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Ideas

108 terrorist memoirs, analyzed

Yes, terrorists write autobiographies — and when they do, they can accidentally reveal some weaknesses of their enterprise

By Jacob Shapiro | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 19, 2014

PIERRE GUILLAUD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Salah Mesbah Khalaf, known as Abu Iyad (left) with Yasser Arafat in Paris in 1990.

IN 1978, prominent Palestinian militant Abu Iyad published an autobiography entitled "Palestinien sans Patrie." This would have been unremarkable, except for a few things. First, "Abu Iyad" was really Salah Mesbah Khalaf, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization's intelligence wing. Moreover, Iyad was widely held to be the organizer of and a senior leader in the Black September organization that kidnapped and murdered 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team at the 1972 Munich Games. The book is full of details about internal conflicts in Fatah and the PLO during the 1960s and '70s. In short, it is a detailed memoir by one of the most prominent terrorists of the 1970s.

It may seem unusual that a well-known terrorist leader would write an autobiography, laying out details of his career and publicly dishing dirt on his own secretive organization. But in fact, the terrorist memoir is something of a genre. For many terrorists, participation in a group is a highly significant life event, often the most important thing they will ever do—and some of those who survive naturally want to write about it.

For my recent book, "The Terrorist's Dilemma," I read all the memoirs that I could find by terrorists or former terrorists—108, in total. My goal was to unpack the operational challenges that terrorist groups face, looking for patterns of management problems, disagreements over spending, and so forth. But along the way, it became clear that the books collectively provide a unique window on the personalities and motives of people in some of the world's most secretive and extreme groups.Their books run the gamut from dry political hagiographies that gloss over operational activities (e.g. the Irish politician Gerry Adams's "Before the Dawn," about his leadership of the Provisional IRA) to fast-paced narratives full of specific details on both failed and successful operations (such as Sean O'Callaghan's "The Informer," which details the author's decision to become a government informant and his relationship with his handlers in the Irish police).

Collectively, they form a valuable window into one of the core security challenges facing the world today. They help clarify what drives individuals to participate, expose groups' internal conflicts to public scrutiny, and illuminate the political thinking behind their campaigns. The memoirs can occasionally be chilling for their sheer callousness towards human life. But reading them is surprisingly reassuring, because they reveal something else as well: the ordinariness and the incompetence that are common hallmarks of terrorist life.

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Terrorist memoirs, by the numbers

THERE ARE JUST AS MANY kinds of terrorist memoirs as there are kinds of people who become terrorists. For my purposes, I defined the genre as including any memoir written by a participant in a covert group whose use of violence lay outside the bounds of the laws of armed conflict at the time. That's a subjective judgment, and some readers will disagree with some of the individuals I included or omitted. But the important thing for the moment is the broad impressions that emerge from this body of work.

And the first broad impression is that being in a terrorist group for any length of time is surprisingly challenging. While the terrorist memoirists are quite diverse, they almost all describe numerous failed operations and internal disagreements. Even those who strive to present their organizations as completely united describe institutions—internal courts, for example—that only make sense if they do in fact face regular disciplinary challenges.

Terrorists tend to present themselves in a few archetypical ways: the youthful idealist chronicling a misspent youth; the resentful outcast denied his or her proper place in history; the penitent former prisoner; the politician who risked all for the cause; and the government agent who risked his life to save others. The most sympathetic memoirs are those written by young men and women who join up in the name of some deeply felt political ideology and gradually become disillusioned with the awful reality of the terrorist environment. The 2002 book "My Jihad," by Aukai Collins, an American who converted to Islam while in the California juvenile justice system, is one of the more illuminating memoirs in this category. His account of traveling to train in Afghanistan and fight in Chechnya is striking for the sheer disorganization of the international fighters supporting the Chechen rebels.

This is hardly unusual; international volunteer movements fighting in civil wars have historically been ineffective. The best known of these, the International Brigade, which drew thousands of American and European idealists to join the Republican side during

the Spanish Civil War, was renowned for its infighting and lack of competent leadership. The discord Collins details puts the lie to any idea that the transnational jihadi movement is unusually capable or unified.

Memoirs by repentant individuals can also be illuminating, especially if the authors have served time for their crimes and so can be open about what they did. Patrizio Peci, a.k.a. Mauro, of the Italian leftist organization the Red Brigades, is particularly candid in his memoir, "Io, L'infame: La Mia Storia de Terrorista Pentito." He describes the sensational aspects of terrorism as one would expect: preparing for hits, purchasing arms, stealing cars, and readying disguises. But he spends most of his time on the daily trials and tribulations of living underground: the lack of vacation time, poor pay, difficulty of dating, bad food, and disagreeable roommates. Peci's complaints are not unique; the pseudonymous Giorgio recounts a similar litany of complaints in his 1981 "Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist."

Beyond the daily grind, what stands out most notably from Peci's memoir is the sheer incompetence of the group. In the planned operations he describes, something almost always goes wrong. He hides weapons in his father's friend's house when the man is out of town; the man comes home early, finds the weapons, and calls the police. In one attack, he forgets to load his weapon; in another, his getaway driver forgets to take off the emergency brake. These errors should not mask the group's brutal history—the Red Brigades murdered at least 75 people between 1970 and 1986 and wounded many more. But the toll surely could have been much worse had they been more capable. This kind of incompetence is a common theme. Amateurish failures are scattered through these books, from Boris Savinkov's 1926 "Memoirs of a Terrorist," about his efforts to assassinate Russian officials in the early 1900s, to the ridiculous bomb designs proposed by Weathermen leader Bill Ayers, according to FBI-informant Larry Grathwohl's 1976 "Bringing Down America."

Even books by prominent political figures occasionally contain revelations. Abu Iyad's "Palestinien sans Patrie," for example, suggests one reason why terrorist movements are so rife with error: Their organizers face uniquely difficult personnel challenges. In January 1971, for example, Jordanian forces seized a large number of PLO arms caches. Abu Iyad describes how the PLO conducted an investigation into this security lapse and "unmask[ed] a number of [Jordanian] agents, who for the most part had passed themselves off as fanatic militants advocating a maximalist position." Most

nonterrorists would naturally think of fanatics as ideal recruits. Who better, after all, to set off bombs in large groups of civilians? But to Abu Iyad, the reality was quite different. As he writes, "This [incident] only served to reinforce my conviction that diehard extremists are either imbeciles or traitors."

The reasons terrorist leaders want to keep traitors out are obvious, but why avoid fanatics? Because terrorists, despite all the associations of the word, do not need maximal violence; they need the *right kind* of violence. Doing too much violence, or hitting the wrong targets, can be just as damaging to their political goals as doing nothing at all. Just ask Qasim al-Rimi, leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, who recently posted a video apologizing for his fighters' decision to attack a hospital building during a Dec. 5 attack on a Ministry of Defense facility in Yemen. As the terrorist memoirs make clear, getting the right kinds of fighters is a major challenge.

Sometimes, the memoirist himself inadvertently sheds light on this challenge. Ngigu Kabiro's 1973 "Man in the Middle," an oral history collected as part of anthropologist Don Barnett's "Life Histories of the Revolution" project, tells the story of a mid-level operative who ran guns for the Mau Mau insurgency against the British colonial administration in Kenya. Kabiro describes how he would charge a hefty commission on guns he purchased in Nairobi for the organization. He was worried that his supervisor "might somehow find out about my self-calculated commission…putting me in hot water with the Mau Mau fighters and thus endangering my life." Kabiro's behavior was not unique: Mohamed Mathu, who ran urban operations for the Mau Mau, complains about men like Kabiro who were "recruited from a life of crime" in his 1974 oral history "The Urban Guerrilla."

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DESPITE THE OCCASIONAL Bourne-style embellishments, many terrorist memoirs are quite dry in tone, revealing little about their authors' personalities. But those that do provide a sense of the particular hearts and minds of these writers suggest one common trait: tremendous confidence. People who write about being terrorists almost all joined the cause in the belief that their actions could change the course of history. Or, at least, they would like to remember having believed so. Most of

them risked their lives for a political cause and therefore have every motivation to remember their time as a terrorist in the noblest light possible. Of the 108 memoirists whose books I considered, only 18 came to view it negatively.

This makes it all the more striking to see how much hate, discontent, and disagreement appears in these books. Thirty-five percent of the memoirs describe clear disagreements over money or logistics. Forty-seven percent recount problems maintaining discipline, and 58 percent report conflicts over tactical choices. Though some memoirists describe groups using bureaucracy and formal organization to solve these problems, in other cases, the problems simply limit what groups can accomplish. Clearly, being a terrorist is not easy, and managing terrorists is even harder. Both those challenges are exacerbated by the need for secrecy.

For those of us concerned about the future of global terrorism, or policy makers charged with fighting it, this offers some hope: Namely, that terrorism is inherently self-limiting. As soon as groups start operating at scale, the necessities of managing a large workforce require a good deal of communications and record keeping. That in turn means they begin producing what intelligence analysts call a large signal—essentially a trail of paper and data that governments can detect and follow. As long as military and law enforcement agencies are looking hard and our political leaders are treating the threat as deadly serious—which neither were consistently doing in early 2001, as several inspector generals' reports have made clear—terrorist groups are forced to stay small. If they get too big, they expose themselves.

Reading the memoirs reminds us why terrorism will always be with us: The misguided idealism on display in so many of their books will not disappear any time soon. But it also helps put the threat they pose in perspective: The energy and unpredictability that make the enterprise dangerous also fundamentally hobble it. Zealous idealists might be willing servants of the cause, but as Abu Iyad recognized, they also make terrible employees.

Jacob N. Shapiro, author of "The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations," is an assistant professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University.

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