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Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror

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1700s. As he notes, “The most tangible and pervasive of [these] themes is power.” During the Barbary Wars, the United States Navy displayed its newfound power to good effect. The second theme is faith. He portrays this in his description of the countless American missionaries who toiled under the harshest conditions. The third theme is fantasy—that is, the region’s exotic and mysterious images and stereotypes. Consistent throughout the book is the discussion of how crucial the U.S. Navy was to the region. Naval War College readers will enjoy the insight into the Navy’s earliest ventures and missions in the Middle East.

In spite of the massive changes that have occurred in the region since 1776 or indeed over the last century—the discovery of oil, the two world wars, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the peace process, and terrorism—Oren makes a good case that today’s problems between the United States and its various Middle Eastern partners and adversaries revolve around these same intersecting threads. He emphasizes in particular the dire need to make a shift from “fantasy” to reality in U.S.–Middle East relations generally.

This extensively researched book is well written, comprehensive, and fascinating. Given our dilemmas in U.S.–Middle East relations today, policy makers and the general public alike will benefit greatly by reading it.

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Bodansky, Yossef. *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. 464pp. \$27.95

The importance to the global jihad of the Chechen wars that have roiled the Caucasus region for more than fifteen years is something Western commentators on terrorism persistently underestimate. For most Western observers, the battle for Chechnya has more to do with tribal-cum-national conflicts and human rights abuses than fighting against the forces of armed radical Islam. Russian claims that it, too, is waging its own “war on terror” (a view that held currency in the United States only briefly after 9/11) now fall on deaf ears. For most people outside the former Soviet Union, the arduous Russian struggle against Chechen mujahideen has evaporated from the headlines and amounts to a forgotten war.

This is unfortunate for many reasons, not least that al-Qa‘ida considers the jihad in the Caucasus to be a major front in its global campaign. The first Chechen war (1994 to 1996) was a humiliating debacle for Moscow that resulted in the establishment of a Chechen pseudostate, which soon fell under the influence of Islamic radicalism. Al-Qa‘ida believed this to be a clear win for its cause.

The second Chechen war, which began in 1999 and coincided with the rise of Vladimir Putin, presents a much different picture. For all intents and purposes, Russia has won—Moscow has successfully reestablished its authority over most of the breakaway region. For al-Qa‘ida, by the same token, Chechnya today is a much less promising venue than it was a decade ago.

The continuing neglect of Chechnya in the “terrorism studies” canon is, therefore, a problem. Chechnya has much to teach Western counterterrorists about

effective tactics, techniques, and procedures against the mujahideen. Russia's trial-and-error efforts there could prove important to Western audiences. A good book on this subject is therefore something very much to be desired.

Unfortunately, Yossef Bodansky's *Chechen Jihad* is not that book. The author is a prolific writer on terrorism in general and its radical Islamic variant in particular, but his viewpoint lacks perspective and subtlety. Bodansky's treatment of the Chechen conflict follows his usual pattern of offering a detailed, chronological narrative, veering into a "you are there" account, devoid of any real analysis. Moreover, the author boasts of many unnamed sources in Moscow's security and intelligence agencies that have given him the "real" story to which others are not privy. The reader is bluntly told that all is to be taken on faith, with no endnotes, as is customary in Bodansky's writings, so as to protect his sources. It is, therefore, impossible to determine where the author gets his material or what its validity may be. In this connection, Bodansky's silence on many controversies relating to Russian intelligence in its struggle with the mujahideen is both revealing and troubling.

In spite of all this, however, a close examination by anyone well versed in the subject will reveal that most of Bodansky's information is in fact gleaned not from clandestine meetings in dark alleys but from (translated) press accounts (it appears that Bodansky knows none of the relevant languages). In other words, the author is relying on practices associated with sensationalist journalism, not serious analysis, much less scholarship.

Chechen Jihad is best left on the shelf; it

has nothing of substance to offer serious students of al-Qa'ida and terrorism.

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Scahill, Jeremy. *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. New York: Nation Books, 2007. 480pp. \$26.95

Jeremy Scahill, an investigative journalist for *The Nation*, takes on Blackwater and the privatization of war and security with a vengeance. His fervor and intensity, no doubt prized characteristics in the world of investigative journalism, are on display here in spades. Scahill deconstructs the legal, political, and moral issues that are interwoven with the use of private security contractors like Blackwater Lodge & Training Center, Inc., in admirable fashion, pointing out the substantial and vexing issues that are presented by corporations engaging in activities formerly and traditionally reserved for the armed forces of nation-states. Regrettably, however, his passion generates stray voltage as his manuscript degenerates into an attack on the Bush administration's Iraq war policy, and further regresses into an assault on the Bush administration generally, political conservatism, and the Christian right. By the final pages, Scahill's vitriol discredits him and takes the wind out of the sails of any reasonable argument he otherwise presents regarding the dangers posed by Blackwater and its sister companies. This is too bad, because the author's meticulous research and willingness to take on an administration patsy are commendable and necessary.