



Portrait of a Jihadist: New Documentary 'The Oath' Reveals 'Human Side' of al-Qaeda

By Emily Wilson, AlterNet

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The Oath opens in New York on Friday, May 7th.

Documentary filmmaker, Laura Poitras, who has won a Peabody and been nominated for an Oscar and an Emmy, is making a trilogy of documentaries about America post-9/11. Her first film in the trilogy, *My Country, My Country*, told the story of the war in Iraq from the perspective of an Iraqi doctor. In her latest, *The Oath*, she profiles Abu Jandal, a Yemeni taxi driver who was Osama bin Laden's bodyguard. Jandal recruited Al-Qaeda members and ultimately named names in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, while his brother-in-law, [Salim Hamdan](#), a former driver for bin Laden whom Jandal recruited, was held at the military prison at Guantanamo Bay and was the first person to face the military tribunals, despite having questionable links to Al-Qaeda.

AlterNet contributor Emily Wilson recently caught up with Laura Poitras in San Francisco.

Emily Wilson: You were going after a different story, and you ended up with this one. How did that happen?

Laura Poitras: I went to Yemen looking to tell a story about a returnee -- somebody released from Guantanamo and returning home. I went there with a lawyer who was representing a dozen clients. Then, on the second day there, I was introduced to Abu Jandal and everything changed. His story was pretty mind-boggling. Here's this guy who was bin Laden's bodyguard and guest house emir who's driving a taxi in Yemen. He recruited Salim Hamdan. Everything changed in that instant. I didn't go to Yemen to say I was going to find a story on al Qaeda. That's the story I encountered by accident, but it was really compelling and a way to still talk about Guantanamo. But Abu Jandal is really the main character.

EW: What most struck you about his story?

LP: Well, that he was driving a taxicab. As a storyteller, you just think, 'This is too wild.' This guy is free and driving a taxicab [while] we have all these people being imprisoned at Guantanamo. I put the pieces together that he was interrogated right after 9/11, a really important interrogation. This happened six days after 9/11 and there he was in a prison in Yemen and having his Miranda rights read to him every morning. It's extraordinary that this interrogation was conducted so soon after 9/11, and according to the book. If he'd been captured in Afghanistan I think he would have been sent to one of the black sites.

EW: How did you get so much access to him?

LP: I showed him the film I made in Iraq, about the war, called *My Country, My Country*, and I think that was key to his decision. And as we show in the film, he's not shy, and he's doing other interviews. It's not like he's not interested in talking to the press. But I needed more access, so that took time and patience. I think on one hand, he was feeling guilt about Hamdan, and I think also he's carrying guilt about his relationship to al-Qaeda and bin Laden. I think he keeps trying to set the record straight and then set it straight again.

EW: What do you mean trying to set the record straight?

LP: My interpretation is that in a sense he's somebody who feels guilty about something, and I think it all goes back to the interrogation. It's kind of like if you did something that betrayed somebody in your past. I think that helps us understand some of his motivations. I think there's some face saving going on and wanting to differentiate himself. I think he had differences of opinion to the tactics and strategies of bin Laden. But he's not repentant. There's the stories of people who say, "I was an extremist and now I've changed all my ways." He's not that. That's what makes him really interesting. He's somebody who had differences of opinion, who broke with them, but who still is quite vocal in his anger to the policies of the West.

EW: You felt it was important to show the human side of al-Qaeda. Why is that?

LP: I think there's a long tradition in nonfiction writing or fiction films of anti-heroes that are these sort of conflicted characters. We have a desire to know what makes someone tick. Often people are motivated by contradictory things, so in Abu Jandal's case, here you have this guy who's a loving dad and a people person. I think he likes driving a taxi. I think he likes having these little conversations. He's very gregarious. He was made emir of a guest house. He's probably not good at keeping secrets, but he is good at working with people. We wanted to show all that and his charisma. The scenes where he's with these young guys, they look at him with such reverence. That's just so important to understand, how people get recruited and his influence. I actually think he's telling those kids not to go and fight. I think he's saying, 'Get an education, don't be stupid.' We wanted to show how that charisma operates. I think with documentary we're used to clear victims or heroes and this presents something murkier.

EW: Why is it important for Americans to have this understanding of what's going on?

LP: If you talk to someone like the FBI agent who interrogated Abu Jindal, he'll tell you the most important thing is this stuff. Like, what are the jealousies and rivalries and what are the opinions between the Egyptians and the Saudis because these are the things that create divisions. You want to understand that, you really do. And I think you want to understand what is the threat. This is a story of guy who was in the inner circle and took a different course, and if you have somebody in the inner circle who didn't support the tactics of 9/11, you're really talking about a small circle of people who do. If somebody that close can be pulled away, then why are we

occupying countries? It seems we really need a much smarter approach to dealing with radicalism, and we've kind of taken a blunt hammer approach. The U.S., we're the one that are the recruiters right now in a sense. I mean Abu Ghraib photographs? A lot of people were radicalized by that.

EW: What are you most pleased about having finished the film?

LP: I think the reception. I think that people are taking on grappling with some really hard things, and that the reaction hasn't been reactionary. In a certain sense this is not the film that either side wants. The Left would much rather have a film of clear victims that they can rally around that and this is not that. And for the right this is a human portrait of somebody they want to vilify. But I think both sides find honesty in it, which is kind of nice. It's scary to make a film that doesn't fall into ideological camps, but it's been great to have people grapple with the honesty and that it's OK to tell a story that doesn't fit into a neat box.

Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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