

**De Wet Potgieter**, *Black widow, white widow: Is Al Qaeda operating in South Africa?* Penguin Books: Johannesburg, 2014. ISBN 978-0-14-353889-9. 206 pages.

“Incisive”, “courageous” and “scary” were some of the words which sprang to mind whilst reading De Wet Potgieter’s latest book. This publication reflects two years of investigative journalism at its best. The book examines Al Qaeda’s presence in South Africa by explaining how terrorists take advantage of corrupt state machinery through acquiring identity documents and passports by fraudulent means. This, together with South Africa’s ridiculously porous borders, resulted in Al Qaeda’s former head, Osama bin Laden, describing South Africa as “open territory”.

The “white widow” in the title refers to British-born Samantha Lewthwaite who converted to Islam and was the wife of Germaine Lindsay, one of the suicide bombers involved in the 7 July 2005 attacks. She spent time in South Africa and has a relationship with both Al Qaeda and the Somali-based Al Shabaab. “Black widow” refers to Hanle Brink, a counter-terrorist operative. The fact that Potgieter could weave a story around these two characters results in a lucid study which reads more like a thriller as opposed to the serious work of non-fiction which it is.

The book also discloses details of paramilitary and urban warfare activity on secluded farms, as well as details of the support Al Qaeda receives from local extremists. It also unveils clandestine cells of Pakistani terrorist organizations established in small towns like King William’s Town, Heidelberg, Springs, Meyerton, Vereeniging and Lenasia. In the process, South Africa itself is not only threatened, but other countries too, since these cells use this country as a springboard to strike at targets in the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe and elsewhere in Africa.

The book tracks the rise of militant Islamists on South African soil since the 1980s. What one finds particularly appealing is how Potgieter seamlessly connected local developments to international developments, for instance, the training of local groups like Qibla in Libya, Iran and Sudan, as well as the fact that South African Qibla members were deployed alongside Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in the 1990s.

Perhaps more disturbing than the extent of militant Islamists’ activities in South Africa is the South African state’s response. Readers, for instance, are exposed to the tensions amongst this country’s security agencies. Simmering tensions between the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and the South African Police Services (SAPS)’s crime intelligence structures boiled over to such an extent that a deep-cover intelligence agent’s cover was exposed. One also gets the distinct impression that security within these state security bodies are not so tight, given the fact that key state witnesses in terrorism trials wind up dead whilst being part of the witness protection programme. In December 2000, for example, Yusuf and Fahiemma Enous were gunned down alongside the couple’s four month-old baby whilst the family was part of the witness protection programme.

More problematic still is that, where South Africa's intelligence agents do their job, they are frustrated by political interference. Whilst police intelligence agents, Home Affairs officials, as well as members of the South African Revenue Services, have gathered sufficient proof of Al Qaeda-linked terrorist groups, their political mandarins have refused to take action to stop these activities. Surveillance and deep cover intelligence operations were repeatedly halted at critical stages by politicians. Under the circumstances we cannot but wonder why? Why will our elected political leaders – those entrusted with the safety and security of each and every South African citizen – deliberately allow this cancer of terrorism to run free in our society?

De Wet Potgieter's book is a must-read for all who are concerned about South Africa. Policy-makers, scholars and the man or woman on the street will find this book most illuminating.

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