



*Changing Character of War Centre
Pembroke College, University of Oxford
With Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation*

Eat, Pray, Fight: One Man's Journey in and out of Al-Qaeda

Aimen Dean: *Nine Lives: My Time as MI6's Top Spy Inside Al-Qaeda*. London: One World Publications, 2018. pp.480. Hb. ISBN: 9781786073280. RRP: £18.99.

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There is more than one aspect of this jihadi account that resembles Elizabeth Gilbert's famous story of a woman on a spiritual journey around the world, 'Eat, Pray, Love'. Just as Gilbert, Dean sets out from his hometown in Bahrain because of a profound spiritual questioning. But where she heads to Italy and India, he heads to Bosnia and the Philippines. Although Gilbert seeks meaning through meditation and Dean through combat, the two books are both ultimately a thorough reflection on values, and how far we are willing to go to live true to them. Both do not just detail the often harsh living reality in remote places, they take the reader on a very intimate journey of the mind (even though they also, at times, read like Lonely Planet travel guides).

Dean's account is more than the story of a Generation X traveller lost in a post-modern world – it is a gripping description of his trajectory from a young Mujahedeen overlooking Sarajevo to an early joiner of Al-Qaeda and ultimately informer for Britain's intelligence services that makes this book a worthy and touching read.

The author, Dean himself, narrates his 'nine lives' between the ages of 15 and 37: a pun on his canny capacity to escape deadly situations unharmed like a cat with several lives, the title really describes the different stations in his evolution into and then out of Al-Qaeda. In nine chapters, we follow him from the early days of his radicalisation in Saudi Arabia to his first combat in Bosnia-Herzegovina, on to the Southeast Asian jungle in the search for his next battlefield, and finally, on his third chapter, into a meeting with Osama Bin Laden where he finally takes the pledge and becomes an explosives' expert in Afghanistan.

Things grow worse after this: not only does his health deteriorate, but, while he is bedridden in Pakistan, so does his belief in the cause. On a medical trip to Qatar, British intelligence opens a convenient escape route for him: undercover espionage in return for a long-term future. While this takes him into the heart of London's millennial jihadi scene, he finally has to return to Afghanistan to be of real use. The attacks of September 11 fall into a time when Dean is knee-deep in the development of a chemical weapon for Al-Qaeda: a device using nicotine gas. Sadly and ironically, Dean's time in Al-Qaeda comes to an end in probably the least desirable way for an undercover agent: American officials leak his profile to a journalist,

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probably in an attempt to bolster their credentials on intelligence penetration of the terrorist organisation. (Although Dean was never an American informer, his information was passed to the United States due to an intelligence-sharing agreement between London and Washington.)

What makes 'Nine Lives' a useful read is that it is, in fact, two books in one: on one hand, it is a spiritual-political coming of age story of a teenage orphan from the Gulf who finds a community in the first wave of Jihadism, only to notice progressively the gap between his values and the organisation to which he pledged loyalty. Because Dean is a thinker – a rare species in Jihadist circles – he narrates this evolution convincingly, providing an answer to the main question at the heart of Western puzzlement when it comes to Jihadism as a phenomenon: why would anyone join such an organisation, even die for it, and deny oneself the comfort of post-modern societies? It is this part that is the most gripping part of the book, and his discovery of the London tube as a gateway to personal liberation is only one of the highlights of this process.

But the book is, of course, also a fascinating insight into Jihadism's now nearly forgotten early days, and Al-Qaeda in particular. The seasoned Jihad-watcher will relish the names dropping of famous fighters, the detailed accounts of attack planning and, of course, the gossip about the daily life of an Al-Qaeda operative, including the development of chemical weapons, persistently bad food and personal antipathies. It reminds us of a time when Jihadism was not a field divided between two organisations, but instead a broad stream with many currents – a set-up to which it is now likely to return. It also addresses some of the main mysteries surrounding certain attacks: the Russian apartment bombings of 1999, for instance, long attributed to the Russian authorities themselves, are revealed to be indeed the work of Al-Qaeda. Within only 19 months, the group had spent \$180,000 (in comparison, the September 11 attacks are estimated to have cost \$500,000 to prepare) on the attacks – money that came mainly from donations the origins of which remain unclear.

It is the honesty with which all of this is described – including gory massacres of Serbs in Bosnia – that deserves praise at a time when most repentant (or pretending to be repentant) Jihadis try to dissimulate what they have done and witnessed. It is also this honesty which makes Dean's account of his evolution away from Al-Qaeda believable even though his falling into the lap of Western intelligence like a ripe fruit sounds a little too smooth. Whether or not Dean was really recruited in the way he described in his book is, however, ultimately irrelevant – it provides a necessary understanding into not only how Al-Qaeda thinks, but why it is likely to continue to be appealing to young men (and women) seeking meaning and community.

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