid on his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Before the force vacated the area, its chief commander, Admiral Bill McRaven, gave special permission to spend an extra 18 highly risky and invaluable minutes in seizing computers and electronic equipment that would provide intelligence information relevant to the ongoing war against al-Qaeda. Thanks to this decision, the world gained a rare glimpse into the writings and innermost thoughts of the man behind the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. The papers reveal bin Laden's future plans and shed light on the hostility between al-Qaeda and Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. They also relate the story of the bin Laden family and how various family members contributed to the organization.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first deals with a battered al-Qaeda in the 2001-2011 period, the second focuses on the rise of the organizations that were al-Qaeda affiliates in 2004-2011 and distinguishes between their differing degrees of importance for al-Qaeda, and the third deals with bin Laden's family and emissaries.

Joining her previous academic writings in the field, Lahoud's pioneering and important work on the captured documents establishes her as one of the most important scholars

on al-Qaeda terrorism in general, and on bin Laden in particular. Although some of the bin Laden papers were already published, their full release to the general public in 2017 enabled the author to organize all the items methodically, sift through them, arrange them in chronological order, and give readers a broad picture on a number of subjects addressed by Osama bin Laden. Among these, his complex relations with the Islamic terrorist organizations affiliated with him that either cooperated with him or formally joined al-Qaeda, but which at the same time maintained a degree of operational autonomy and sometimes ignored his instructions, are worthy of note. The book shows bin Laden's suspicious attitude toward Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and even senior Taliban figures, with the exception of Mullah Omar. It describes his relations with family members—those who lived with him in Abbottabad and those who were forced to go into exile in Iran and live there under house arrest under the close supervision of Iranian intelligence, or who fled to the tribal region in Waziristan, Pakistan. The documents reveal the deep involvement of Siham Sabar, bin Laden's wife, and their daughters, Sumaiya and Mariam, in counseling bin Laden and formulating his ideas and messages about his organization's policy, particularly in the last years of his life.

The book highlights the highly effective counterterrorism campaign waged by the United States against al-Qaeda leaders using armed drones, which to a great extent paralyzed the organization. Another important factor was the cooperation the United States had from the Pakistani government, and where bin Laden was concerned, from the Taliban as well.

The book sheds light on how bin Laden managed his organization remotely by means of emissaries, tried to influence his affiliates, and issued instructions and messages to his subordinates and affiliates. In the concluding chapter, Lahoud reveals for the first time the existence and identity of additional couriers who delivered letters between bin Laden and his subordinates in Waziristan when he was holed up in the compound in Abbottabad. She asserts that the location and arrest of these emissaries by Pakistan was what helped pinpoint bin Laden's hideout, not necessarily the surveillance of Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, who was known as bin Laden's leading courier. This contravenes the previously accepted belief that al-Kuwaiti was the one who led to the discovery of bin Laden's hideout and his elimination, as portrayed in the Hollywood movie *Zero Dark Thirty*.

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The major contribution of the documents' presentation, analysis, and interpretation is not diminished by its limitations, of which Lahoud is also aware. These limitations allow, and perhaps also invite, alternative interpretations to what is presented in the book on a number of topics. For example, there were additional bin Laden documents not taken from Abbottabad because of the limited time available to the commandos. In addition, the period covered by the captured documents is almost exclusively 2001-2011; the documents do not cover the long preceding decade and even earlier, which is equally relevant to an understanding of the actions taken by bin Laden in managing his organization.

Furthermore, we now have access to books, interviews with senior security and intelligence figures, and evidence from interrogations of arrested al-Qaeda operatives that also shed light on the actions of the organization and its leaders. This facilitates a critical reading of the documents written by bin Laden when he was in his compound hideout, remote and

cut off. Lahoud agrees that this confinement distorted his perception of the difficulties faced by his organization and its members. His limited understanding of the workings of international relations had a similar misleading influence on bin Laden's perception of the situation.

Lahoud presents an interesting view of the relations between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Along with the deep suspicion that bin Laden felt toward the Taliban leaders, he expressed complete confidence in Mullah Omar, calling him the Emir of the Believers, who had proved his loyalty to Islam by protecting bin Laden, despite the heavy pressure to extradite him. Lahoud's assessment contradicts the accepted view that bin Laden surprised Mullah Omar by attacking the United States on its own territory without giving Omar prior warning. Her assertion (p. 33) that presumably bin Laden, revealed in the documents as someone who consulted extensively before taking important decisions, had obtained Omar's blessing or approval for the operation is not adequately substantiated.

Lahoud's assertion that al-Qaeda was in dire straits following the attack by the United States on Afghanistan beginning in October 2001 is not disputed. However, her claim that because bin Laden went underground al-Qaeda in effect halted its terrorist attacks starting in late 2001 until late 2004—evidenced by the fact they are not mentioned in the bin Laden papers—is open to question. For example, early in al-Qaeda's heyday, when bin Laden controlled the organization and had freedom of action in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda executed a total of three terrorist attacks: at the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (August 1998); against the American destroyer *USS Cole* (October 2000); and with the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud. Lahoud agrees that al-Qaeda carried out this assassination, but it is not mentioned in the bin Laden papers as an attack by the organization. In other words, the bin Laden papers do not mention all the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda.

With respect to Lahoud's contention that the organization stopped operating when bin Laden went underground in late 2001, al-Qaeda actually carried out more terrorist attacks, some of which had been planned earlier at the organization's headquarters in Pakistan. The attacks were waged primarily under the leadership of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (sometimes called KSM), whom bin Laden appointed to command al-Qaeda's foreign terrorism unit. KSM tapped the organization's money and personnel, and also utilized its connections with its affiliates in order to continue the attacks, while al-Qaeda's other leaders, including bin Laden, fled, went into hiding, or were arrested or killed.

Among the attacks carried out in al-Qaeda's name starting in late 2001 was the attempted bombing of an American Airlines plane by the "shoe bomber," a suicide terrorist with explosives hidden in his shoes—only a technical malfunction prevented the plane from exploding and causing the death of all its passengers (December 2001); dispatch of a Tunisian terrorist, who killed 22 people in a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia (April 2002); and a multi-target terrorist attack in Mombasa, Kenya against a plane belonging to Arkia Airlines (an Israeli airline), and a hotel hosting Israeli tourists (November 2002). Fifteen people were killed in this attack, which Lahoud also recognizes as an al-Qaeda attack, while hundreds of passengers on the plane survived when the missiles targeting it failed to detonate, thus preventing mass murder. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed also used al-Qaeda money to finance the multi-target attack against two pubs in Bali, Indonesia, in which 202 people, mostly foreign tourists, were killed by members of Jamaah Islamiyah, one of al-Qaeda's close partners (October 2002).

Lahoud likewise raises questions about al-Qaeda's responsibility for attacks carried out in Britain: in 2005 against transportation targets in London, and a plan in 2006, which reached the final stages before being thwarted, to blow up seven airplanes in midair on transatlantic flights from London to a number of destinations

in the United States. There is evidence from documents and interrogations of prisoners indicating that senior al-Qaeda figures were involved in these attacks, although the method of operation and management differed from the period in which the organization's headquarters operated freely in Afghanistan. Instead of attacks carried out at the initiative of the headquarters with its training, financing, and management, and the field commander overseeing the execution, the local representatives went to the headquarters, received training and guidance, and were sent on their way to carry out the operation themselves.

Lahoud's assertion that bin Laden's decision to grant a stamp of approval to affiliate organizations not fully subject to al-Qaeda's control or influence proved to be a miscalculation (p. 148) is too categorical, and is possibly also exaggerated, because in his last days, some of these partners ignored his "strategic advice" about their actions, and one even eventually rebelled against his successor. The clear advantages of al-Qaeda's alliances and partnerships for the organization emerged mainly during the organization's darkest hours, and in practice generated its inflated image of power at its lowest moments, including after bin Laden's death. There were obviously also limits to these affiliations, of which bin Laden was well aware, since they involved geographically remote organizations operating in different and diverse cultural and political arenas, and under constraints resulting from their environment and the circumstances in which they operated.

Bin Laden never sought direct structured hierarchal command of the partner organizations in Iraq, the Islamic Maghreb, the Arabian peninsula, and Africa. He understood perfectly well that these alliances and partnerships constituted a force multiplier for his organization, and that they gave him a powerful image far in excess of his actual strength. Bin Laden obtained the status of a "master conductor" of an overall strategy of global jihad, while the organizations were in fact operating autonomously according to the existing circumstances, restrictions, and constraints in their respective areas. In his last years, bin Laden sought to prompt his affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, or Iraq to act in accordance with his "new and revised" concepts. Since he was isolated or cut off from them, or at least had difficulty communicating with them, and since they acted according to the conditions and restrictions defined by their local situation and were not accustomed to accept his orders, his resulting frustration with some of them comes as no surprise. It appears that this was a "natural price" of the type of the connection and relationship between them. The importance of these partners for the organization's continued existence and relevance under the subsequent command of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has been clearly shown.

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The most prominent example of the complexity of these relations is the connection between al-Qaeda and its Iraqi branch. For example, following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and due to his desperate situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, bin Laden relied on the merger with al-Qaeda in Iraq under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to maintain the al-Qaeda brand. The price paid by the organization was being forced to put up with al-Zarqawi's insubordination, although Lahoud brings documents and a new interpretation that puts the connection between bin Laden and al-Zarqawi, and initially also between bin Laden and his successors, in a different and slightly more "positive" light than what is generally thought—although al-Zarqawi's successors eventually rebelled against al-Zawahiri (pp. 151-167).

Al-Qaeda's relations with the Yemeni-Saudi branch were also sometimes frustrating for bin Laden when his strategic advice was not fully carried out. It is clear, however, that the organization's terrorist operations in the international theater contributed to strengthening the al-Qaeda brand's powerful image as a global, active, and formidable organization, even at a time when al-Qaeda was not at the peak of its strength (pp. 180-187).

Thus despite possible differences of opinion about some of the interpretations given by Dr. Lahoud for several of the events involving bin Laden, and although it appears that it is difficult to strike new ground on a matter that has been covered so extensively by many scholars, her impressive and thorough study successfully presents a new and challenging line of thought. It is therefore likely that her book will become required reading for professionals dealing with terrorism, and for the members of the public at large interested in the subject.

Yoram Schweitzer is a senior research fellow at INSS, where he heads the Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program. He formerly served in the Israeli intelligence community and served as a consultant on counterterror strategies to the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defense, as head of the Counter International Terror Section in the IDF, and as a member of a task force dealing with Israeli MIAs at the Prime Minister's Office. Mr. Schweitzer was a researcher and head of the educational curriculum at the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya. He holds an M.A. in military and diplomatic history from Tel Aviv University. yorams@inss.org.il