

IA-Forum interviews *NYT*'s reporter, Carlotta Gall, on her new book, The Wrong Enemy, and her thirteen years of reporting on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa.

By Cynthia Iris (04/14/02014)

International Affairs Forum: You reported on Afghanistan and Pakistan for the *New York Times* for 12 years (2001-2013). You have a new book on that experience, The Wrong Enemy. Over all those years, what were a couple of high points for you, and a couple of low points?

Carlotta Gall: One of the low points was getting beaten up in Quetta [in December, 2006], because they raided my hotel room and snatched all my things. I realize in retrospect, I'd been quite slack. They took my computer. I had an enormous amount of contacts, sources, tapes from people that I would normally keep secret, unnamed sources that would remain unnamed. They grabbed all that. That was a really low point -- to realize that the Pakistanis had information that I'd preferred they wouldn't have.

They also threatened the Pakistani photographer who was with me, which was very hard to bear. And they said this terrible thing when I said he should stay with me -- they said, "he's Pakistani, we can do with him what we want". That's awful to hear when it's a colleague that you're sort of responsible for. So that was a particularly low period. And of course in the end I turned it into something good. It made me angry and determined. I realized they were trying to stop me reporting on that issue. So of course they made me more determined to keep at it and expose it more.

One of the high points came out of that, because it's a strange thing in America, and perhaps elsewhere, but when you get beaten up or you run into trouble, you get noticed. So then I

actually won a few prizes the following year, partly because of that reporting, I think in recognition that it was dangerous, but also that it was worthwhile, and some of the reporting was good.

So perhaps, I think that was a particularly quite good year the following year. I made several trips to the United States and received awards. Which of course is really encouraging. When you're doing war reporting, you're often out there on your own, or just with a small band of colleagues, and I often don't think anyone's reading my copy even. So suddenly to get awards and realize that your peers and people whose opinion you value are reading it and commending you, it's really important. And it was very gratifying.

IA Forum: So let me shift to the raid on Bin Laden's compound. That went amazingly well for the U.S. You claim in the book that Pakistan's ISI (intelligence service) knew that Bin Laden was at this compound for some time. If the incoming U.S. helicopters, despite efforts to fly undetected, actually were detected but they weren't hindered on purpose, do you think that it might have been in Pakistan's interest for the raid to succeed and that's partly why it went so smoothly?

Ms. Gall: I don't know, in short. But I do have a passage in the beginning of one of the chapters -- General Helmley, an American general coming to serve as a military attaché in Islamabad, had this conversation with one of his senior commanders who said that, if Musharraf found bin Laden, or if bin Laden came to General Musharraf's office, (the president then of Pakistan), and said, "I want to give myself up", Musharraf would hand him over to the Americans, but he would describe it as, 'I'm having a bad dream'.

In other words, he would rather bin Laden not be found in Pakistan and then have to deal with all the questions and all the embarrassment and the spotlight. That's my feeling. They hid him almost, perhaps not thinking down the road, what will happen if and when he gets caught. But more, 'let's just hide him and keep him under wraps, kind of try and forget that he's there'. I think it's more that.

Some of the American officials I've talked to say the Pakistanis didn't ever want to be the ones to betray or arrest this Muslim leader who's so charismatic, who's known throughout the Muslim world. They didn't want to be the Muslim nation that betrayed such a hero, because he is a hero among many Arabs, especially just ordinary people on the streets. So that could have also played in Pakistani thinking -- just 'hide him, keep him put away somewhere', rather than have to deal with this dilemma of a Muslim nation handing over one of the Muslim heroes to an infidel, to America.

IA Forum: Let's continue with Pakistan a little bit. It's a bit of an older story at this point, but I wanted to bring two threads together. You recently said that you think the Pakistani government knows where the new al-Qaeda leader, al-Zawahiri, is. If Pakistan is playing both sides of this struggle, do you think that A.Q. Khan's network has been revitalized, and potentially is a serious threat again, selling nuclear materials?

Ms. Gall: I think A.Q. Khan is under pretty good wraps. He's controlled. He's still living in his house in Islamabad. He's now got a little bit more freedom. He can speak on the television, he can write pieces for newspapers. I can't be sure, but I think he's controlled as far as proliferation goes. I think that Pakistanis recognized that that's one step too far, that was something that America was furious about, and moved against. You know, many of us think Pakistan got off lightly with that.

But I think they got a sore enough rap on the knuckles to avoid that in the future. I think what they're doing is expanding their arsenal for their own purposes. That's pretty clear from one of my colleagues, David Sanger, who has written about that, that it's actually the fastest-expanding nuclear arsenal in the world, what the Pakistanis have been building. But I don't think there's evidence that they're trying to proliferate the knowledge to other countries. As far as I know, they've drawn a line at that, which means they did learn a lesson.

IA Forum: Looking at how things are moving from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Yemen, Somalia, and to Kenya, given that you are now covering North Africa, do you think that al-Qaeda is growing stronger even if only as a diffuse organization or an inspirational message?

Ms. Gall: Certainly this sort of militant Islamism is spreading, there's no doubt about it. It has spread and taken on great urgency and popularity in some areas. Al-Qaeda, I think, will be on the decline, just because I don't think Zawahiri is anything like the leader or the figurehead that bin Laden was. He's struggling, as we've seen, to control the different groupings in Iraq. But I think he's the sort of really malevolent mind behind al-Qaeda.

He's still incredibly dangerous, and he's still trying to expand and create havoc. Like any guerrilla movement, it has to, by force, be a diverse and sort of scattered movement. Some people call them franchises; some people just describe them as offshoots, going their own way. But that's how you run a guerrilla movement, and that's how, I think, al-Qaeda always has been. They send people off to different countries. I met one of Bin Laden's acolytes in Chechnya years ago, in the '90s. He didn't say he was al-Qaeda, but he was doing the same sort of thing.

So anyways, they go off and they try and do their things, and that is all coming from the core leadership, however diffuse it is. However, I don't think it can last because I think the whole ideology is redundant, to try and spread Islamism through the sword and through fear and intimidation, which is how they all operate on the ground, in the end can't work because people turn against it. People will reject it, even if for a long time they live under the fear because they're not powerful enough to reject it. They will reject it.

So I think it's a redundant ideology in the end, but how long we have to struggle against it can be still another decade or more. And at the moment, yes, I see a spreading of it. In Libya it's rife, it's tried to make its way across North Africa, and I think that might take quite a few years to spill out and expand itself.

And of course, what's most worrying is all the young men going off to Syria, because it's just like what happened with Afghanistan in the '80s. All these young men went off to Afghanistan, fought there for 10 years. Then, they wanted to carry on to the next war, but they often couldn't go back home, or if they did, they caused trouble when they went back home, or they went elsewhere.

So that's a great worry, because there's thousands of young men going off to Syria, and they're becoming very, very radical. So that is not over. I would say this is al-Qaeda, even if it's not being ordered day-by-day by al-Qaeda, it's what they're all about, and it's where it's all coming from. I use a very broad sort of definition of what is al-Qaeda in that they're following the same ideas; every group will carry all of that differently. But they're basically following the same idea.

IA Forum: Mullah Omar -- you had said that you think he might be moving between Quetta and Karachi. How significant do you think his forces will be in disrupting Afghan life when the new president is installed?

Ms. Gall: It slightly depends who wins. But I think he'll just continue. Already they've shown in run up to elections, but also from the reporting I've done in Pakistan, they're dead set on a return to some sort of influence after the foreign forces leave. Most NATO and America forces are going to leave this year. Even if there's a residue, it's going to be a much smaller force in just probably one or two or three places. So they will definitely make a push.

Mullah Omar, we don't know how active he is. But he's certainly there as the figurehead, and he will continue to be the figurehead. Depending who wins the election, Dr. Abdullah, is a long-time opponent of Pakistan and the Taliban. He was closely involved in the Northern Alliance all those years, fighting the Taliban. So he, I think, will take a very strong stance against them. And Pakistan will also be very upset if he is the president, because I think they don't like the northerners.

If Ashraf Ghani wins, I'm not sure how he will manage. I think he will try and fight because I don't think he's got any time for the Taliban, but he will also probably try and reach out to Pakistan and to the Taliban. I doubt he'll have much success with the Taliban. With Pakistan, I think gradually we are going to see the Pakistani civilians take charge in that country and get a grip on foreign policy. I think Nawaz Sharif understands what's at stake. I hope he'll find the strength to take back control of foreign policy and security policy from his military, who I think are out of control.

IA Forum: So let me just return a little bit to the Bin Laden raid. Why do you think we haven't heard more about the contents of documents taken from the compound by the U.S.?

Ms. Gall: Yes, that's extremely frustrating, because I think that really would be fascinating for any student of this war or of al-Qaeda. I presume it's because it's CIA, perhaps some of it's still actionable and relevant. But I presume they've just classified everything. They were in charge of the raid, so I guess, they get to keep the goodies. Some of us probably should put freedom of information requests in to see more of the material, because there was so much. I think the public deserves to know more of what was in that.

IA Forum: What do you think might have been the real story regarding the major incident with Ray Davis, the CIA contractor, in Lahore in 2011? It certainly leads to the questions of how disruptive to the stability effort in Afghanistan do you think was the CIA's presence in Pakistan?

Ms. Gall: In Pakistan, for a couple of years before the raid on bin Laden, it was clear that the Pakistanis were getting very angry about the presence of more and more Americans in Pakistan who were doing things. It was clear to me they were running their own networks of human intelligence in Pakistan in the tribal areas, partly to inform themselves better for the drone strikes. And the drone strikes became much more accurate and much more intense in those years. It was clear that they were no longer cooperating with the ISI, who had been up until then giving the ground information.

America was getting much smarter, and was therefore running its own networks of informants, and doing a better job of it. And also it was clear from the Afghan side that they were also running human intelligence networks of agents, both in Quetta and in the tribal areas, because they managed to stop a lot more of the car bombs coming in Kabul, the suicide attackers, and so

on. They were having more and more success at that in Kabul. So the Afghans had also developed these networks. And perhaps they were working together.

It was clear to me from the Pakistani military comments that they were getting very angry about this. There were certain things that General Kayani, the head of the armed forces would, would blow up and really strike out with very strong language against things that were happening. And it showed his nervousness that he was not in control of what was happening on the ground. And therefore he risked getting exposed on all sorts of manner of things.

So in that context the Raymond Davis incident in Lahore blew up. It exposed all that nervousness that the ISI and the Pakistani military were feeling about these rings, that they were losing control of the intelligence work happening on Pakistani soil.

They were closing in on a lot of characters in FATA - the tribal areas. And hitting them with drone strikes. And that was getting Pakistan very angry. The whole campaign against the drones has been run not only by the Taliban, but also by the Pakistani military, because they wanted the drone strikes to stop. So they've really, those drone strikes have hit them where it hurts. So I think that was all part of it, and that was definitely what Raymond Davis was doing when he was in Peshawar, he was helping run those human networks.

IA Forum: Now you're covering North Africa. What are the stories there you hope to report on most, and do you see any connection or analogy between what you have been seeing in Afghanistan and Pakistan to what's happening in countries you're covering in Africa?

Ms. Gall: Well, one of the most fascinating things is, if you followed Afghanistan, one of the great guerrilla leaders who was fighting against the Taliban, Ahmad Shah Massoud, he was

killed two days before 9/11, in what was an attack connected to 9/11 and instigated by bin Laden. The two men who did that were Tunisians, and their leader, who is still alive, showed up in Tunisia. He got out of prison after the Arab Spring uprising. His name's Abu Iyad; he was at Tora Bora with bin Laden. And he's still around.

And so suddenly, he started this movement, Ansar al Sharia, which just took off enormously in Tunisia, attracted sort of tens of thousands of youths, filled all the mosques, took over all the mosques, with lots of Salafi, quite extremist preachers. So he's got this amazing hybrid -- it's a social movement as well as a jihadi movement. Now he's on the run, because he overplayed his hand. He turned to violence far too quickly. If he'd kept it a nonviolent movement, he would be the real king of North Africa by now.

So that's been fascinating for me to pick up this, on this character, and follow this sort of next generation of these people, where it will take North Africa. So there's things like that which have ties, and because I have the understanding of the '80s and '90s and al-Qaeda and so on, it helps me understand what's going on. And then the whole influence of al-Qaeda and foreign fighters in Libya is very scary and very important.

Libya feels like Afghanistan in the 90s, with all sorts of training camps and all sorts of characters coming and going with relative freedom, because of the lawlessness and the weakness of the state. So there are similarities. But then it's also just fascinating to see Arab countries finding their way after the Arab Spring. So many young men are frustrated and unemployed. That's also an incredible sort of social movement to see.

IA Forum: In recent years, you've talked about large news organizations have pulled foreign correspondents out of areas that need coverage. How do you think these stories will be told on what's really happening in these countries? What's the future of good foreign reporting?

Ms. Gall: Well it's both depressing when you see a lot of colleagues pulled back home because the bureaus are closing. On the other hand, I go to Tunisia and I'm sort of the old-age doyenne of the foreign reporters. But there are lots of young reporters there, foreign reporters -- Americans, French, British, European. There's quite a vibrant group. They're managing on very small budgets, they're often reporting for multiple organizations, and they're all tweeting and blogging nonstop. But they are managing, and they're just like me. They just love being out there and reporting.

So I think that won't die. What's clear, even as the media companies are changing, there's a need for writers, and there's a need for people who are on the ground and can say what's happening. And so you see all these things like Twitter and all the news with social media, they actually rely on the print media, or the people who are writing. They're passing on our stories or other people's things that have been written. They can't exist without writers. So in that sense, journalism will continue.

And as long as there are journalists who are keen to get out there, we'll find a way to get paid and to do the job. So I'm not worried about that. The quality, of course, is the concern. And, is it sustainable? Can these young journalists afford to live and manage? And that's worrying at the moment. But I can't help thinking somehow it'll shake out, and there will be a way to fund it. Because I think it is needed, and people still do read us. People still want to know from someone reliable who can cut through the massive information and say in a succinct and reliable way something on what's happening.

I'm still very optimistic for journalism, because I think with all this modernity and new ways, there's still a desire for information, in fact there's a greater desire for information. So, and that's our trade. We just have to adapt and find a way to keep delivering in the right way, in an approachable or a readable way.

IA Forum: How long do you think you're going to keep this up?

Ms. Gall: I think I'm one of those people who will keep reporting until I'm too old to get around. I'm not the sort who wants to come back and be an editor and sit under fluorescent lights at a computer screen. I'm never happier than being out in the field talking to people and seeing for myself what's going on.

IA Forum: Please keep up the good work. Thanks for talking with *IA-Forum*.

Carlotta Gall is an award-winning *New York Times* reporter. She covered Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2001-2013. Her new book is [The Wrong Enemy: American in Afghanistan, 2001-2014](#). She began her newspaper career at *The Moscow Times*, in Moscow in 1994. Gall has written two books on Chechnya. Currently, she reports on North Africa. Ms. Gall was educated in England and read Russian and French at Newnham College, Cambridge. She received a Master's degree from City University, London in International Relations and Journalism. She speaks three languages.