

A Conversation with Lance Charnes about Doha 12

What inspired this book?

Back in 2010, a Mossad hit team assassinated a top Hamas operative, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in Dubai. They were less-than-slick about it and ended up on a number of surveillance videos. The Emiratis posted the footage on YouTube – it's kind of interesting to watch. Anyway, the team used for their covers the identities of real Israeli dual-nationals living in Israel. These people's other citizenship countries were extremely perturbed by this. Of course, Hamas was hopping mad.

So I got to thinking: what would have happened if Hamas decided to go after these poor schlubs whose identities were stolen? Voila: *Doha 12* was born.

What was it about this story that appealed to you?

It was a perfect setup for a thriller, start to end. If I didn't write it, someone else would have. How could I pass that up?

Where did the characters of Jake and Miriam come from?

I didn't want a super-special-forces stud as my male lead – that's been done to death and I don't find it very interesting. At the same time, he had to have some combat experience so he could credibly do some of the things he was going to have to do. He needed to be a native New Yorker so I didn't have to do an entire book with an ESL lead. So Jake's background covers all this – born on Long Island, moved to Israel as a boy, served in the Israeli Army, then returned to America. Making him a bookstore manager was another way to keep him away from being either a Reacheresque drifter or the more standard cop/spy/special-ops guy, as well as being a blatant ploy to endear him to bookstore managers around the globe.

I needed a partner for Jake, not just pretty deadweight, which meant that Miriam had to have her own badass side. I also needed someone to be able to voice the anti-Arab view and have reason to do so. That's why the men in her life have died violently. I was going to make her an ex-soldier until I found out that women weren't allowed in combat roles in the Israeli Army until around 2000. That's where her stint in the Border Guard came in – it was a way to give her combat training and experience without changing history. And of course, she needed to be big enough and fit enough to be able to kick ass on her own behalf.

A recurring motif that's unusual in thrillers is that Jake has to hold Miriam back from being too aggressive.

That's true. A lot of the thrillers I've read have demoted the female lead to a secondary role, tagging along with the hero and being the comely sex interest and object to be protected. I

wanted Miriam to be an at-least-equal partner who doesn't hesitate to get her hands *very* dirty. The last thing I wanted was a helpless heroine.

The “good guys” and “bad guys” are less starkly delineated in Doha 12 than usual for a thriller. Did you intend to draw some moral equivalence between Mossad and Hezbollah?

Not so much “moral equivalence” as introducing the idea that both sides believe they're doing their duty to their respective nations and that each side considers the other to be a pack of terrorists. I wanted to make sure readers understand why Alayan does what he does as much as they know why Gur does. If at any point the reader has to wonder who to root for...well, good.

“Terrorist” is one of those eye-of-the-beholder words. To the Loyalists of colonial America, the Sons of Liberty were terrorists. To the residents of Sderot in southern Israel, the Gazans who fire rockets at them are terrorists; to those Gazans, the Israelis who bomb and shell their houses and keep them shut off from the world are terrorists.

Are you worried readers might take offense to this?

Unless they've totally chugged the Kool-Aid for one side or the other, I have to hope that by this point, readers know that both sides have done reprehensible things and both have completely abandoned the moral high ground. Likud notwithstanding, a significant number of Israelis have come to terms with this; I imagine the same holds for the Palestinians and the Lebanese.

The Hezbollah hit team seems to be motivated by nationalism rather than religion. Do you think this is the case in real life?

Hezbollah has evolved a great deal since it was Islamic Jihad and a tool for the Iranian mullahs to strike at the pro-Shah Iranian diaspora. On one hand, it's still a Shi'ite sectarian organization with an ongoing involvement in terrorist activity, such as the Burgas bombing. On the other hand, it's a major player in the Lebanese government. It's essentially run southern Lebanon for much of a generation, and by some accounts has done a better job of it than the Lebanese government has elsewhere. Lately it's been reaching out to non-Sunni groups within Lebanon to broaden its power base. Hezbollah considers itself – and is considered by others within Lebanon – to be the real guarantor of Lebanese security against Israeli incursion. So I don't think it's a stretch to imagine that its military and security services may be motivated by patriotism and not just religion.

Also, there are too many instances in books, films and TV shows of the “crazy Muslim terrorist.” That's lazy and inaccurate. It wasn't too long ago that we were worried about the Irish Republican Army, but despite the fact Catholicism was a major part of their program, nobody characterized them as “crazy Christian terrorists.”

Both Gur and Alayan say, “We’re not winning the war.” Do you think Mossad and Hezbollah believe this in real life?

At least on the Israeli side, I know this to be the case. A recent documentary, *The Gatekeepers*, featured the past six former heads of Shin Bet, the Israeli analogue to the FBI. To a man they said that the long-term occupation of and encroachment on the lands seized in the 1967 war hasn’t moved Israel any closer to either security or peace and is corroding the nation’s core values. Israeli security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority has brought about more calm in the West Bank than direct military rule ever did. On the other side, since the 2006 war Hezbollah has largely confined itself to Lebanese internal politics and, lately, the civil war in Syria, and has refrained from unduly antagonizing Israel, even though it has more than enough resources to make things highly unpleasant for the Israelis. Perhaps all sides are learning that nobody has won this 60-year war.

How did you choose and research the settings for the major set-piece action scenes?

The three major settings – Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station, Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery and Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan – all look great and haven’t been used to death. All three also gave me great big arenas for the action.

Since I’m not blessed with a publisher’s advance, I had to do as much research as I could without actually going to the locations. The Internet is a Godsend for that. I was able to pull up dozens of pictures, videos and websites for all three locations and study them until I understood how each place looks and, more important, how it works. For instance, I scored a floorplan for 30th Street Station from the Metro Jacksonville (Florida!) government website. With that, I was able to plot and time out the action in that scene. YouTube videos were really useful for working out sightlines. Google StreetView and Bing Streetside were invaluable.

It must’ve worked. When I finally traveled to Philadelphia and New York City and visited the locations *after* I’d written the book, I needed to make only minor changes in the text.

Did you outline the plot or let it develop as you go along?

Outline. Heavily. I was moving people over three continents; things had to happen on certain days or after X amount of time, and it all had to come together on one particular day. There’s no way I could do that on the fly. That doesn’t mean the characters couldn’t change my plans if they wanted, but they had to live in a strong framework.

How long did it take to write Doha 12?

About six months. It took over eighteen months and a lot of revisions to get it through Pure Fiction League, the critique group I belong to.

What part or aspect was the hardest to write?

Jake's daughter Eve and Jake's relationship with her. I don't have kids and I've never spent a lot of time around them, so coming up with a reasonable depiction of a six-year-old girl under these circumstances was a chore. The critique group kept me straight on this.

What other novels do you think compare closely to Doha 12?

I like to compare it to Daniel Silva's Gabriel Allon series and some of Jack Higgins' modern-day spy books. Neither author relies on the superhero protagonist or the omnipotent global conspiracy as a villain.

Do you foresee a sequel or series?

Not really. I've screwed up Jake's and Miriam's lives enough. I suppose they might have one more adventure left in them – nothing having to do with terrorism or the Mideast – but after that they'd flee New York and go hide in the wilderness somewhere so nothing exciting would ever happen to either of them again.

Why did you choose to self-publish?

I wasn't getting any traction with agents even though I know this is the best and most commercial novel I've written so far. The "no response means no" policy a lot of agents have adopted is especially maddening; I can deal with hearing "no," but hearing nothing is truly frustrating. At the same time, the self-publishing route has become paved and now has signs and service stations and rest areas. I'd also been reading about non-household-name authors with traditional publishing contracts who were having to do nearly as much work as self-publishers and were getting a fraction of the money for it. So finally I decided, *what the hell*. I'd been laid off from my previous job and wasn't working, so I had the time, and even if I managed to sell only a couple dozen copies, that would be a couple dozen more people who would see it than if I simply let it rot on my hard drive.