

The Longest War – The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda
by Peter L. Bergen.
Free Press 2011.

A cascade of books has been written about Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda since the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11th 2001, but the writing of Peter Bergen, National Security Analyst for CNN and one of the very few journalists to have met Bin Laden, still stands out from the rest. The Osama bin Laden I Know and Holy War Inc remain authoritative texts that have still not been surpassed, and now The Longest War must be added to form a trio of books that no one interested in the terrorist threat posed by Al-Qaeda and the Western responses to it can afford not to read.

Bergen divides his book into two parts, Hubris and Nemesis, the latter qualified by a question mark. The first section reviews the build up to and aftermath of 9/11, seen from the perspective of the terrorists planning and executing the attacks and the US response; it also rehearses the ways in which the Bush administration used the 9/11 tragedy as a tool to pursue their pre-existent agenda of deposing Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Bergen's review of these events has the bonus of a perspective granted by time so that the context for actions and reactions that have changed the world forever may be properly understood.

The second section, Nemesis?, looks at the ways in which Al-Qaeda has squandered the advantages it gained from 9/11 in the Muslim world, not least through its support for the extraordinary internecine brutality of its late acolyte in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, and its association with countless acts of terror perpetrated by the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

By the time The Longest War concludes a new US President, Barack Obama, is dealing with the aftermath of the calamitous Bush presidency, still fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and still looking for Osama bin Laden: Bergen's final chapter considers not just the on-going hunt for bin Laden but also the likely impact of the Saudi terrorist's capture and/or killing on Muslims throughout the world.

He notes ominously the enduring power and influence of the late Sayyid Qutb, the key ideologue of jihadism, since his death in 1966 and posits that the same effect might be felt in the event of bin Laden's demise. But his final message is clear: the western war against jihadist Muslims, and their war against us, will continue regardless and will define the future of many nations, not least our own.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh