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# The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous

During the war in Afghanistan, eager Arab youths volunteered en masse to fight a historic "jihad" against the Soviet "infidel." The support network that funneled money, supplies, and manpower to supplement the Afghan mujahidin is now contributing experienced fighters to militant Islamic groups worldwide. Veterans of the Afghan jihad are being integrated into Islamic extremist groups via wartime routes. New bases and waystations are training and sheltering the second generation of Arab mujahidin. Relying on a number of state sponsors and individual patrons, this network is fluid enough to withstand most government crackdowns.

The war's melting pot gave the militant Islamists numerous ideological and logistical ties with fighters from other countries. Victory over the Soviet Union has inspired many of them to continue their jihad against other infidels, including the US, Israel, and more secular Middle East regimes. Afghanistan's Arab veterans are joining existing militant groups—such as Egypt's extremist Islamic Gama'at, radical splinter factions of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, and Yemen's Islamic Jihad. The veterans' wartime expertise and religious zeal enhance the paramilitary capabilities and effectiveness of these extremist groups.

The perception that the US has an anti-Islamic foreign policy agenda raises the likelihood that US interests increasingly will become targets for violence from the former mujahidin. Plans by Islamabad to deport all Arab veterans remaining in Pakistan would

dump hundreds more devout fighters into the network, exacerbating the problems of governments that are accepting the wandering mujahidin.

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### When the Boys Come Home

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reverberated throughout the Muslim world, summoning thousands of volunteers to fight the jihad. Estimates of the number of non-Afghan volunteers range from 4,000



Rose al-Yusuf, April 5, 1993

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to 25,000, with Arab fighters making up the majority. The Arab mujahidin were considered highly motivated and prepared to die for the jihad. Many spent their own money to volunteer. Up to 30 percent reportedly were considered criminals or outlaws in their own countries. Some may have joined the war effort primarily to get hands-on military training.

The mujahidin excelled at guerrilla warfare. Volunteers trained with small arms, explosives, and other weapons, learning techniques well suited to terrorist operations. Many still have access to the false passports, visas, and identity papers they used during the war, facilitating their free flow throughout the region. Their knowledge of communications equipment and experience in logistics planning will enhance the organizational and offensive capabilities of the militant groups to which they are returning.

These veterans also possess a wide range of technological knowledge. Their experience with high-quality computers, faxes, and telecommunications equipment during the war enables them to share propaganda ideas and strategies with even the smallest Islamic opposition groups worldwide.

Most significantly, these volunteers are welcomed as victorious Muslim fighters of a successful jihad against a superpower. Buoyed by their experience, the fighters are more confident, and they have won the respect of many Muslims—Arab and non-Arab—who venerate the jihad. The mujahidin also have strong ties to fellow fighters scattered throughout the region. Familial bonds intensify through intermarriages; for instance, the sister of Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is married to Algerian militant figure Boudjemaa Bounaoua.

### The Mujahidin Support Network

The war-era network of state sponsors and private patrons which continues to support the mujahidin has no rigid structure and no clearly defined command center, but receives guidance from several popular Islamic leaders and financial support from charitable Islamic organizations and wealthy individuals. Key figures who have emerged as the mentors of the mujahidin provide one another with the

contacts and conduits needed to keep the militant groups they support in business.

A close working relationship reportedly exists among Hekmatyar, Egyptian Islamic Gama'at spiritual leader Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, Yemeni Islamic Jihad leader Sheikh Zindani, and Sudanese National Islamic Front (NIF) leader Hassan al-Turabi. Sheikh Jilani, the leader of the Jama'at al-Fuqra based in Lahore, is also believed to have some ties to the mujahidin network. This circle of mutual admiration nurtures the network of safehavens, bases, and logistical support.

Numerous wealthy patrons of the Afghan cause, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, reportedly support the ongoing mujahidin effort as part of their generosity to Islamic movements worldwide. Money usually flows through multiple pipelines of Islamic charities and mosques. The end use of the money is not questioned; the mujahidin appear to feel free to seek out additional or alternative routes and patrons, and to move their training bases to new locations.

Among private donors to the new generation, Usama Bin Ladin is particularly famous for his religious zeal and financial largess. A Saudi businessman living in Khartoum, Bin Ladin uses his close ties to Turabi to funnel support to Islamic militants operating in places as diverse as Yemen and the US. His joint ventures with Sudanese businessmen provide front companies for his exploits. Bin Ladin's money has enabled hundreds of Arab veterans to return to safehavens and bases in Yemen and Sudan, where they are training new fighters. He also maintains financial and ideological ties to Sheikh Abdel-Rahman, Sheikh Zindani, and Hekmatyar.

### Hubs of Mujahidin Activity

Among the handful of known mujahidin centers, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain preeminent because of their key roles as staging areas for Arab volunteers entering the war in the 1980s. Many Arab-run nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) based in both countries continue to funnel money and logistical support to Arab mujahidin. Islamabad recently closed several of these NGOs, probably in response to constant pressure from North African regimes and

to US concerns about Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorist groups. The Pakistani Government also may be frustrated with its inability to control such freewheeling groups within its borders.

Last April Islamabad began a "roundup" of Arab veterans who remained in Pakistan, but reports indicate that many fled to safety in Afghanistan. Conservative estimates say 2,000 Arab mujahidin remain in Afghanistan, where they continue their training and provide safehaven to fellow Arab mujahidin forced out of Pakistan. A few Arab veterans leaving Afghanistan and Pakistan reportedly are seeking safehaven in Iran, where mujahidin bases are still operable. Some of these fighters probably are being trained by Tehran to conduct intelligence or militant activities throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Evidence suggests Tehran relies on its own network to support these Arab mujahidin. Members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) provide terrorist training to veterans, and probably other Islamic militants, in Sudan, according to various reports. Tehran has used the IRGC to train Sudanese NIF recruits for more than a year.

Sudan is fast becoming one of the key locations for mujahidin training and logistical support to a variety of Islamic militant groups. Of the hundreds of returning mujahidin who reportedly have found safehaven in Sudan, some are training North African extremists, including members of Egypt's Islamic Gama'at. The NIF-dominated government views these radical groups as liberation movements and allows them to meet and coordinate activities, including terrorist planning, while in Sudan. The US designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism might incite some of these extremists to retaliate against the US, particularly if they fear that Khartoum will react by curtailing its current level of support to Islamic groups.

Yemen is also becoming an increasingly important waystation in the long voyage home for some mujahidin. The Yemeni Islamic Jihad reportedly has training camps where mujahidin alumni instruct militants from across North Africa. The Yemeni Islamic Jihad is credited with carrying out the December 1992 Aden hotel bombings, in which US troops billeted at

## Terrorism in New York: The Mujahidin Connection

Many of the suspects in the February 26 bombing of the World Trade Center, and those arrested in June for a second plot to bomb the UN and other targets, had been involved in fundraising and recruitment for the Afghan war. The suspects include devout followers of Egyptian Islamic Gama'at leader Sheikh Abdel-Rahman, who worked with the mujahidin in Peshawar, and US Muslim disciples of the Pakistani Jama'at al-Fuqra, led by Sheikh Jilani in Peshawar.

**Mujahidin in the US.** One of the key suspects in the World Trade Center bombing, Mahmoud Abouhalima, was involved in recruitment efforts for the mujahidin in the US, where he worked as Sheikh Abdel-Rahman's driver. Siddig Ibrahim Siddig Ali, arrested in June in connection with the plot to bomb the UN building and other New York City targets, came to the US via the mujahidin pipeline from Sudan. Once in New York, he joined Abdel-Rahman's mosque and worked as his translator. At least one report suggests Siddig was planning to move on to the jihad in the Philippines, where Muslim separatists have fought a 20-year war with Manila.

**US citizen and accused bomb plotter Clement Rodney Hampton-EI** also fought in the Afghan war, where it is believed he first developed contacts with the other suspects and Sheikh Abdel-Rahman. It was his role to find overseas escape routes and to procure sufficient funds to make the bombs, strongly suggesting that he maintained contacts made during the Afghan war. Hampton-EI also may have had ties to Fuqra members.

**New York—just part of the network?** In addition to Sheikh Abdel-Rahman, many Islamic activists in the US benefit from the mujahidin network. Bin Ladin has funneled money to Abdel-Rahman in the US through Sudanese NIF sources. The Alkifah Refugee Center in Jersey City, which supported the mujahidin and sent fighters from the US to Afghanistan, is typical of many organizations in the Middle East now using their funds to support new Islamic causes and train a new generation of fighters.

the hotels were targeted. Because the Yemeni regime seems either unable or unwilling to rein in the activities of this vehemently anti-Western group, the group

and its mujahidin connections remain a threat to US interests.

### Looking for Work in North Africa

Many Arab veterans attempting to return home are joining forces with Islamic militants in North Africa already embroiled in terrorism or sabotage campaigns against their regimes, which they regard as anti-Islamic. In most of these cases, the West is not a primary target, though small-scale violence against businesses and tourists have embarrassed the regimes and probably deterred foreign investment. Extremists might attack US interests should the US appear to be supporting the increasingly repressive policies of these regimes.

Algeria has long argued that returning mujahidin have been responsible for some of the most violent attacks against the Algerian security services. Government officials claim that as many as 1,000 veterans have returned to Algeria—where they are called Afghans because of their distinctive dress. Those who have returned are respected among their Islamist colleagues for their jihad experience, and many probably are engaged in the Islamic opposition's activities.

The security services believe the veterans are largely in charge of training militants. The radical splinter groups of the underground Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) already have access to arms and some military expertise, but the returning veterans, who reportedly retain ties in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan, can add some degree of organization and long-term planning to the insurgency.

Egypt's Islamic Gama'at is one of the groups that benefits the most from the mujahidin network. Bin Ladin reportedly facilitates the return of Egyptian veterans, funnels money to the Gama'at, and provides training in his camps in Sudan. The Gama'at still has connections to the mujahidin hub in Peshawar, where recent threatening faxes from the Gama'at to press agencies in Cairo originated.

Although the Gama'at remains an unpopular opposition force in Egypt, the addition of handfuls of Afghan war veterans and their offshore connections probably has increased their effectiveness somewhat.

Egyptian security services claim several jailed Gama'at leaders were trained mujahidin responsible for the use of "nail bombs," a particularly lethal form of homemade explosive. Egyptian officials blame the August 18 assassination attempt against the Interior Minister on an Afghan-trained extremist.

Ironically, the Qadhafi regime in Libya, once one of the largest Arab financial backers of Hekmatyar during the war, now fears the returning veterans and has lashed out publicly against them. Libyan mujahidin reportedly are training in Yemeni and Sudanese camps, but it is unclear whether many have succeeded in returning to Libya to join the small, weak Islamic opposition.

### Looking for a New Jihad

Arab mujahidin are also turning their energies to new conflicts, principally in Bosnia and Tajikistan. Both appeal to many Arab veterans as emerging holy wars against infidels. A few hundred Arab veterans reportedly are fighting in Bosnia, a presence the Bosnian Muslims tolerate because they have failed to receive military assistance from elsewhere. But Bosnian Muslims greatly dislike the highly militant brand of Islam practiced by radical mujahidin.

Some fundamentalists on the Afghan side of the Afghan-Tajik border increasingly portray the struggle against Dushanbe's restored "old-guard" Communist regime as a continuation of the jihad against the Russians. Recent cross-border fighting has demonstrated the considerable guerrilla skills Tajik opposition forces have learned from Afghan and other military advisers.

Camps operating in Afghanistan near the Tajik border, still holding about 60,000 Tajik refugees, provide training grounds to Tajik insurgents; instructors reportedly include both Afghan and Arab mujahidin. Arab NGOs that supported the mujahidin during the war, as well as Afghan party leaders who head the fledgling Kabul government, reportedly are giving support to activities in this region. Tajik militants are reported to have surveilled the Russian and US Embassies in Dushanbe. Tajik rebels may choose to attack foreign diplomats in order to

destabilize Dushanbe and limit the number of outside observers, a strategy pursued by Hekmatyar in Kabul in August 1992.

More and more Arab veterans of the Afghan war are joining forces with militants in Kashmir who have been leading an insurgency against Indian rule. To many, India represents another anti-Muslim infidel that must be defeated. The Harkat al-Jihad al-Islami, a small group of non-Kashmiri veterans of the Afghan war whose leader has vowed that the "jihad will continue until we throw India out," apparently is well armed and operating about 80 miles southeast of Srinagar.

### Mujahidin in Every Corner

Beyond the Middle East and South Asia, small numbers of Afghan war veterans are taking up causes from Somalia to the Philippines. Mujahidin connections to the larger network heighten the chances that even an ad hoc group could carry out destructive insurgent attacks. Veterans joining small opposition groups can contribute significantly to their capabilities; therefore, some militant groups are actively recruiting returning veterans, as in the Philippines where the radical Muslim Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) reportedly is using mujahidin members' connections to the network to bolster funding and broker arms deals. The ASG is believed to have carried out the May bombings of Manila's light rail system.

The military wing of the Islamic Union Fundamentalist Organization in Somalia (al-Ittihad al-Islam), which is fighting to install an Islamic government in Mogadishu, reportedly is taking advantage of the rising number of Afghan veterans infiltrating its movement to improve its operations. Some Somalians reportedly are training in Yemeni and Sudanese camps. The US presence in Somalia may be viewed as a provocation by these individuals, but it has not yet been a target of terrorist attack.

### Focus on the United States

The alleged involvement of veterans of the Afghan war in the World Trade Center bombing and the plots against New York targets are a bold example of what tactics some former mujahidin are willing to use in their ongoing jihad (see box, p. 3). US support of the mujahidin during the Afghan war will not necessarily protect US interests from attack.

The growing perception by Muslims that the US follows a double standard with regard to Islamic issues—particularly in Iraq, Bosnia, Algeria, and the Israeli-occupied territories—heightens the possibility that Americans will become the targets of radical Muslims' wrath. Afghan war veterans, scattered throughout the world, could surprise the US with violence in unexpected locales.

(Gina Bennett, INF/TNA)