

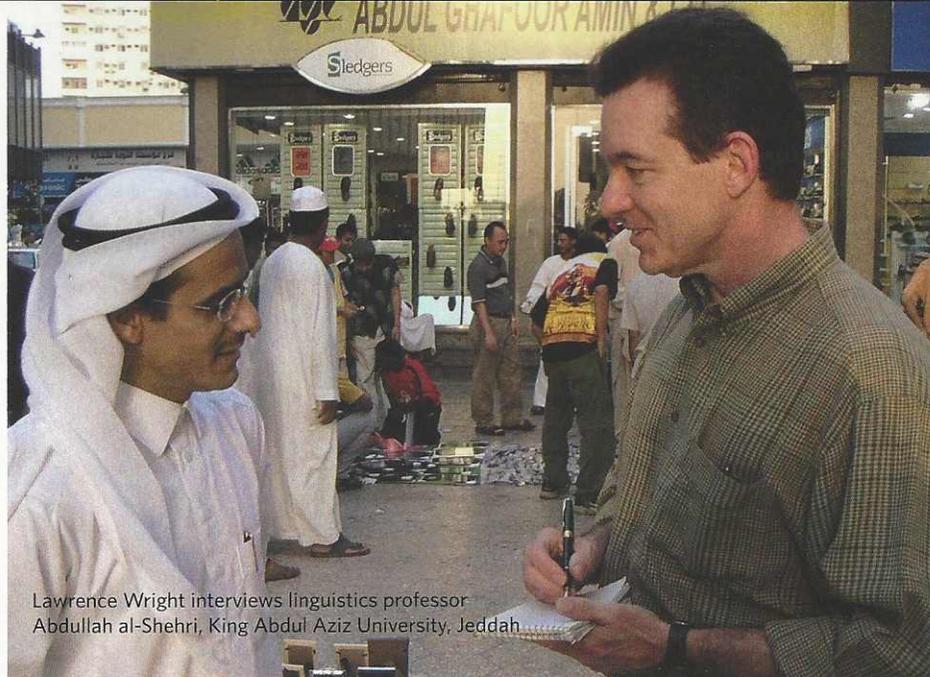
Lawrence of Arabia

AUTHOR LIGHTS OUT FOR THE MIDDLE EAST TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF 9/11

By Laura Ohata

Strapping on bombs and climbing on airplanes, terrorists inspire fear because we know so little about them. After 9/11, Lawrence Wright set out to learn all things al-Qaeda, conducting more than 600 interviews with FBI agents, CIA spies, Saudi princes and friends and family in the Osama bin Laden entourage. Filled with intimate details—from terrorist trainees in Afghanistan watching Schwarzenegger movies for inspiration to domestic disputes between bin Laden's four wives—Wright's new tome, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, hits bookstores this month. So how does a staff writer at *The New Yorker* unlock reluctant lips?

Morning light crawls across a red Persian rug in the den where Wright's wife, Roberta, and daughter, Caroline, read the paper. Wearing a threadbare T-shirt, Wright brews a cup of dark roast and says, "I love Turkish coffee. It's very intense and flavorful. When you're brewing it,



Lawrence Wright interviews linguistics professor Abdullah al-Shehri, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah

you put the coffee in, then you put the sugar in, and you stir the whole time it's heating. When it's just about to boil, you pour it into a cup, and it has this surface with bubbles and texture on top. I spent months trying to get this thing brewed properly, and finally Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law Jamal Khalifa showed me how to do it."

The journalist who put bin Laden's brother-in-law at ease grew up in Abilene and Dallas, with a banker for a father and a bookish socialite for a mother. Wright attended college at Tulane, and as graduation approached, like other educated boys in 1969, Wright avoided combat in Vietnam. Claiming conscientious objector status, he took a job teaching English at the American University in Cairo.

Leaving is never easy, and Wright had to say an unplanned goodbye to his then-girlfriend, Roberta Murphy. Two weeks later, he sent a letter to her proposing marriage, and negotiations began. Wright suggested a wedding in Egypt, where he could have three more wives and breaking up was as easy as uttering, "I divorce you." A classics major, Roberta insisted on marrying in Athens. Roberta won, and for the next two years, the Wrights enjoyed life in Cairo.

When they returned to the United States in 1971, Lawrence took up journalism. Nine years later, he moved the family to Austin, when he landed a job at *Texas Monthly*. Fellow author Stephen Harrigan (*Challenger Park*) says, "Larry's got very deep roots here—many good friends. If he were solely consumed with his career, he would live in New York or Washington, D.C., but his base is Austin, and it has been for a long time." In the 1980s, Wright was a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*, and in 1992, he became a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

Along the way, producer Lynda Obst asked Wright if he would work on a screenplay about a female CIA agent, but with the Cold War over, the CIA didn't have an identifiable enemy. Wright says, "I mulled over the plot for a year and considered setting it back in time. Finally, I realized that the CIA *did* have a real-life antagonist: the FBI. Their bureaucratic quarrels were legendary. At the time I began my research, they were fighting over which organization would control counterterrorism inside the United States. I chose to make the terrorist an Arab because I had some experience living in the Arab world." Starring actors Denzel Washington, Annette Bening and Bruce Willis, Wright's movie *The Siege* should have been a huge hit, but it bombed. Despite hiring Arab-American consultants to make sure that the

film wasn't offensive, protestors sabotaged the release. Wright was angry because he had carefully crafted the only Arab-American hero in Hollywood history and cast the part of FBI agent Frank Haddad with actor Tony Shalhoub.

Undaunted, Wright continued screenwriting and even co-produced his own movie, *Noriega, God's Favorite*. Then, on September 11, 2001, two airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center, collapsing the twin towers in shards of glass, molten steel and clouds of dust. Wright says, "I had lived in Egypt and spoke Arabic in a modest manner, and I had the intuition to write *The Siege*, which predicted the events in spooky ways. So I decided to devote my life to writing about 9/11."

Within an hour of the attacks, Wright sent an e-mail to his editor at *The New Yorker*, David Remnick, that said, "Put me to work." Wright recalls, "The phone service was down, and all

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