

Disruption: Inside the Largest Counterterrorism Investigation in History

Aki Peritz (Potomac Books, 2021) 407 pages, maps, photos.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

One of the most common tropes for reviewers is “a true story that reads like fiction.” In the book *Disruption*, Aki Peritz has worked hard to make a complicated counterterrorism (CT) operation read like a thriller. To his credit, he also worked hard to capture as many facts as possible in telling the story. For these reasons, the book will be popular among readers outside of the Intelligence Community. Whether it will be as popular with IC readers remains to be seen.

The basics of the terror plot described in *Disruption* are detailed in the open-source press and in the court cases in the UK. The best summary of the case, known as OP OVERT on both sides of the Atlantic, is Peritz’s own piece published in *Politico*.^a He details how British citizens traveled to Pakistan and met with a known terrorist recruiter named Rashid Rauf. After traveling to Pakistan, these individuals decided to follow through on a plot like one first designed in the 1990s by two notorious terrorist masterminds—Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and his cousin Ramzi Yousef. Their plan focused on placing multiple bombs on aircraft flying from Manila to North America.

That plot was disrupted by a fire caused by the bombmaker, which resulted in a police investigation in the Philippines. In the 2005–2006 plot, the goal was to bring down multiple airlines departing from the United Kingdom headed to the United States. The terrorists planned to carry on board aircraft precursor chemicals disguised as sports drinks, assemble the bombs on board, and detonate them when the aircraft were over the Atlantic Ocean.

Throughout the summer of 2006, the US and UK governments worked together to build the terrorist investigation using a joint operational name OP OVERT. At the same time, the United States worked with the Pakistani intelligence service to track down Rashid Rauf. OP OVERT concluded when the US and Pakistani team captured Rauf and the British team arrested the conspirators in the UK.

In the first half of *Disruption*, Peritz provides the reader with detailed biographies of the various players in the terrorist plot. The main perpetrators of the terrorist plan were UK-born Muslims, whose parents and family members were Pakistani. Peritz relates the step-by-step process of transition from apolitical British men to dedicated Islamic extremist terrorists. At times, the details Peritz offers make for difficult reading. He provides the historical, ethnic, and even personal context leading up to Rauf’s recruitment of the primary perpetrators. Peritz often makes the jump from detailed facts to suppositions on the thoughts and motivations of the players. While the speculations are reasonable, they are no more than that. Unfortunately, they are folded into the facts in a way that it would be difficult for the average reader to distinguish the two.

Peritz focuses much of the second half of *Disruption* on the design and execution of the CT operations in the UK and in Pakistan. He spends considerable time and effort outlining tensions that existed among all the CT players and political figures in the saga. Anyone who has served in the intelligence or the special operations communities in the past 20 years will have no problem relating similar tensions among allies.

In part, these are inherent in the CT world. Law enforcement organizations want to build the best possible case to ensure conviction arresting the conspirators “just in time.” CT organizations within the intelligence and special operations world focus on disruption of terrorism plans. Disruption might mean preventative detention or some type of kinetic operation.

Either way, CT and special operations forces are committed to getting the job done whenever and wherever success will be the result. In a post-9/11 world, the balance between these two viewpoints has shifted in favor of disruption. The “high drama” as described in *Disruption* is not necessarily anything new or surprising among allies.

a. “How the U.S., U.K. and Pakistan teamed up to stop another 9/11,” *Politico* (online), January 2, 2022.

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In sum, *Disruption* is a well-researched book that captures the essence of OP OVERT. It might not have the full details correct, but that is the risk of working solely from open-source information. Future historians with the benefit of declassified documents no doubt will be able to tell the full story. There are small errors that should have been caught by the author or the editors. One example is identification of Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Salafi Islamic extremist, as one of the founders of al-Qa'ida and the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani Deobandi extremist group. Azzam was assassinated long before either al-Qa'ida or LET were formed. It is entirely fair to consider Azzam as an ideological ancestor for Salafi extremists, but hardly a founder.

Pertiz manufactures tension that exists only in intemperate comments among counterterrorism operators after long hours of hard work. The revelation of that intemperance will make it a popular book. For professionals, the manufactured drama will undermine the book's utility. They might also skip the first chapter titled "The Killer beside You." Peritz's fictional summary of what could happen is designed to engage and horrify readers. It may do so for the general public, but the melodrama created in this chapter will not convince an intelligence professional to give the book a chance. For a more concise and less melodramatic version of the story, look to Peritz's *Politico* article.



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