

Terrorism Open Source Intelligence Report (TOSIR) No. 374 12 March 2009

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[Article 2](#) “FBI Director Warns of Terror Attacks on U.S. Cities,” by Carrie Johnson, [Washington Post](#), 23 February 2009. *FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III warned that extremists “with large agendas and little money can use rudimentary weapons” to sow terror, raising the specter that recent attacks in Mumbai that killed 170 people last year could embolden terrorists seeking to attack U.S. cities.*

[Article 3](#) “Pakistan: An Ineffective Attack and the Importance of Countersurveillance,” [Stratfor](#), 3 March 2009. *A Sri Lankan cricket team was attacked by gunmen in Lahore, Pakistan, on the morning of 3 March 2009 on its way to the third day of a match with a Pakistani team. Clearly, the attack was reasonably well-planned, if not so well-executed. In order to plan such an attack, those responsible had to have conducted preoperational surveillance of the cricket team’s security detail and the routes used to take the team to the stadium. The attack could have been prevented had the preoperational surveillance been detected. The violence was sufficient to show the country—and the world—that Pakistani security forces could not protect a high-profile foreign delegation.*

[Article 4](#) “Post Incident Report: Lahore Attack,” [European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center \(ESISC\)](#), 5 March 2009. *The 3 March 2009 shock attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, Pakistan, is a clear sign of both the weakness of the Pakistani government and the growing threat posed by Islamist groups. It could also be proof of the implementation of a new terrorist tactic: it is the second time in less than four months that terrorists conducted an operation of “urban jihad” in the area, including the 26-29 November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India. But the Lahore attacks also underline the fact that Pakistan must face terrorism not only on its western border and in relation to the situation in Afghanistan but also everywhere else in the country and even in the quietest places: Lahore was seen as relatively protected against violence until the attack. The message is crystal clear: the terrorists hit where they want, when they want.*

[Article 5](#) “One Big Unhappy Family,” by Fred Halliday, [New York Review of Books](#), Vol. 56, No. 4, 12 March 2009—a review of [The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century](#), by Steve Coll (New York: Penguin, 2009). *Steve Coll’s fascinating recent book, The Bin Ladens is not so much a book about Osama bin Laden himself, or his terrorist*

network and political aspirations, as about the power structures of modern Saudi Arabia. And in this it is most informative. Against much contemporary writing about the Arab world, which tends to explain political and social behavior by analysis of culture and religion, Coll's book is about more secular matters—about sibling rivalry; fascination with modern technology, particularly planes and means of communication; about the attraction of women; and above all, for all the talk of piety, about money. Drawing on extensive oral testimony from friends and business partners, *The Bin Ladens* gives persuasive explanations not just of Osama bin Laden, of where he came from and how he was radicalized, but of his gifted and restless family and, perhaps more than anything, of the modern Saudi elite itself.

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1. “Pakistan Sets Roadblocks in U.S. Hunt for Extremists, Officials Say,” by Josh Meyer, Los Angeles Times, 9 March 2009 (<http://www.latimes.com>). [KBTSPakWT, KBTMLET, KBTGFBI] We quote:

Washington, D.C.—U.S. efforts to identify and thwart the growing threat posed by Pakistani extremists who enjoy easy access to the United States—and already have a significant presence here—are being undermined by the government of Pakistan, according to current and former U.S. and Western counterterrorism officials.

After the terrorist attack in Mumbai, India, in November, which killed more than 170 people, the FBI and other U.S. agencies went on high alert, searching without success for evidence of plotters in the United States. But they were essentially shut down in efforts to work the Pakistan side of the investigation, not only to find additional plotters but to learn more about the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Pakistani militant group suspected of orchestrating the attacks, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and its global network of cells, the officials said.

[Lashkar-e-Taiba threat has potential to reach around the world—including to the U.S.]

FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III flew to Islamabad last week, in part to press for better cooperation. But the FBI and other U.S. officials have been denied access to about 20 members of Lashkar, including about six senior officials also suspected of heading the group's global operations and fundraising. A senior Pakistani official said the government wanted to cooperate with U.S. authorities, but must do so slowly and investigate the militants independently or risk a backlash from the populace and the military, which view the militants as strategically important assets. On Sunday, the nation reached agreement with Interpol to share information about the Mumbai investigation.

“The big picture is that the civilian government in Pakistan is trying to set things right,” the Pakistani official said. **“But there will always be some people who say, how far back do you want to reach”** in terms of investigating the Pakistani militant groups and the Islamabad government’s long-standing ties to them? **“Can we just say, ‘Come in, guys, and find anything you want on Lashkar-e-Taiba and shut it down’? It’s not going to happen.”**

Bruce Riedel, a former South Asia specialist for the CIA and National Security Council, said in an interview after the Mumbai attacks that **Pakistan had long protected the militant groups.** He warned that a **“global jihadist syndicate” of disaffected young Pakistanis was the most likely mechanism for launching an attack in the United States,** possibly with Al-Qaeda. Riedel, who now chairs the Obama administration’s Pakistan-Afghanistan strategy review, said **Mumbai was only the latest of several attacks by such militants on soft targets frequented by Americans,** including hotels in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Islamabad.

Juan Carlos Zarate, the deputy national security advisor for counterterrorism in the Bush administration, said: **“We are and should be concerned about the threat LT [Lashkar-e-Taiba] poses,”** using a popular acronym for Lashkar. Its name means “Army of the Pure.” **Lashkar “doesn’t just reside in South Asia. It is an organization that has potential reach all over the world, including the United States,”** he said, adding that there are “LT-tied individuals in the country that we need to be concerned about.”

[Lashkar, other Pakistani militants in many ways bigger threat to U.S. than Al-Qaeda]

U.S. and allied intelligence shows that **potentially tens of thousands of Pakistanis have trained in Lashkar’s guerrilla camps in Pakistan, and many of those trainees have gone on to work with Al-Qaeda. That includes a small number of U.S. residents,** some of whom are believed to have returned to the United States. **Nearly a dozen Americans,** including many members of the so-called Virginia Jihad Network, **have been convicted in U.S. courts of training at Lashkar camps.** Evidence confiscated from other, often computer-savvy, young militants shows a **Lashkar interest in the Washington area, New York, California, Georgia, and other locations,** according to interviews and court testimony.

But authorities say their far greater concern is the thousands of disaffected Westerners and Pakistanis in Britain and other “visa waiver” countries in Europe who travel frequently to Pakistan. An unknown number of those have trained in Lashkar camps and, after being indoctrinated in its hatred of the West and returning home, **are free to travel to the United States with only a cursory last-minute background check.** FBI Director Mueller highlighted that concern in a recent speech, saying U.S. authorities fear a Mumbai-style commando attack, and that such militants from “less well-known terrorist groups . . . are **merely an e-ticket away from the United States.”**

“Where you’re not subjected to the scrutiny of a visa or an interview and the like, then that is one less precaution or screening mechanism that is out there,” Mueller told a Council on Foreign Relations audience. FBI intelligence chief Donald Van Duyn told Congress recently that the bureau was **investigating “a limited number” of U.S. individuals with suspected links to Lashkar but that there was no evidence the group had an organized U.S. presence.** Still, he and his intelligence counterpart at the

Department of Homeland Security, Charles Allen, testified that **they were so worried about domestic Mumbai-style attacks that they had briefed state and local law enforcement agencies, and the managers of thousands of hotels, public transportation hubs, and other locations on how to protect their facilities.**

Last week's commando-style attack on Sri Lanka's cricket team in Pakistan bore many similarities to Mumbai, prompting a warning by U.S. intelligence agencies about **the possibility of domestic strikes against American sports events and teams. The assault in Lahore left eight people dead, six of them policemen.**

According to Riedel and other current and former U.S. terrorism officials, **Lashkar and other Pakistani militants are in many ways a bigger threat to U.S. interests around the world than Al-Qaeda, whose leadership is on the run from numerous CIA airstrikes in the Pakistani tribal areas.** Many of Lashkar's leaders have close operational ties to Al-Qaeda, and the group has long embraced its concept of a global jihad, or holy war, against the West.

[U.S. officials frustrated by Pakistan's lack of full cooperation in various investigations]

Lashkar has funded and trained fighters to attack U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, often in conjunction with its allies in the Taliban. Lashkar-affiliated militants also have been **involved in several plots against U.S. and allied interests here and overseas—including the 2005 London subway bombings** that killed 52 people, the surveillance of Wall Street and other U.S. financial hubs, and **a 2006 plan to blow up at least a half a dozen commercial jetliners as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean from London to the United States.**

U.S. officials say that Pakistan cooperates in going after foreign Al-Qaeda fighters within its boundaries, but that it often refuses to cooperate significantly in important counterterrorism efforts focusing on Pakistani militant groups like Lashkar. For 16 months, for instance, **Pakistan dragged its heels in the global investigation into the 2006 airline plot** despite Mueller's personal appeals, **denying U.S. officials access to suspected mastermind Rashid Rauf**, senior FBI officials confirm. They say Rauf, a Pakistani Briton, was the key conduit between Al-Qaeda's leadership in the tribal areas, Lashkar, and other militant groups and their cells in Britain and the West, and extremist sympathizers in Pakistan's intelligence and military agencies. Rauf ultimately escaped under suspicious circumstances and was killed last year in a U.S. airstrike.

U.S. officials also say they have been **frustrated by Pakistan's lack of full cooperation in other terrorism investigations focusing on Pakistani militants, including the 2002 kidnap-slaying of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl**, a grenade attack near the U.S. embassy in Islamabad in 2002 that killed the wife and daughter of an embassy official, the 2006 slaying of another U.S. consulate employee in Karachi, and a 2008 attack at an Islamabad restaurant that injured four FBI agents.

Robert Burnham, the FBI's former legal attache in Pakistan, said U.S. counterterrorism officials stationed in Pakistan repeatedly pressed it for more cooperation, but even basic requests for financial records, criminal background checks, and investigative assistance went unanswered. **"We would almost always do the right thing by making requests**

through” Pakistani authorities, Burnham said. “And these things would fall into a black hole.”

In response to heavy U.S. and Indian pressure after the Mumbai attacks, **the Islamabad government said it raided some Lashkar training facilities, shut down several of its offices, and detained some key members.** But one veteran Justice Department counterterrorism official said **Pakistan’s refusal to fully cooperate meant that U.S. authorities still knew little about Lashkar’s shadowy network in the United States.** “I’m confident that there are people here who have gone to LT training camps,” the official said, **“and that when LT asks for their help, they will give it to them.”**

The foregoing is Article No. 1 (TR374A01) in the Terrorism Open Source Intelligence Report (TOSIR), No. 374, 12 March 2009, prepared by Interaction Systems Incorporated (isinreports@mindspring.com).

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2. “FBI Director Warns of Terror Attacks on U.S. Cities,” by Carrie Johnson, Washington Post, 23 February 2009 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com>). [KBTGFBI, KBTUSleepers, KBTSPakWT] We *quote*:

FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III today warned that extremists “with large agendas and little money can use rudimentary weapons” to sow terror, raising the specter that recent attacks in Mumbai that killed 170 people last year could embolden terrorists seeking to attack U.S. cities. At a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, **Mueller said that the bureau is expanding its focus beyond Al-Qaeda and into splinter groups,** radicals who try to enter the country through the visa waiver program, and “home-grown terrorists.”

“The universe of crime and terrorism stretches out infinitely before us, and we too are working to find what we believe to be out there but cannot always see,” Mueller said. **One particular concern, the FBI director said, springs from the country’s background as a “nation of immigrants.” Federal officials worry about pockets of possible radicals among melting-pot communities in the United States** such as Seattle, San Diego, Miami, or New York.

[FBI analysts, agents conducted 60 interviews following attacks in Mumbai, India]

A Joint Terrorism Task Force led by the FBI, for instance, continues to investigate a group in Minneapolis after one young man last fall flew to Somalia and became what authorities believe to be the first U.S. citizen to carry out a suicide bombing. As many as a half-dozen other youths from that community in Minnesota have vanished, alarming their parents and raising concerns among law enforcement officials that a dangerous recruiting network has operated under the radar. “The prospect of young men, indoctrinated and radicalized in their own communities . . . is a perversion of the immigrant story,” Mueller said.

For the first time, **Mueller also disclosed details about FBI efforts to assist Indian authorities probing a November siege by conspirators with ties to a terrorist group in Pakistan.** FBI Special Agent Steve Merrill, a legal attache posted to the bureau’s

office in New Delhi, had been preparing to play cricket for the American team competing at the Maharajah's annual tournament, the FBI director recalled. Instead Merrill detoured to Mumbai, where he helped to rescue Americans trapped in the burning Taj Hotel and coordinated the arrival of the bureau's rapid deployment team. **Analysts and agents from the FBI ultimately conducted 60 interviews including one of the lone surviving attacker, Ajmal Amir Kasab. Forensics experts pulled fingerprints from improvised explosive devices and recovered data from damaged cellphones,** once "literally wiring a smashed phone back together," Mueller said.

The foregoing is Article No. 2 (TR374A02) in the **Terrorism Open Source Intelligence Report (TOSIR)**, No. 374, 12 March 2009, prepared by Interaction Systems Incorporated (isinreports@mindspring.com).

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3. "Pakistan: An Ineffective Attack and the Importance of Countersurveillance," Stratfor, 3 March 2009 (<http://www.stratfor.com>). [KBTSPakWT, KBTZTactics, KBTTSecurity] *We quote:*

A Sri Lankan cricket team was attacked by gunmen in Lahore, Pakistan, the morning of 3 March on its way to the third day of a match with a Pakistani team. As the motorcade of police, cricket players, and umpires entered a roundabout a quarter of a mile from the stadium, two cars entered the roundabout and **an occupant fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at the bus carrying the players. The RPG missed the target and hit a storefront, while a hand grenade thrown under the bus rolled beyond it and exploded without damaging the vehicle.**

After the initial grenade attack, three other gunmen took up positions in the center of the roundabout and began firing at the police van escorting the cricket players before turning their attention to the bus itself. **The bus driver was able to evade the gunmen and safely deposit the team at nearby Gaddafi Stadium,** where the match was to be held. From there, the team was evacuated by helicopter. Six members of the team reportedly suffered minor injuries.

[Appears attackers had bigger plans in mind given abandoned weapons caches nearby]

The target of the attack obviously was the Sri Lankan cricket team. The incident took place at approximately 8:30 a.m. local time, before most stores in the area had opened. It was not carried out at the actual cricket match, where more civilians would have been put in harm's way and where beefed-up security would most likely have prevented the attackers from gaining entrance. **By going after the team while it was in transit to the stadium, the attackers were able to hit the target when it was most vulnerable and predictable.**

The objective of the attack appears to have been to disable the bus with an RPG and hand grenades or, if those failed, gunfire so that the team would be caught in the open with no clear exit to safety. By disabling the lead police vehicle first, the gunmen were employing the standard tactic of blocking and bunching up the following vehicles to make them easier targets.

One of the team members said during a press conference that **gunmen were aiming for the tires of the bus in an attempt to stop it**. There were also several bullet holes in the front windshield of the bus, **indicating that gunmen may have been targeting the driver**, but he was not injured and was able to get the bus out of the attack zone (“off the X”), an action that saved the team members’ lives as well as his own. **From the improvised explosive devices, grenades, and extra ammunition found in backpacks abandoned nearby, it appears that the attackers had bigger plans in mind.**

[Positioning, well-coordinated ambush showed attackers had at least some tactical training]

Clearly, the attack was reasonably well-planned, if not so well-executed. The attackers appear to have known where the bus would be and the approximate time it would be there. Considering it was the third day of the cricket match, this is not surprising. **Motorcades following daily routines are easy targets;** attackers need only to establish their positions and wait for the convoy to show up at about the same time it showed up on previous days.

While there are indications that police had received warning of an attack on the team and may have altered the route on the day of the attack, the roundabout leading from Gulberg Main Boulevard to Liberty Square appears to be a major choke point just a few hundred yards from Gaddafi Stadium. The bus was attacked from the front and both sides, showing that gunmen had planned an ambush and deployed their forces in a manner that gave them several angles of attack.

After it was clear that the assault on the cricket team had failed, the gunmen fired on other vehicles in the convoy, including the vehicle carrying the umpires, most of whom were foreigners. The gunmen were able to disable the umpires’ vehicle, **but the gunmen did not stay around to finish them off,** perhaps because their main target, the bus carrying the cricket team, had evaded the ambush. Several members of the Sri Lankan team were injured, including an assistant coach from Australia, but no members were seriously injured. However, **five police officers and one bystander were killed.** The attackers fled on foot and in a stolen car. **Police have reported that they have detained four of the culprits.**

The fact that the attackers were able to position themselves and initiate a well-coordinated ambush from several directions shows that they were prepared and had received at least a modicum of tactical training. (A moderate skill level suggests that a more organized group was behind this attack.) While it did not result in maximum damage, **the violence was sufficient to show the country—and the world—that Pakistani security forces could not protect a high-profile foreign delegation.** This comes as no real surprise, as they also were unable to protect former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

In order to plan such an attack, those responsible **had to have conducted preoperational surveillance of the cricket team’s security detail and the routes used** to take the team to the stadium. **Operatives conducting such surveillance are vulnerable to detection if security forces are looking for them.** While the bus driver (whom we believe was likely a trained security driver) saved the day by getting the players off the X, **the attack could have been prevented had the preoperational surveillance been detected.**

The foregoing is Article No. 3 (TR374A03) in the Terrorism Open Source Intelligence Report (TOSIR), No. 374, 12 March 2009, prepared by Interaction Systems Incorporated (isinreports@mindspring.com).

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4. “**Post Incident Report: Lahore Attack,**” European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC), 5 March 2009 (<http://www.esisc.org>). [KBTSPakWT, KBTZTactics, KBTTSecurity] *We quote:*

The shock attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, on Tuesday, 3 March, is a clear sign of both the weakness of the Pakistani government and the growing threat posed by Islamist groups. It could be also a proof of the implementation of new terrorist tactics: it is the second time in less than four months that terrorists conducted an operation of “urban jihad” in the area. The operations in Mumbai, India (26-29 November 2009), and in Lahore, Pakistan, share a lot of similarities:

Obviously, the two attacks were carefully planned with an effort on intelligence collection and reconnaissance. In Mumbai, the terrorists used Google Earth Map and pictures and conducted a reconnaissance operation on the field a few months before the attack. In Lahore they attacked the third day of the [cricket] competition which seems to indicate that they carried out reconnaissance the two previous mornings.

The terrorists were approximately the same number [10 to 12 attackers].

They were in their early twenties.

They arrived on the crime scene with their arms and ammunition packed in sacks.

They used a large variety of arms (AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and, in Lahore, antitank missiles).

They wore the same kind of loose pants authorizing high freedom of movement.

They were trained to fire casually but precisely while walking (which is not as easy as it appears).

Their backpacks were loaded with high-energy snacks (dried fruits and chocolates).

[Pakistan is dealing with an existentialist threat given the number of attacks, people killed]

This last point indicates probably that even if the Lahore’s terrorists were not on a suicide mission, as in Mumbai, they were ready to withdraw from the scene and resist in a building if challenged by the security forces. **All those similarities point to possible common training or, at least, to training by the same people observing the same training methods.**

Does it mean that the same “organization” is behind the two attacks? Or that it is a new tactic? It is impossible to answer the first question so early in the investigation. The possibility that the attack at Lahore could be linked to events in Sri Lanka, for instance, must be carefully studied. **For the second question, a possible third attack would be the proof we need. ESISC assesses that, if there is a new tactic (perpetrating “urban jihad” attacks involving from eight to ten terrorists, very mobile, and using a variety of weapons) there should be a third attack somewhere in the coming months.**

But the Lahore attacks underline also the fact that Pakistan must face terrorism not only on its western border and in relation to the situation in Afghanistan but also everywhere else in the country and even in the quietest places: Lahore was seen as relatively protected against violence until the 3 March attack. And no one could forget that, on 20 September 2008, terrorists were able to attack the very center of Islamabad, a few meters from the buildings of the presidency and the parliament, when they blew up the Marriott hotel. **The message is crystal clear: the terrorists hit where they want, when they want.**

Stephen Smith, the Australian Foreign minister, [highlighted] on Wednesday an “existentialist threat to Pakistan.” **He is right: between October 2007 and this week at least 550 people (including Benazir Bhutto) were killed in not less than 15 high-profile terrorist attacks. And hundreds of others were killed in “routine low-level” attacks (dozens happen each year).** The troubles in the Swat valley (where the “Pakistani Taliban” were looking for an enforcement of sharia) were another sign of the [possible inability] of the regime to impose order in the country.

. . . [The] **government of pro-Western and nuclear-armed Pakistan doesn’t really control what’s happening in the country and is unable to protect its citizen as well as foreign visitors. Even if most of the victims of the attacks, [in recent] years, were Pakistani, Westerners are obviously a target for the terrorists:** [a] On 15 March 2008 an Italian restaurant in Islamabad was targeted (four FBI agents were wounded). [b] On 20 September 2008 the target was the Marriott hotel. [c] On 9 February 2009 the Polish geologist Piotr Stanczak was beheaded by the “Pakistani Taliban.”

Given the extreme volatility of the situation, the possible attacks in the near future, and the inability of the authorities to control the situation, ESISC [assesses] that **any non-urgent travel to Pakistan must be avoided.** If travel there is needed, extreme caution must be observed.

The foregoing is Article No. 4 (TR374A04) in the [Terrorism Open Source Intelligence Report](#) (TOSIR), No. 374, 12 March 2009, prepared by Interaction Systems Incorporated (isinreports@mindspring.com).

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5. “One Big Unhappy Family,” by Fred Halliday, [New York Review of Books](#), Vol. 56, No. 4, 12 March 2009—a review of [The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century](#), by Steve Coll (New York: Penguin, 2009). [KBTSSaud, KBTQLadenBio, KBTQLadenFamily, KBTQOverview, KBTSYemen] Reviewer Fred Halliday is an Irish writer and academic

specializing in international relations and the Middle East, with particular reference to the Cold War, Iran, and the Arabian peninsula. Steve Coll, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist and writer, is president and chief executive officer of the New America Foundation. We quote from this review posted at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22412>:

About a decade ago I had a curious visitor to my office at the London School of Economics. An American in his mid-fifties, he explained that he had been a student in the 1960s and had come by to see who was in the office of a former professor. I asked him what he was now doing. **"I am the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia,"** he replied.

Previously, **Wyche Fowler** had been a Democratic senator from Georgia, losing his seat in 1992; he had then been **appointed U.S. ambassador in Riyadh by President Clinton, a position he held from 1996 to 2001.** So, I asked him, **how would he evaluate the situation in this notoriously opaque country?** Ambassador Fowler explained that **indeed it was difficult to monitor the country; he and his colleagues were largely confined to the embassy, and access to Saudis was extremely difficult.** As ambassador, he said, **the only person he could really talk to was the King**—an experience he compared, with a little irony, to talking to Ronald Reagan.

He was not alone in finding it **difficult to get a handle on Saudi Arabia. Until the past decade or so, there was almost no reliable academic or journalistic writing on the country.** U.S. intelligence and diplomatic analysis did little better. **As The Bin Ladens, Steve Coll's fascinating recent book, demonstrates, precise knowledge about the workings of power, members of the ruling elite, security, and money was intrinsically impossible to find.**

[The Bin Ladens gives persuasive explanations of the family, the modern Saudi elite itself]

Along with several other American ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, **Wyche Fowler has a walk-on part in Coll's book. Following the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998, Fowler was told to put pressure on the Saudis to reveal details of the bin Laden family finances and links to Osama, who took credit for the bombings. He found himself caught up in conflicts between different branches of the U.S. government, each insisting that it had the best means of getting the desired information.**

It is easy to claim that one or another approach would have made a decisive difference, that the 11 September attacks could have been avoided, or that the Saudis could really have closed down the Al-Qaeda operation. Looked at from the outside, however, such assumptions appear less certain. **In a world where public statistics, and accounts, are largely inventions, in which even basic figures of national income and expenditure are worthless, conventional forms of investigation, based on experience in the United States or elsewhere, are of little use.**

To read Coll's book is to enter a universe of perpetual movement and deal-making, but one in which little, if anything, is recorded or written down, where power and money are distributed by means of kin networks, informal gatherings of influential Saudi males, and the mobile phone. The Bin Ladens is not so much a book about Osama bin Laden himself, or his terrorist network and political aspirations, as about the power structures of modern Saudi Arabia. And in this it is most

informative. Against much contemporary writing about the Arab world, which tends to explain political and social behavior by analysis of culture and religion, **Coll's book is about more secular matters—about sibling rivalry; fascination with modern technology, particularly planes and means of communication; about the attraction of women; and above all, for all the talk of piety, about money.**

Drawing on extensive oral testimony from friends and business partners, **The Bin Ladens gives persuasive explanations not just of Osama bin Laden, of where he came from and how he was radicalized, but of his gifted and restless family and, perhaps more than anything, of the modern Saudi elite itself.** The success of the bin Ladens was tied to their connections and access to the King and his close associates, and the ability to anticipate and carry out, whether in building, engineering, or accounting, the wishes of the House of Saud.

[Bin Laden family exposed to Saudi Puritanism, Western lifestyle—chose variety of paths]

Coll describes the rise of Mohamed bin Laden, a poor immigrant from the Hadhramawt region of Yemen who arrived in Arabia in the 1920s and became one of the country's leading construction magnates. Beyond ingenuity and hard work, he had a remarkable capacity for understanding and manipulating the shifting and internecine worlds of the Saudi royal family. The Saudis came to power in the 1920s without the experts or trained personnel to run a state, and they relied heavily on enterprising immigrants, like Mohamed bin Laden, together with the more cosmopolitan business elite of western Arabia, the Hijaz.

This reliance persisted well into the second and third generations, so that by the time Mohamed bin Laden was killed in a plane crash in 1967, his elder son Salem—educated in Britain and in Lebanon, and with a taste for the lifestyle of Texas and California—came to occupy the same position, coaxing contracts and payment out of the Saudi court and, in a loose but effective way, managing the family construction business on behalf of Mohamed's fifty-four children, among them twenty-four sons, of whom Osama was one of the youngest and, initially, less prominent.

Salem bin Laden built up contacts with Americans that would have been unimaginable to his father. These included oil engineers, fixers, financiers, and pilots, as well as a string of lovers whom he met in his ceaseless traveling, flying, purchasing, and negotiating. He died in a plane crash at a small airfield in Texas in 1988. **There is something at once elusive and intoxicating about the world of the oil elite of Arabia. Many of its members spend their lives talking, charming, making deals, managing to receive payments, moving from one city and continent to another, accompanied by hangers-on, cronies, sycophants, and friends.** The first question that always arises in such circles is "*Mata wasalt?*": "When did you arrive?"

This is a world awash with money, the precise origins of which are hardly clear. In all the pages of **The Bin Ladens**, and the detailed account of the family's business, personal, and political activities, **three words rarely if ever appear: "book," "idea," "read"—although we soon gather that the initially reserved and pensive younger brother Osama must have read extensively.** It is small wonder that, exposed to both Saudi Puritanism and the Western lifestyle, the members of the bin Laden family should have chosen a variety of paths, from assimilation into the Western elite, such as Yeslam, now in the perfume business in Geneva, to outright rejection, as in the case

of Osama. As Coll puts it, perhaps with a little simplification, the bin Laden family divided into the “Hard Rock” and “jihadi” factions.

[Osama bin Laden came to believe his own rhetoric about his leadership of a global jihad]

Coll is careful not to bring Salem’s younger brother Osama into the picture too early. This is in part because he wants to show from what kind of world **Osama**, who was **born in the mid-1950s**, emerged. **He received an elite education in a private school in Jeddah, al-Thaghr**, modeled on a British “public” school; it featured English and Scottish teachers, and a school magazine which was edited in Osama’s time by a Saudi who later became a student at the London School of Economics. **For many years**, until his estrangement from the family in the late-1990s, **Osama received his share, estimated by Coll at between \$2 and \$3 million per year, of the bin Laden business income.**

His entire career and life opportunities had been framed by his ties to the Saudi elite; but whereas his brothers concentrated on financial and commercial links, Osama’s links were political. Radicalized by Muslim Brotherhood teachers who were in exile from Egypt in the 1980s, and increasingly drawn to an austere, reserved lifestyle, **Osama went to Pakistan in 1984 to help organize the recruitment and deployment of Arab volunteers who had come to fight the Russian and Afghan Communist forces over the border. At first, his primary function was to help funnel money from the Saudi intelligence services to the mujahideen, and also to use skills, contacts, and, it seems, even construction equipment** provided by the family business to build bases and facilities for the anti-Communist forces inside Afghanistan.

Coll is keen to maintain a sense of proportion in describing Osama bin Laden’s role in the Afghan jihad. He was not a major military leader, but had a part in at least two bloody episodes in the latter stages of the war: a battle in 1987 in the border region of Jaji, where he had built a network of caves and fortifications for the Islamist fighters; and the unsuccessful siege of the eastern Afghan town of Jalalabad in 1989.

Coll goes on to develop **one of his major themes—the degree to which Osama bin Laden, increasingly involved in fighting and an apparently heroic military campaign, came, more and more, to believe in his own rhetoric about his leadership of a global Islamic movement. He quarreled first with his Palestinian mentor, the militant Islamist cleric Abdullah Azzam, who died in mysterious circumstances in 1989, and then with his Saudi sponsors, following the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in 1990.**

Saudi Arabia supported the United States in the Gulf War, while bin Laden saw the presence of infidel U.S. forces in Arabia as violating the sacred land of Islam. **It was when King Fahd rejected bin Laden’s offer to fight the Iraqis using Islamist forces instead of relying on the United States that the latter’s real falling out with the Saudi ruling family began.**

[Osama’s time in Sudan, involvement with Al-Qaeda in Yemen not discussed enough]

Coll questions the conventional story about bin Laden’s links to the CIA. As the author of a previous book on the CIA’s role in Afghanistan, *Ghost Wars* [2004] he is well placed to investigate the issue. **He finds that there is no evidence of bin Laden ever being paid by, or meeting directly with, American intelligence representatives during**

the Afghan war. However, as **Coll also makes clear, this does not mean too much. Bin Laden was well connected with the Pakistani and Saudi security services, and made at least one trip to London, in 1986**, when he stayed in the Dorchester Hotel for six to eight weeks, negotiating for the supply of portable anti-aircraft missiles to the Afghan guerrillas with his brother Salem and a representative of the German arms firm Heckler & Koch. **Plausible deniability is, in the world of covert operations and intelligence, very much part of the game.**

Coll draws on information found by the Bosnian authorities during a raid in 2002 to provide **an account of the founding of Al-Qaeda as a loose transnational coalition at meetings in Peshawar, Pakistan, in August 1988**. The story of Osama's gradual estrangement from the Saudi state and from his own family is also well told. For Coll, **key turning points are Osama's involvement, however indirect, in the 1993 attempt to bomb the World Trade Center in New York and his open denunciation, beginning in 1994, of the Saudi ruling family for allowing the military bases of American infidels on Arabian soil.**

On other questions, such as why the date of 11 September 2001 was chosen, we remain in the dark. Remarkably for a subject on which so little that is reliable has been written to date, **The Bin Ladens contains very few erroneous or contestable judgments.**

The main weaknesses occur in Coll's account of events that have little to do with America or Saudi Arabia as such. **He makes rather too little of Osama's time in Sudan, from 1991 to 1996, a period following the takeover of Sudan by Islamists in 1989, when he was involved in major attempts to overthrow the government of Egypt and other states, including Algeria and Libya.**

In 1993, al-Jihad, the Egyptian organization run by bin Laden's close associate Ayman al-Zawahiri, failed in its attempt to assassinate Egypt's interior minister and prime minister. **This was not an interlude: it was the blocking—by the government of Egypt, among others—of the export of the Sudanese Islamic revolution to neighboring states that pushed Osama to his later “global” attacks in East Africa and Manhattan. In this very important sense, 11 September, spectacular as it was, was also a sign of failure**, not of escalating battle, and it was carried out on behalf not only of bin Laden but of his radical Egyptian allies.

Coll's account of Al-Qaeda's role in Saudi Arabia's neighbor, Yemen, in the late-1980s and early 1990s greatly understates the extent to which Islamist militias such as the Abyan Army, led by Tariq al-Fadli, a former sultan, and the armed groups in northern Yemen led by Abd al-Majid al-Zindani **supported the pro-Western North against the formerly socialist South.**

The undermining and ultimate destruction of the Communist regime in South Yemen, the only case other than Afghanistan in which a Soviet-style system was established in the Muslim world, was a major priority for bin Laden and his associates. Coll's account implies that this was something that occurred only in the late-1980s, whereas the involvement of bin Laden's allies and kin, in what for them was a struggle against a Communist regime similar to that of Afghanistan, lasted through to the 1994 war between North Yemen and the socialist republic of South Yemen, which the North won.

[Original 9/11 plan seemingly envisaged at least ten simultaneous hijackings and targets]

On three broader matters relevant to the whole Al-Qaeda story, Coll's book clarifies our understanding. First, Osama bin Laden was not a product of a medieval mentality, or of some rigid "Islamic" way of thinking, but of the modern world—its conflicts, ideas, and, not least, its gadgets, ease of communication, media-produced images, and even fantasies.

Second, while he came from a wealthy and well-connected family, Osama, along with the estimated fifty-three other children of Mohamed bin Laden, did not inherit, or have access to, enormous sums of money: Coll assesses his wealth, calculated on the basis of Mohamed's estate, divided proportionately between the children, at around \$24 million, and at least some of this he is believed to have lost in business ventures in Sudan during his time there in the 1990s. **What Osama bin Laden did, and to a degree still does, have is the ability to make use of contacts and to raise money. This network includes sympathetic members of the bin Laden family, among them some of his sisters and half-sisters; informal contacts in the Saudi elite; and, not least, parts of the Pakistani intelligence and business communities.**

Third, although the attacks on Manhattan and Washington in September 2001 were direct hits on American soil, Osama bin Laden's aims do not encompass the defeat of the United States, or the conquest of the West, by, or "for," Islam: the attacks on Europe and the United States are, in Arabian tribal terminology, "raids." The "planes operation," as it was originally called when it was first conceived in 1998, was designed to be a spectacular piece of theater, what anarchists used to call "propaganda of the deed," a provocation that would draw the U.S. military into further, and costly, conflicts in the Middle East, primarily Afghanistan. This was also the original purpose of the attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbor in October 2000, an operation that failed to sink the missile-carrying vessel, but that did kill seventeen American servicemen.

The original plan for 11 September seems to have envisaged no fewer than ten simultaneous hijackings and targets on the West as well as the East coast of the United States. As we now can see so clearly, even the scaled-down four-plane operation more than served its purposes, drawing America into a war in Afghanistan which it appeared to win, in 2001, but which has now turned very much the other way. It also led to something Osama bin Laden seems not to have envisaged, a war in Iraq, which, even if it can be stabilized, has served as a recruiting ground, and symbol, for jihadis across the region.

[Attempts to separate state, private interests in the Middle East are doomed from the start]

There is, however, a fourth, and wider, lesson of the world portrayed in Coll's book, namely that of the business practices and modus operandi of the Arabian business and political leaders. **During the spike in oil prices in the first half of 2008, much was made in the Western financial press of possible joint ventures with, and major investments by, Middle Eastern sources of capital, and in particular of the growing influence of Arab, along with Russian, Chinese, and Singaporean, "Sovereign Wealth Funds" in investing in the West.** A lot of people in banks, and other cash-starved enterprises, are hoping that these donors will help them out of the current world financial crisis. At the same time, Western governments and bank regulators

demand that these new investors comply with standards of transparency and what is generally termed “good governance”; this means knowing the source of the funds being invested, the institutional structure of the donor bodies, and the relationship between private and state sectors, and individuals, within the donor communities.

Eminently desirable as such Western-style reforms may be, Steve Coll makes it clear that **they are fundamentally incompatible with the financial and decision-making culture of Saudi Arabia and, by extension, of other Middle Eastern states. No major decisions, on investment or payment, are taken in formal meetings.** Funds may seem to be attached to particular private donors or entrepreneurs, like members of the bin Laden family, but it is often their links to influential members of the ruling family that provide the key to their wealth: **thus any attempt to separate state from private interests is doomed from the start. As for legal commitment, an estimated 80 percent of contracts signed in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia are not carried out.** And as is well known, “commissions,” “kickbacks,” “local partners,” and the rest are ubiquitously necessary.

[Despite Obama’s seeking better ties to Arab, Muslim world, burden of past remains heavy]

What is more striking about The Bin Ladens are two themes that are not addressed, omissions that follow perhaps inexorably from Coll’s approach to the story. **One is a consideration of the qualities that have made Osama bin Laden and his associates so attractive to some in the Muslim world and beyond.** Osama bin Laden’s rise is explained not just by his skill with videos, fundraising, and theatrical mass murder, but **also by the chord he strikes among millions of people who, for a variety of reasons, resent the domination though not necessarily the lifestyle of the West,** and in particular of the United States.

By devoting little attention to the larger bin Laden phenomenon, **Coll leaves for the most part unexplored the question of what it was that Osama himself felt he was responding to, and the longer-run impact and endurance of the loose movement he initiated and inspired.**

In the final part of the book, **Coll describes the situation of each of the main branches of the bin Laden family since September 2001,** ending with a couple of chapters on Osama, portrayed here as on the defensive and increasingly unstable and eclectic in his choice of targets and ideological themes. **The Al-Qaeda leader—who may, according to some reports, be in the lawless frontier area of Pakistan—is evidently much aged and tested by his recent experience.** He has had to contend with repeated divisions within Islamist ranks, and Al-Qaeda has apparently failed to build a coherent international organization.

Here the point is very well made by Coll that the origins and development of Osama’s thinking are not to be found in anything traditional or scriptural, but are, rather, a response to the tensions of modern Saudi Arabia and of the Middle East as a whole.

In focusing on bin Laden’s family background, Coll does not seem to recognize the extent to which, in some ways, history is, broadly speaking, going Osama’s way. The United States will not be able to maintain a permanent presence in Iraq, and even if the present state survives it will in all likelihood become an ally of Iran’s. Turkey has

been increasingly alienated from the West, and particularly from the United States. The Muslim Brotherhood is gaining popularity in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Kuwait—a trend that has reportedly increased in response to the recent conflict in Gaza. Most importantly, in the opinion of many firsthand observers, the attempt to build a new Western state in Afghanistan seems doomed to failure.

As bin Laden—“a global news junkie,” according to Coll—surveys the world on the Internet and postpones, as all revolutionaries must, his dreams of a worldwide insurgency, he must be gratified to see how his old associates in Afghanistan, the Taliban, and his old patrons and allies in the Pakistani security system are, after the initial U.S. successes of 2001, very much back in business. While it is too early to be sure who inspired, trained, and organized the recent [Mumbai] attackers, there can be little doubt that they will be viewed with pleasure, when not enthusiasm, by Al-Qaeda.

President Obama has said in a television interview with al-Arabiya that “we are . . . communicating a message to the Arab world and the Muslim world, that we are ready to initiate a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest.” But the burden of past U.S. policies in the region, both before and after 11 September, remains heavy.

[Coll neglects historic responsibility that America should bear for rise of Al-Qaeda itself]

Here we come to the other clamoring silence in this book, one obscured all the more by the subtitle “An Arabian Family in the American Century.” **One of the leitmotifs of the book is the embrace by the Saudi Arabian elite, and in particular by the majority of the bin Laden family, male and female, of American consumerism and American business. Yet there is a larger question here of who, in the end, had the greater influence on whom. For Osama bin Laden, with at least some support from others in the clan, turned into the greatest enemy of the United States in the early twenty-first century.**

At the same time, **Coll’s recognition of the interaction between Saudi and U.S. government officials and businessmen may serve to displace, even obscure, the historic responsibility which America should bear, and which few care to investigate, for the rise of Al-Qaeda itself.**

This, to an outside observer, is **the most striking failure of the post-11 September debate within the United States: the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington are blamed on everything from the Koran to current Saudi educational practices. But the central stimulant and conditioner of the rise of Al-Qaeda and of Osama bin Laden himself, namely U.S. policy in Afghanistan in the last decade of the Cold War in particular, and in the Muslim world more generally, is neglected.**

As Steve Coll shows, **that Osama bin Laden himself apparently did not meet with U.S. officers is in itself trivial; backed as he was by the Pakistani and Saudi intelligence forces in the conflict with the Soviet Union, bin Laden was both a recruiting sergeant and logistics officer, later prone to exaggerating his role, in an international campaign orchestrated from Washington. In this sense, for all his distance from the other, more compliant, members of the family, Osama bin Laden was as much a part of the involvement with America, and of American global strategy in its supposed “century,” as were those Saudis who bought properties in Florida and Texas, or who**

invested in U.S. businesses. And lest we forget, and for reasons that go far beyond the plans, malevolence, and indeed survival of one aberrant visionary, **this story is still far from over.**

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