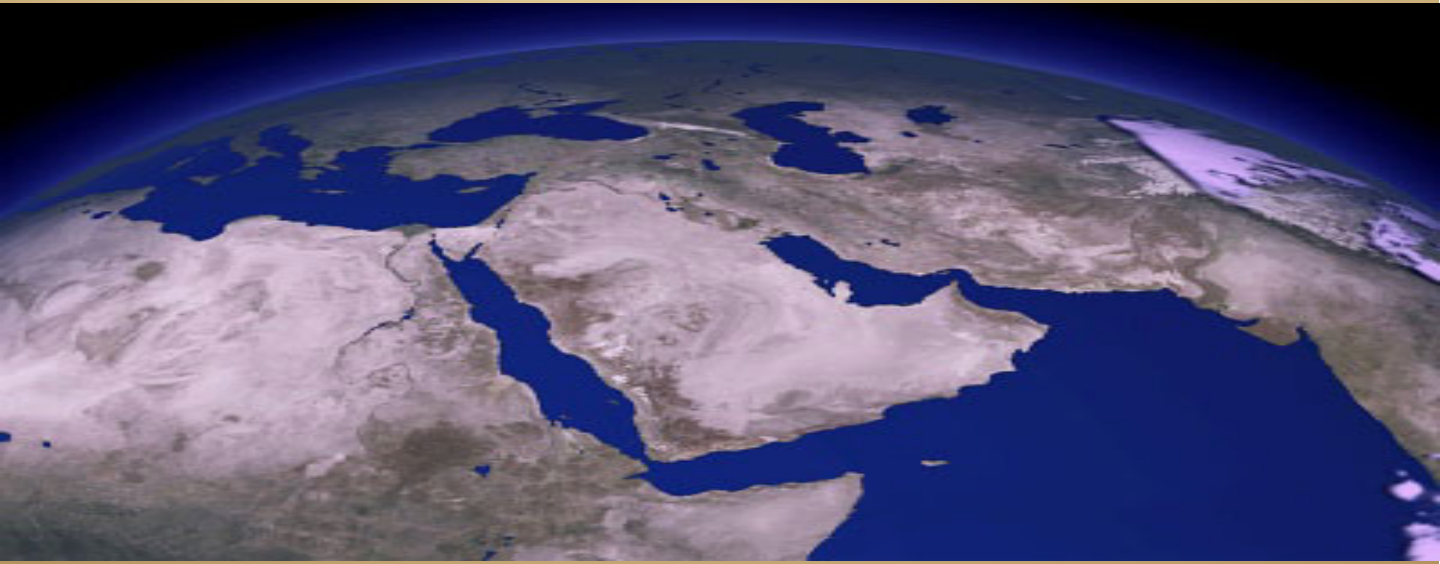




Program on National Security at the FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



al-Shabaab



AQIM



AQAP



**Al-Qaeda
Central**

The Foreign Fighters Problem, Recent Trends and Case Studies: Selected Essays

Edited by Michael P. Noonan
Managing Director, Program on National Security

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- Counterterrorism and homeland security
- Development, diplomacy, and informational issues that contribute to the holistic implementation of strategy.



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The Foreign Fighter Problem

On the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines have confronted third-party national combatants. Known as “foreign fighters,” these individuals have gained deadly skills and connections that can be exported or exploited to devastating effect in other locations.¹ Over the past two decades, the foreign fighters phenomenon has grown after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—to the ethnically cleansed fields of the Balkans to Chechnya and beyond. But this is not a new problem.²

This report is the second volume of findings from an important series of FPRI conferences on the so-called foreign fighter problem. These conferences have brought together leading experts in the field to examine and discuss this phenomenon from different ideational and disciplinary perspectives. While the [first volume](#) dealt primarily with functional areas of the phenomenon, this edition focuses primarily on the case studies of al Qaeda franchises or allied affiliates in Somalia, the Maghreb, Yemen, and Afghanistan/Pakistan.

Today, the outcomes of the geopolitical revolution unfolding across North Africa and the Middle East are far from clear, the problems associated with al Qaeda and its affiliated movement are likely to breed havoc for the foreseeable future across the region. Furthermore, the veterans spawned by such conflicts undoubtedly will present problems for international security writ large, too. The cases and phenomenon analyzed here may well provide important lessons for both those interested in the regions under examination here, but also for others who examine international challenges far removed from the study of radical extremism of the al Qaeda variety.

¹As will be seen in Barak Mendelsohn’s contribution in this e-book the term foreign fighter may also be applied to, for example, local nationals who have acquired their fighting skills and experience in foreign conflicts.

² David Malet has shown that foreign fighters were, for instance, actively engaged in conflicts in the 19th century. See his “Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts,” Ph.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, 2009.



THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PROBLEM: RECENT TRENDS AND CASE STUDIES

By Tally Helfont, *Rapporteur*

FPRI's [Program on National Security](#) held a conference on the foreign fighter problem, September 27-28, 2010, in Washington, DC at the Reserve Officers Association, which cosponsored the conference. General William Ward, Commander of US Africa Command, delivered a videotaped message to the conferees, and Terence Ford, Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development for US Africa Command, delivered the keynote. Audio and video files of the proceedings are posted on FPRI's website at: <http://www.fpri.org/research/nationalsecurity/foreignfighters1009>. Selected papers from the conference will be published in *Orbis* and other outlets. [Samuel Helfont](#), [Tally Helfont](#), [Michael Horowitz](#), and [Michael P. Noonan](#), served as panel moderators. FPRI's Program on National Security is supported by a contribution from FPRI's Vice Chairman John M. Templeton, Jr.

The views expressed herein are those of the speakers and should not be construed to represent any agency of the U.S. government or other institution. What follows is a summary of the keynote address, major panel presentations and discussions.

VIDEO MESSAGE

In a video message played at the outset of the conference, *General William E. Ward*, Commander of U.S. Africa Command, said he believed “very strongly that the foreign fighter phenomenon is a measurable threat to global peace and security.” He stressed that the degree to which these organizations operate globally is an important aspect of the current phenomenon. Through the “recruiting, indoctrinating, training, equipping, and employing individuals in different locations around the globe,” foreign fighters have been able to exploit “vulnerabilities in under-governed areas and even within relatively well-developed nations.” Gen. Ward cautioned that, “like many places, Africa is vulnerable” and referenced some of the dilemmas that have arisen in trying to stem the foreign fighter problem. In closing he applauded the aims of the conference, which he said “continues some of the important and insightful dialogue from last year’s [foreign fighter] conference,” and expressed his eagerness to hear its results.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Terrance Ford, Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development for U.S. Africa Command, delivered the conference’s keynote address. Ford noted that “globalization has changed how foreign fighter networks operate throughout the world,” enabling these networks to be far more efficient, lethal, and clandestine. Likewise, Ford pointed out that foreign fighters “often see themselves—and are perceived by some others—as freedom fighters.” Motivated by ideology, religion, oppression and social injustice, these fighters take up arms to further what they consider a noble cause and “bring a fervor to the battlefield that is lacking in mercenaries and combatants.” He cautioned, “we should be mindful of these attributes as we craft anti-recruitment strategies” and “prepare operational plans to militarily defeat them.” Finally, Ford emphasized the need for countries to develop “self-sufficient security apparatuses capable of defending individual state borders.” He added that regional cooperation between stronger and weaker nations in defense of common borders would serve “to deny the safe havens on which the foreign fighter networks rely.”

PANEL 1: RECENT TRENDS IN FOREIGN FIGHTER SOURCE COUNTRIES AND TRANSIT NETWORKS

Stephanie Kaplan, a Ph.D. candidate in MIT’s Political Science department and a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, offered three arguments for understanding the causes and consequences of the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon.

First, Kaplan argued that “contemporary terrorism research is too terrorism-centric, and that war is the most profitable lens through which to view the global jihadist movement.” In support of this assertion, she referenced data suggesting, “more violent Islamic extremists participate in the movement through war than through terrorism.” Likewise, she added that information culled from the Harmony Documents¹ focused more “on concepts of guerrilla warfare, weapons and inventory”—traditional methods of armed conflict—than on terrorism.

In Kaplan’s second argument, she posited that the “foreign fighter problem is actually several problems ... that mirror the life cycle of the foreign fighter phenomenon.” She explained that this cycle is comprised of the pre-war phase, the war phase, and the post-war phase and that each phase raises a host of disparate questions that would require unique treatment.

Third, she stressed the need for a conceptual framework to understand the problem across time and space. Kaplan explained that the discussion of this phenomenon has been focused for too long on ad hoc case study analysis, which she described as being “very descriptive and very reactionary,” rather than predictive. According to Kaplan, each war generates capabilities—operational, organizational, logistical—and by looking “at the problem through this framework, not only can we accurately assess what’s going to happen in wars” but come up with better preventative prescriptions.

Marc Sageman, an FPRI Senior Fellow and author of *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad*, focused on the phenomenon in terms of a potential “bleed-out” effect that may occur *after* foreign fighters take part in global jihadi conflicts. Sageman argued that acts of political violence carried out in the West by returned foreign fighters are an important measure of the threat posed by this group. Citing numerous examples, he concluded that the number of instances in which foreign fighters carried out such attacks in the West was limited, therefore refuting the concept of the “wandering mujahideen.”

Likewise, Sageman challenged the concept of foreign fighter groups, such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as being franchises. “It’s a wrong metaphor,” and implies that the central organization is consciously setting up franchises. Rather, Sageman suggested that it is more aptly characterized as a phenomenon. Citing additional examples of terrorism, he illustrated that often the plots that succeed come together in an organic fashion and that the days of systematic, lengthy training and recruitment are gone.

Lorenzo Vidino, currently a visiting fellow at the RAND Corporation, built on Sageman’s point about the asystematic nature of the phenomenon. Based on his interviews in Italy of “former jihadis” regarding their experiences as foreign fighters, Vidino argued that the foreign fighter pipeline was very much “random.” “The whole experience of foreign fighters is often shaped by coincidences in advance largely beyond the control of the ‘wannabe’ foreign fighter,” said Vidino, adding that the locale often had nothing to do with the fighters themselves but rather with the handlers that they had come across.

Vidino also noted that, when looking at Europe, certain countries favor specific conflict arenas to channel their foreign fighters. For example, “In Spain, the pipeline really goes to mostly North Africa. It used to be Iraq. If we’re talking about Sweden, it’s largely Somalia. Germany, as we heard, is really Pakistan ...” and so on. This point served to strengthen Vidino’s assertion that the foreign fighter pipeline can, in many instances, disregard personal preferences for certain conflict zones for the sake of supply and demand.

Vidino concluded with a point about American foreign fighters. For a long time, said Vidino, it has been a common understanding that the foreign fighter phenomenon was a European issue that it “did not really affect Muslims in the United States.” He explained that according to this view, “American Muslims are virtually immune to radicalization because they’re well integrated into society, while European Muslims have not well integrated, and hence more prone to radicalization.” Citing several well-publicized cases spanning back to the 1980s, Vidino maintained that the facts simply do not support this understanding.

Clinton Watts, a Managing Director for Innovative Analytics and Training (IAT), highlighted five points that he believed were critical to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon from a global perspective. First, Watts noted that while the places change, the process stays the same. He posited that “most of the foreign fighter recruits come from maybe two dozen towns around the globe” and because these towns are known for terrorist recruitment, anti-radicalization and anti-recruitment tactics should be focused there.

Second, Watts dealt with the concept of “fighters versus martyrs.” Watts referred to the Sinjar Documents² where recruits

¹The Harmony Documents were captured by the United States Military during the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, which include correspondence by al Qaeda operatives in the 1990s. The declassified documents are currently part of the Defense Department’s Harmony Database, administered by The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp>

² The Sinjar Records refers to a subsection of the Harmony Documents that were captured by coalition forces in October 2007 in a raid near Sinjar, along Iraq’s Syrian border. These records contain a collection of more than 600 foreign fighter personal records collected by al Qaeda in Iraq. The Records are publicly available through The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point: English www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/FF-Bios-Trans.pdf>, Arabic: <www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/Foreign_Fighter_Bios-Orig.pdf>

themselves made the decision whether to be fighters or martyrs. Watts believes that choosing to be a fighter is significant because of the bleed out effect mentioned by Sageman.

Third, Watts argued that while both physical and virtual recruitment exists, the physical manifestation is much more powerful because of the personal trust that can be established. He pointed out that the old Marine adage, “The best recruiter of a Marine is a former Marine,” is also applicable in this phenomenon: “The best recruiter of a foreign fighter is a former foreign fighter.”

Fourth, Watts suggested that the foreign fighter model is more closely likened to “how ant colonies form to find food sources” as opposed to a strictly hierarchical model. According to this logic, would-be foreign fighters seek out their targets using varying methods. Once the target is found by an individual, signals are sent out to the colony—or the cell, in this case—to organize around that target. Understanding these networks as being ant-like can, according to Watts, facilitate the disruption of foreign fighter mobilization.

Finally, Watts suggested that a strategic approach to dealing with foreign fighters would be “to make villains, not martyrs.” In short, trying to create a local environment that looks upon the activities of returned foreign fighters as atrocities, rather than greeting them with a heroes’ welcome.

PANEL 2: SOMALIA CASE STUDY

Ambassador (ret.) David Shinn, an Adjunct Professor of African Affairs at The George Washington University, focused his remarks exclusively on foreign fighters from the al-Shabaab movement, although he acknowledged that there are other foreign elements engaged in fighting in Somalia.

Shinn explained that initially, al Qaeda had a difficult time “recruiting Somalis to the jihadi cause,” despite the chaotic situation in the country during the 1990s. However by 2007, al-Shabaab, which came out of the fractured Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), began trying to establish closer links to al Qaeda. Shinn clarified that while “al-Shabaab is not under the operational control of al Qaeda” nevertheless, it still maintains very close links to the group.

According to Shinn, “al-Shabaab is organized into three layers,” and while the top layer is comprised of Somalis, “you have other layers in the leadership that are very, very critical to the organization,” which include “a significant and growing number of foreigners—either foreigners or Somalis from the diaspora with foreign passports.” He added that of “the 85 member executive council of Al-Shabaab today, 42 are Somalis and 43 are foreigners.” As such, “the hardliners led by the foreign jihadis wield enormous influence and have access to resources and the means to dictate their wishes to the less powerful factions.” Shinn also emphasized that “the foreign veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq play an important part of al-Shabaab Field Commanders because of their military experience,” teaching “techniques of suicide attacks, remote controlled roadside bombings, kidnappings and assassinations” to the rest of the group.

Shinn underscored that “al-Shabaab has developed one of the most effective media recruitment programs ever developed by a militant Islamist organization,” which has “been particularly successful in the Somali diaspora in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Africa and even Australia.” These recruitment efforts, he said, have “motivated a significant number of these people to go to Somalia” and join al-Shabaab. (A write-up of Ambassador Shinn’s was published as an FPRI Enote, accessible at: <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201011.shinn.somalia.html>.)

Ted Dagne, a specialist on East African affairs, noted that “of all the regions in Africa, it is the Horn of Africa that has emerged in the past 15 years as a region highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks and a safe haven, not just for international organizations, but for local terrorist organizations as well.” Dagne stressed that while Somalia has been used as a terrorist safe haven in part due to its lack of central authority, the “emphasis on foreign fighters and foreign influence” frequently has been overstated given that the terror attacks “being carried out against Somalis is basically by Somalis, largely, with the help of some foreigners.”

He argued that “the Ethiopian invasion, with the support of the United States, is seen by many observers as contributing to the emergence of al-Shabaab and the proliferation of other extremist groups in Somalia.” Dagne also remarked that al-Shabaab’s ability to recruit and retain recruits has been reduced over the past year, “in large part because of their own misdoings—because of the attacks they’ve been carrying out, because of their affiliation ... with foreign entities.”

Dagne added, “for the first time in the past several years, we have seen Somalia move beyond the clan politics.” Specifically “the leadership of Al-Shabaab, or the leadership of the ICU, it’s more inclusive than any time,” pointing to the new reality in which “religion is more important for Shabaab” than clanism.

Daved Gartenstein-Ross, the Director of the Center for the Study of Terrorist Radicalization at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, asked, “Why has Shabaab placed so much emphasis on foreign fighters from the West?” Drawing from some

earlier comments made during the conference, Gartenstein-Ross noted that al-Shabaab's active recruitment strategy stands out from foreign fighter recruitment tactics in other arenas. He suggested that active recruitment is likely a part of the group's operational strategy to seek out individuals, who are technologically savvy and familiar with English (as opposed to recruits who are useful militarily). Gartenstein-Ross added that this strategy may also be "designed to expand Shabaab's transnational reach."

He highlighted the importance of the oft "neglected non-western foreign fighters" and specifically the "Somalis born in Kenya and Ethiopia" to al-Shabaab as an organization. From a threat standpoint, he argued that this group is problematic not only because of "what they do when they're inside Somalia" but also for "what they do when they leave"—"whether they might carry out some sort of terrorist attack or some other kind of jihadi-related activity while they're in the United States."

Gartenstein-Ross also posed the question, "why Shabaab is not an al Qaeda affiliate?" According to its public messaging and public addresses, it is clear that al-Shabaab holds al Qaeda in high regard, "and likewise, al Qaeda leaders, who don't always embrace any jihadist group out there, have also issued a number of statements favorable of Shabaab." Gartenstein-Ross therefore suggested that al Qaeda has yet to give al-Shabaab its official imprimatur because "perhaps Somalia is actually being seen as a real possible base of strength," and it "doesn't want to attract greater U.S. attention to that theater of war," in case things go poorly for the group in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ken Menkhaus, a professor of Political Science at Davidson College, situated the "question of foreign fighters in Somalia, foreign fighters for that matter in Africa in broader context"—namely, "an African context of political weakness." He charged that "Africa is the theater for other people to play out their wars," explaining that "what's happening in places like Somalia and elsewhere is very much a function of a political vacuum."

Menkhaus identified an additional factor as to why the Somali diaspora supported al-Shabaab (not only financially or morally, but also physically by going to Somalia to join the group): Somalia "was a perfect fit for the al Qaeda meta-narrative." Specifically, the Ethiopian intervention in 2006 was seen as "a Christian-dominated government of Ethiopia coming in a crushing and oppressing Muslims with the backing of the evil empire, the United States." This, Menkhaus said, made it "relatively easy for some to be convinced that this was the next great front in their struggle."

Menkhaus added that the poor state of the Somali economy and the country's dependence on remittances from abroad have acted to constrain the influence of al-Shabaab to an extent. Menkhaus explained that the diaspora is the lifeline of the Somali people, and "if they start engaging in terrorist attacks in the United States, elsewhere, they run the risk of a law enforcement clamp-down ... jeopardizing the remittance system itself."

PANEL 3: MAGHREB CASE STUDY

J. Peter Pham, the Senior Vice President of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy and an Associate Professor at James Madison University, remarked that prior to the establishment of al Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Maghrebis—that is, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and others—made up a significant percentage of the suicide bombers "in the al Qaeda led insurgency in Iraq." This participation "helped facilitate, if you will, the building of the trust networks" between al Qaeda central and the Maghreb-based combatants, culminating in the announcement in 2007 "by the GSPC [*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC*] that it had become al Qaeda in the land of the Islamic Maghreb."

Because some of those sent to fight in Iraq returned to the Maghreb and joined AQIM, Pham argued that it may be more appropriate to label these combatants "as foreign trained, rather than as foreign fighters." Moreover, these foreign-trained fighters brought back new terrorist techniques that had not been used previously in the Maghreb, effectively broadening the scope of AQIM's capabilities in terms of casualty rate, lethality, and the execution of multiple, coordinated attacks.

Pham observed that "robust action on the part of Algerian government has largely changed the nature of the [AQIM] campaign," in effect, defeating the guerrilla war or counterinsurgency centered in Kabylia in the North. He said that "the nature of the organization is also changed because of the defeats," in which AQIM has less of a "hierarchical structure, and now the former zone commanders have a great deal of autonomy."

Lianne Kennedy Boudali, an International Policy Analyst with the RAND Corporation, suggested that "regional foreign fighter incidence is on the rise in the Maghreb," or to be exact, "increasing numbers of fighters from states in Africa are participating with AQIM activities." Boudali attributed AQIM's need "to expand its activities into the Sahel" to its "inability to sustain itself through recruitment." However, she clarified that AQIM's "increased cooperation with fighters, who are from Mauritania, from Mali, from Niger, has allowed them to expand their support networks," including social support for recruitment, financial support, and the use of criminal networks. She assessed that while AQIM is not "in a position to destabilize any of the states in the region," the fact "that they are able to draw [in] these additional populations" poses some threat to regional security.

Boudali cautioned that “the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan serve to socialize a young generation of potential recruits, both in North Africa and in the Sahel states, making them perhaps more susceptible to AQIM's recruitment messages.” However, she made the distinction that recruits from the Sahel countries are often in “units where you see more criminal activity taking place; ... they're more in the mold of the guerrilla fighter than what we think of as a ‘foreign fighter’ seeking martyrdom.” Therefore, “their utility to AQIM may derive more from their social, tribal, or in fact their criminal connections” than from their ideological or martyrdom aspirations. She noted that “the criminal activity ... gives the United States an interesting angle to increase its collaboration in the area,” perhaps diffusing some of the skepticism of American involvement on the continent.

Boudali suggested that “AQIM’s activities in the Sahel have caused economic harm to some of the disadvantaged populations in the Sahel”—the Tuareg, the Berbers, and others. Those groups “being harmed by the loss of the tourism, income and so forth from AQIM’s activities” have less of an incentive to cooperate with AQIM, said Boudali.

Audra K. Grant, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, explained that the organizational make-up of AQIM, which is comprised of mostly “Algerians, and has substantially fewer Moroccans, Libyans and Tunisians ... is partly due to effective counterterrorism efforts in those countries, but also to weaknesses in the jihadi movements in these countries.”

Grant listed some of the “conditions that have made this sort of [jihadi] activity permissive, particularly in the Sahel region, where al Qaeda has had more success in extending its outreach.” Specifically, she noted that the existence of “huge swaths of remote, difficult to govern territory” along with extremely porous borders makes the Sahel region extremely vulnerable to AQIM’s network operations.

When looking at the North African fighters who returned from Afghanistan, Grant pointed to an alarming number coming “specifically from two cities—Darnah and Benghazi [Libya].” These cities “are revered among local residents for their historic resistance and rebellion, being former sites of Islamic rebellion.” Grant added that, in her view, “urban settings are important for playing a role in terms of foreign fighter recruitment” due to factors like a lack of “economic opportunity, high levels of unemployment, anti-Western sentiment, frustration with governments, lack of political opportunity,” among others. Grant also said that the Internet “has a function in radicalizing individuals who do end up becoming foreign fighters,” which she believes “was the case for those who went to Iraq, at least for some Maghrebi countries.”

John Entelis, a Professor of Political Science and Director of the Middle East Studies Program at Fordham University, raised the notion that “AQIM, in its new manifestation, is a manifestation of decline, not a manifestation of strength or empowerment.” According to Entelis, there are five factors associated with the AQIM decline theory. The first factor is the national reconciliation effort in Algeria promoted by Abdelaziz Bouteflika that resulted “in more and more jihadis turning themselves in” and the defection of GSPC founder, Hassan Hattab, himself.

A second factor is “the success of [the] splits within AQIM.” “The reconciliation processes formed division among AQIM fighters” who were unsure “whether or not members should accept the government’s amnesty offer.” Entelis explained that on the one hand, “Hattab has been particularly vocal in calling for AQIM members to lay down their arms.” On the other hand, “it inspired AQIM leader [Abdelmalek] Droukdel to provide religious justification for suicide attacks”— a relatively new phenomenon in the Algerian context.

A third factor is AQIM’s “stance towards the parent organization” regarding “division between locally focused objectives and more global ones,” in which “certain GSPC members resent having been reduced to mere agents of al Qaeda.”

A fourth factor relates to intellectual figures—such as Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif (aka Dr. Fadl), a known source of al Qaeda’s philosophy—who challenged the legitimacy of AQIM and declared GSPC’s jihad to be illegitimate.

The fifth factor affecting the weakness in AQIM is “the changing international stance and shrinking sources of aid.” Entelis elaborated, stating “since September 11th, a global response to terrorism has seriously interrupted operations, including the sources of funding.” This “can help explain this wave of kidnapping and ransom that is to make up for this loss,” he said.

Challenges to the decline theory, according to Entelis, are based on five alternative factors, including 1) the absence of political freedoms, 2) the crisis itself in civil society throughout North Africa, 3) regional instability and a climate of conflict, 4) weak regional cooperation, and 5) a hopeless socioeconomic environment.

PANEL 4: YEMEN CASE STUDY

Christopher Boucek, an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Middle East Program, stressed that when “talking about Yemen, especially in the last year or so, the issue has been all about terrorism and security, and terrorism and security is not Yemen's biggest problem.” Rather, according to Boucek, “Yemen is facing a number of challenges, and terrorism and security are just one of these challenges.” If Yemen is in danger of becoming a collapsed state, it is first and

foremost because of “issues like the economy, governance, corruption, subsidies—a whole range of larger systemic issues, including resource depletion, but primarily focused on the economy.” However, there is a correlation between these factors, as the latter are “the conditions that lead to instability and the foreign fighter issue.”

He suggested that there are three separate groups currently active in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen: 1) Yemenis, who are focused on Yemen’s domestic issues, 2) Saudis, who are uninterested in what goes on inside Yemen but rather are focused on “going back to Saudi Arabia and fixing what they got wrong the last time around,” and 3) the third-country nationals, including Pakistanis, Egyptians, and others. In light of this breakdown, “what can be done about the foreigners who are active in al Qaeda?” In Boucek’s estimation, “you might be able to get someone to turn out the foreigners—the Saudis and the Pakistanis—but not the Yemenis.” Boucek posited that this “raises some interesting questions for counterterrorism policy and how we deal with Yemen looking forward.”

Boucek warned that released Yemeni Guantanamo detainees, both those who have already returned to Yemen and the 90 or so that will eventually be released and return, pose a significant threat to the country’s stability. He explained that “Yemen doesn’t have an adequate system in place now for dealing with this and they won’t have an adequate system in place for dealing with other returnees.” Furthermore, Boucek said that Guantanamo detainees often keep in touch with one another after their release, coordinating their activities to travel to Yemen and engage in jihad, “not only amongst themselves but with other third country returnees.”

Brian O’Neill, a freelance writer and blogger focusing on Yemen and U.S. foreign policy towards the country, challenged the assertion commonly found in the media that explains Yemen’s “jihadi problem” as resulting from al Qaeda being beaten in the AfPak region and therefore seeking out new territory. He suggested instead that these fighters are “there because they want to be there, because AQAP is strong and it’s a viable franchise, and the conditions in Yemen seem profitable.” O’Neill added that “AQAP doesn’t exist because of these foreign fighters—it’s an organic, homegrown organization.”

O’Neill noted that AQAP “has done a really excellent job of beginning to insinuate themselves into the tribal system through marriage and through recruitment ... creating these safe havens, but safe havens with an element of control to them,” which he thought was “a much more profitable venue for jihad than say, the chaos of Somalia.” Therefore, dealing with this problem, he said, becomes more difficult as lines between AQAP and Yemeni society “begin to blend and blur.”

O’Neill acknowledged that Yemen provided a disproportionate number of people going to wage jihad abroad, and that, as was mentioned by one of the webcast participants, those who returned took up leadership positions and shared their expertise with local combatants in AQAP.

Barak Salmoni, a visiting defense fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, pointed out that although there is a great “need to reform Yemen’s sociopolitical structures,” this does not imply “that there were coherent structures to begin with.” It is important to remember that “there has not been a unitary Yemen ever, governed from Sanaa, where the ruler was able to reign throughout the land,” and that it has “frequently been the site of political and armed contestation based upon ideology.”

Salmoni suggested that, in Yemen, a “hyper-local identity” exists, which includes “an enduring north-south gulf” and “an enduring sense of Yemeni-ness—often opposed to outsiders.” This is important because “the notion of foreign control, the hidden hand, has been a leitmotif both to the opposition to the Yemeni regime, as well as on the part of the Yemeni regime itself.” The Saleh regime has been known for playing different factions off one another and using “irregular, often tribal, auxiliaries” that are seen as foreign to fight “out of region.” Salmoni said that this tactic “reignites notions of who is from here and who is foreign—and can work against even the sub-regional community.” Understanding these notions of foreign and non-foreign is “significant to understanding the challenges Yemen will face.”

Salmoni also emphasized the role of diaspora communities in financing violent elements within Yemen and how this affects efforts to combat violence and terrorism in the country. He explained, “There are legal networks of commercial exchange that go from the northern highlands down through Sanaa or through Aden, and then pass internationally into the Gulf sheikdoms and even into Iran.” These financial exchanges then can make their “way back into Yemen in terms of funds which can be used locally—locally to acquire weapons, locally to buy loyalty of tribes in a temporary way ...” In essence, this cycle which includes the participation of diaspora communities serves as fuel to perpetuate violent activities within Yemen.

PANEL 5: AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN CASE STUDY

Brian Glyn Williams, an Associate Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, provided a review of the history of jihadi foreign fighters in Afghanistan over the last 30 years. He discussed the post-9/11 period and the invasion of Afghanistan by American forces in detail, focusing specifically on the ethnic origin of the foreign fighters and how different groups engaged in different aspect of the conflict. Moreover, Williams explained that while the foreign fighters who came to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan included, among others, Uzbekistanis (not Afghan Uzbeks), Tajiks, and

Arabs, there was also a massive force of Pakistanis—of both Pashtun and Punjabi origins—that joined, “bolstering the Taliban army.”

Williams described the extremely high casualty rate among foreign fighters, adding that in certain instances, cadres of fighters were deliberately used as cannon fodder. “Fortunately for the foreign fighters,” Williams said “in 2002, the Bush administration sort of turned its back on Afghanistan. There was no interest in doing nation building.” Accordingly, due to the low levels of American troops in Afghanistan at the time and the administration’s shift to Operation Iraqi Freedom, foreign fighters and al Qaeda were able to regroup and to re-infiltrate their previous strongholds in Afghanistan. Williams explained that “al Qaeda began teaching the Taliban how to use IEDs from Iraq, how to use suicide bombings,” despite the fact that “suicide bombings had always been taboo in Afghan culture.” In short, during this period of limited American activity in the country, foreign fighters learned new techniques from other conflict zones and began applying them locally.

Sameer Lalwani, a Research Fellow with the New America Foundation’s American Strategy Program and a Ph.D. candidate in political science at MIT, discussed the concept of foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan through the lens of civil war and insurgency. Lalwani noted that while the foreign fighter phenomenon has been examined from two perspectives—“the inflow of foreign fighters into a civil war insurgency or the outflow of foreign fighters to engage in acts of terrorism”—in the AfPak arena, “we’re interested in the first category but obviously it has implications for the second.”

Lalwani underscored the need to examine “the definition of what it means to be ‘foreign’ or a ‘foreign fighter’” and suggested thinking about the foreignness of the combatant “in terms of nationality and political boundaries, ethnicity, regional identity,” and “...whether or not these fighters are governmental or non-governmental forces.” He provided an example in Afghanistan where, “The Afghan national police in some particular areas of Afghanistan are seen as tremendously foreign and hostile, corrupt, invading the role of locals and in other places they are deeply integrated with local communities and command structures of local forces.” This factor is important because in the latter scenario, these forces often have a difficult time “combating insurgents within their territory because they’re seen to be of the same ethnic stock or tribal background.”

Additionally, Lalwani raised the point about the role of states in the foreign fighter phenomenon. He argued that “neighboring states play a major role in backing transnational rebels; whether it’s through sanctuaries, as Pakistan has done with Afghanistan, or even through tacit sanctuaries or tacit displacements of foreign forces ...” Therefore, state “policies are chief determinants of the role of foreign fighters” and thus a point of leverage.

Bruce Riedel, a Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy, commented that the number of foreign fighters that exist in any given arena is “very, very murky,” raising “a definitional question... what is an al Qaeda fighter? Is he signed up for the al Qaeda pension plan? Does he have the al Qaeda secret handshake?” Riedel suggested that figures relating to organizational numbers connote “that we know exactly how big the al Qaeda problem is” and in his view, we simply do not. He added, however, “al Qaeda and the foreign fighters, whatever their numbers are, have acted as a force multiplier in Afghanistan,” and “have provided the cutting edge of training” and propaganda development in theater.

He discussed the role of American foreign fighters in the AfPak arena, pointing to “an increasing tendency of American citizens—usually of Afghan or Pakistani origin—to go to Afghanistan and Pakistan where they are now being trained by al Qaeda.” Riedel emphasized that “in terms of counterterrorism, this is probably the single most important problem we’re facing today.”

Riedel suggested, in conclusion, that “... the only serious way to control this foreign fighter problem is with the assistance of the government of Pakistan. And at the end of the day, that comes down to the assistance of the Pakistani Intelligence Service—the ISI.”

Stephen Tankel, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s South Asia Program, focused his remarks around two concepts: “why foreign fighters were drawn to conflicts,” and “the idea of foreign fighters as force multipliers.”

Tankel suggested looking at these questions “through the prism of Punjabi militant groups.” According to Tankel, “Punjabis occupy a very specific place in the jihadi milieu,” because they are not far at all from Pakistan and yet are “considered to be foreign fighters in Afghanistan and also potentially in the tribal areas as well.” He added that while they “were foreign fighters in terms of ethnicity,” it was their “identity that drew them together,” since “the Taliban was Deobandi as were many of these Pakistani Punjabi militant organizations.” In effect, he suggested that over time, “while those foreign fighters still count as ‘foreign’ in Afghanistan,” the relationships have moved away from being simply “a marriage of convenience” to more of “a strategic alliance.”

Regarding foreign fighters as force multipliers, Tankel suggested that “the destabilization in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] has been very troublesome for Pakistan” and “these Punjabis, who are to a degree foreigners in

the FATA ... have been able to contribute to the insurgency” in three ways: 1) their networks reach “into the heartland, which can be used to launch terrorist strikes into Islamabad and Rawalpindi and Lahore,” 2) they engage, promote, and foster the idea of sectarianism within tribal Pashtuns, and 3) they bring expertise from their training under the Pakistani Army and the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). In short, “a very small number of people can have a very disproportionate impact.”

CONCLUSION

Michael Noonan, the Managing Director of FPRI’s Program on National Security and organizer of both Foreign Fighter Conferences, summarized the major themes covered in the panels. Noonan noted that a common thread throughout the conference, particularly in the cases of Yemen and Somalia, was the extent to which local politics colored the regional manifestation of the foreign fighter problem and how indirect strategies probably served as the best way to deal with them. He concluded by remarking that however “elastic or inelastic you want to use the term ‘foreign fighters,’ I think we can all agree that it is a serious strategic international issue in terms of terrorism, but also a very important issue tactically on the ground.”

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Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends

by Barak Mendelsohn

Barak Mendelsohn is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Haverford College and FPRI Senior Scholar. He is the author of *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism*.

Abstract: Beginning with a historical perspective on foreign fighters, this article then seeks to clarify ambiguities and biases that shape how we often analyze the foreign fighter phenomenon. The central focus is then on the evolving trends and activities of the movement. A new generation of fighters has emerged who are comfortable as terrorists, recruiters, trainers and media propagandist, among other specialties. The author concludes by assessing the significance of the problem today.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters, in which volunteers leave their homes and intervene in a clash taking place in a foreign location, is hardly new. Mercenary camps, often comprising warriors from different backgrounds, holding no particular allegiance to the authorities in their place of origin, have had a ubiquitous presence on the battlefield throughout human history.¹ Even after the state-based order was established, it was many years before armies were based on members of the national or ethnic community, thus reducing the need for using mercenaries (local or imported). Furthermore, not until the nineteenth century did the dominant European powers make a strong push to establish a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence by blocking the activities of violent nonstate transnational actors (for example, pirates).² Even today, such a monopoly is often only a theoretical construct, as states' actual hold in large areas of the globe is incomplete.³

While identified today with Muslims joining coreligionists in jihad all around the world, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not restricted to individuals sharing this particular religious identity. Foreign fighters have been

¹ P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 19–39.

² Janice Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³ Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

involved in conflicts based on diverse religious identifications, ethnic identities, and ideologies. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War saw foreign fighters on both sides, with communists fighting against “fascism” and Catholics volunteering to fight “communism.”⁴ In the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, American Jews came to the Middle East to join the Israeli army, while members of the Muslim Brotherhood fought separately for (?) the Egyptian army.

One must also note that foreign fighters are hardly a prominent aspect of modern day warfare, as nations have preferred largely to rely on professional armies. In devising their security doctrines, states evaluate the threats and prepare appropriate capabilities. They seek maximum predictability to allow for planning in an already too uncertain environment; the primacy of security does not allow states to rely on chance. But to use foreign fighters as a meaningful ingredient of state power implies gambling on a country’s fate with a weak hand. Prior to the breakout of conflict, a state cannot be sure whether it will have sufficient numbers of foreign volunteers, with adequate and appropriate training to meet their current needs. Moreover, to use foreign fighters, a state must establish an infrastructure to identify, transfer and absorb the volunteers in its armed forces. Given the erratic and unpredictable nature of such a foreign element, it is only reasonable that states prefer to rely on known resources. The few that do not could ultimately find their choice to be costlier than expected.

More often, foreign fighters are found in asymmetric conflicts in which at least one side of the conflict is a non-state actor, usually a guerrilla force or another irregular outside group. When fighting is based on surprise attacks and small arms rather than large maneuvers and sophisticated weapons, the value of volunteers, even with little training and fighting experience, is exponentially greater. Even then, the foreign element tends to be more marginal, at least in numbers, than the local component. Indeed, the Afghan resistance to the Soviets during the 1980s, which gave rise to the foreign fighters’ phenomenon of our time, was exactly that: an Afghan resistance.⁵ The contribution of the foreign fighters was not particularly significant, their number miniscule in comparison to the local Afghans.⁶ Most of them served in supportive roles in humanitarian agencies, media offices, political organizations and hospitals.⁷ Only in the mid-1980s was there a noticeable increase in their participation, which reached its peak after the Soviets had withdrawn. Even then, it did not amount to more than a few thousand at any given time.⁸

⁴ David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions,” *Orbis*, Spring 2010, pp. 97–114.

⁵ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

⁶ Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 49.

⁷ Burke, *Al Qaeda*, p. 68.

⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 201.

Thus, one may plausibly argue that the current surge of interest in the foreign fighters' phenomenon is exaggerated or at least somewhat surprising. From the perspective of their military contribution, such a claim is not unreasonable; but it misses the many ways in which foreign fighters can be important. The foreign fighters' phenomenon is about more than their contribution on their first battlefield; it encompasses a life cycle that starts when an individual begins to consider joining a fight in a country that is not his, continues through his involvement in conflict, and ends with his actions once he leaves that arena.⁹ One may be nothing more than a spectator in one fight, yet assume an important role in a later conflict; or go home and contribute to recruitment or propaganda that may shape other conflicts. Indeed, the current worries about foreign fighters seem to center around the threat of a "bleed out" as jihadi veterans, equipped with new knowledge of fighting, training, recruitment, media and technical skills in building bombs, take their skills elsewhere—potentially facilitating the initiation or escalation of terrorism in their home country or in other arenas, and enhancing the power of insurgencies and terrorist groups.

Arab jihadis had a minor impact on the war against the Soviets but Afghanistan's bleed out has exerted a remarkable impact on conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as on terrorism in the United States and Western Europe—most notably through the rise of a global jihadi movement. Under the leadership of Abdullah Azzam, a movement dedicated to defending Muslims wherever they are and without consideration of nationality became a reality. In later years, segments of this movement shifted their orientation from simply defending Arab lands "under occupation" to a more ambitious program calling for the establishment of a Caliphate governed by shari'ah law throughout the Muslim world and beyond. From an insignificant force during the 1980s emerged a challenge to the victor of the Cold War, motivated by a view of the United States as the spear of another Crusading campaign against Islam, vindication that its cause is just, and confidence that God is on its side, guaranteeing its inevitable triumph. Returnees from Afghanistan played important roles in the Algerian civil war, the uprising of jihadi groups in Egypt against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the Chechen rebellion against Russia, and the Bosnian civil war. Arab-Afghans also established al Qaeda and stood behind the 9/11 attacks, as well as other bombings in numerous locations around the world, ultimately leading to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and military interventions in disparate locales from the Philippines to Somalia.¹⁰

⁹ Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the "Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks" panel discussion from the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

¹⁰ Barak Mendelsohn, *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 37–62.

Thus, to assess the importance of foreign fighters, we must remember that their role is usually ambiguous and indirect. A fighter's importance is therefore rarely linear, extending beyond his contribution on any given battlefield. Moreover, significant as they may be, foreign volunteers' operational roles are often surpassed by the disproportionate importance of their political effects.

Equally importantly, the role of foreign fighters keeps evolving. Trends in the foreign fighters' phenomenon are inseparable from variables such as the technological environment, societal norms, political atmosphere, counter-insurgency and counterterrorism doctrines. An examination of the way in which the struggle between the global jihadi movement and the U.S.-led international community has evolved in recent years suggests that an important transformation in the role of foreign fighters has taken place.

Definitional Complexities

To assess recent trends in the foreign fighters' phenomenon, we must first clarify that the concept is still clouded by ambiguities and biases that affect any analysis. Notions about foreign fighters are shaped by our state-centric perspective. When we speak about "foreign," we refer to nationality: A volunteer is foreign if he holds the citizenship of a country external to the conflict. But this ontology often fails to correspond to the foreign fighter's sense of identity. A Pashtun volunteer from Pakistan is likely to feel greater identification with fellow Pashtuns across the border in Afghanistan than he would with a fellow Pakistani citizen from Punjab. Yet in our accounts, the Punjabi fighting with government forces in the tribal areas is considered local, while a Pakistani Taliban fighting alongside his co-ethnics in Afghanistan is a foreign fighter.

Moreover, we tend to treat "foreign" and "non-foreign" fighters as a dichotomy, ignoring the different levels of "foreignness." In some places, simply traveling to the next village makes one a foreigner. Different identity markers—province of origin, ethnic group, tribe, sub-clan or any other—can determine one's level of "foreignness." This is especially important to our understanding of why certain arenas are more likely to attract external volunteers and why some "foreigners" are more likely to join a fight away from their states, as well as locals' varying levels of receptiveness to external assistance. Scholars remind us that rather than one coherent group of foreign fighters, we often find diverse groups. In Somalia, we find members of the Somali diaspora from the "near abroad" (mostly from Kenya and Ethiopia), Somalis from the "far abroad" diaspora (for example, Sweden), and non-Somali Muslims. Each group shares some identity markers with the forces fighting in the country, but also differences that may sometimes be important determinants of how each group of foreign fighters is received by the locals

and what its impact on the arena will be. Pakistani Taliban are relatively easy to integrate into the forces of Afghan Taliban, while Arab volunteers sometimes have strong disagreements with the locals. Sometimes the level of “foreignness” can be greater than the commonalities, potentially rendering foreign volunteers a divisive factor rather than a force multiplier.

We should also acknowledge that our studies identify foreign fighters only as forces that do not belong to a national armed force. But for locals, the American forces in Iraq are more foreign than are the jihadi volunteers from Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Therefore where we see a threat of foreign fighters, the groups these fighters join may feel that they face a foreign fighters’ problem of their own, in the form of occupying foreign national militaries. This sense of threat could lead to the activation of kin forces located across the international border.

Usually the discussion of the significance of the foreign fighter problem also suffers from a tendency to bracket all foreign volunteers together. First, a distinction must be made between two manifestations of “foreign fighter”: a foreigner fighting in a local conflict that is not his own country’s war; and a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country.¹¹ John Walker Lindh, the American Taliban, fits in the first and more traditional category, while the plotter of the failed 2010- date attack in Times Square Faisal Shahzad, belongs in the second.

Although there is some overlap between the two categories—particularly when a veteran of jihad then uses the skill set he received to carry out a terrorist attack outside that arena—one may question the analytical usefulness of treating the two phenomena together. According to Marc Sageman, traditional “foreign fighters” do not end up engaged in terrorism in the West, whereas the foreign trained fighters do.¹² On the other hand, we may be witnessing a shift in the way in which foreign fighters participate in violent conflicts; we should benefit from examining the possibility that the traditional model for foreign fighters is losing ground to the new model. The fact that the expansion of jihad arenas in recent years now enables a youth to fight for his ideals without leaving his homeland, seems to strengthen this possibility. If such a transition is indeed taking place, it also implies a shift in the mode of analysis: whereas the traditional category focuses on the impact that fighters, usually engaged in guerrilla warfare, may have on a particular conflict, the second category views the destination of the prospective fighter primarily as a sanctuary, and his activities there as instrumental for receiving tools to violently promote political objectives elsewhere. One implication of this is that in cases of foreign trained fighters, there is a shift in the role of the foreign

¹¹ Comments made by Marc Sageman, during the date “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹² *Ibid.*

destination away from being the objective of the volunteer. In this model, the sanctuary no longer serves as the main source of indoctrination, the formation of comradeship, and a constituting experience.

A related issue, noted by Stephanie Kaplan, is that the foreign fighter “problem” is actually several problems that should be disaggregated for better understanding and for designing effective policies. Kaplan proposes that we divide the fighter’s “life cycle” into the pre-war mobilization phase, the war stage, and the post-war period.¹³ Studying the first phase could answer puzzles regarding the volunteers’ motivations. Foreign fighters largely appear to be ideologically generated, while their distribution across jihad arenas is random. Although ethnic ties have some predictive power with regard to where a volunteer ends up fighting, in many cases the destination reflects the accessibility of a particular place at a particular time, and the instructions of the volunteers’ contact people.¹⁴ This first phase may also include the facilitating factors that can turn a sympathizer into an actual foreign fighter.

Questions related to the second phase can include (but are not restricted to) how volunteers are absorbed in the conflict zone, their training, operational roles, and affiliation within the fighting apparatus. Another question concerns their impact on the war. The Sinjar records provide a unique view into some of these questions, particularly regarding how foreign fighters made their journey to Iraq, their roles once inside the country, and their significance as sources of funding for al Qaeda in Iraq.¹⁵

Finally, the third phase concerns what happens to these volunteers after they leave, particularly how the earlier phases shape the volunteers’ future trajectory.¹⁶ While some foreign fighters return home and reintegrate into society, many do not. Their experience is often a constitutive event that shapes who they are and what they do. Many find it hard to return to their daily lives. They seek the company of people like them, and in many places their reputation in their community is tied to their identity as fighters. In some cases, even when a former fighter tries to leave his past behind, his state continues to identify him as a threat, thus pushing him back to the underground life and into the arms of comrades who face the same problem. Some of these individuals go on to form the infrastructure for the next generation of foreign fighters.

Only a comprehensive account based on breaking down the foreign fighters’ experience will allow us to understand the phenomenon’s real

¹³Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹⁴Comments made by Lorenzo Vidino, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹⁵Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point: Countering Terrorism Center, 2008).

¹⁶Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

significance and to design measures to address the full scope of the problem and at multiple points.

Recent Trends

As in the past, we find that foreign fighters engage in numerous activities ranging from guerrilla fighting, planning and carrying out terrorist attacks, media and propaganda campaigns, training, and recruitment. However, given the evolving nature of the foreign fighters' phenomenon and the dynamics of the war on terrorism, recent trends inevitably show some evolution alongside considerable stability.

Fighting Forces, Field Commanders

Evidence suggests that foreign fighters often make excellent insurgents. But not all do. Many foreign fighters do not survive their first battlefield, suffer death, or are captured. Others may decide to participate in a foreign fight for only a limited time or in just one arena, and then retire. Thus, in a self-selecting process, only a relatively small group of experienced operatives ends up assuming leading positions in one of the active jihadi fronts. Their rise is a function not only of personal charisma or reputation (a particularly important factor for individuals fighting away from their homes and alongside local insurgents), but mostly of knowledge accumulated through experience, often via activity in a number of locations or prolonged service in one arena. Note that while this is uncommon, some foreign fighters with special talents, previous experience, or sufficient time in the field do reach command positions in their first stint. For example, Omar Hammami, also known as Abu Mansour al-Amriki, a young American man from Alabama who traveled to Somalia, now occupies an important position in al-Shabab.¹⁷

However, the value of foreign fighters for insurgencies, especially that of first-timers, appears to be in decline. Moreover, on average, the farther away a volunteer's country of origin, the less likely he is to be seen as an asset as a fighter. Most jihad arenas have access to plenty of potential recruits. In places awash with weapons (such as Somalia and Yemen), locals tend to be in a better state of readiness to fight than are most foreign fighters, some of whom need the most rudimentary training.¹⁸ Volunteers from Western countries are not only insignificant for the fighting effort; they may even become a liability. Instead of a force multiplier on the front, many need the equivalent of babysitting. A large segment has practically no military skills and no familiarity

¹⁷ Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times Magazine*, January 27, 2010.

¹⁸ Comments made by Ken Menkhaus, during the "Somalia case study" panel discussion from the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

with the terrain. In many cases, they have poor language skills, are unused to the harsh conditions, and tend to become ill.¹⁹

More useful are foreign fighters originating from the “near abroad,” the immediate neighboring states. Usually they share ethnic links (for example, Pakistani Pashtuns in Afghanistan, Kenyans from Somali origins in Somalia), have some fighting experience and familiarity with weaponry, and normally do not represent a risk to the social fabric as they share a high level of cultural understanding with their brethren across the border. Nevertheless, there is still no compelling evidence to suggest that even these fighters’ contributions on the battlefield are critical for battle outcomes. The reports on the impact of the Pakistani *madrassa* students who fought in Afghanistan leave open the question of their aptitude and whether they were needed because Afghan fighters were unavailable.

In recent years, it has also become evident that foreign fighters may actually hinder the jihadi effort. Already in the 1990s, the Arab contingency in Bosnia committed excesses that turned a highly effective military force into a political liability.²⁰ The adverse consequences of such excesses became even more apparent a decade later, as the actions of foreign jihadis in Iraq created a backlash from the Sunni populations (especially from the Sunni tribes) and gave impetus to the establishment of the Awakening Councils.²¹

An awareness also seems to be growing among al Qaeda’s senior leadership concerning the self-inflicted damage caused by over-zealous fighters with insufficient understanding of the local conditions. While al Qaeda often criticizes tribalism and encourages the dismantling of the existing social structure to make space for a true a-nationalistic, ethnicity-surmounting Islamic order, its experience has exposed the power of such entrenched identities.²² The Iraqization of the al Qaeda branch in Iraq, and the much more careful operation of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, underscore the importance that al Qaeda now assigns to understanding local conditions, taking advantage of local grievances, and utilizing local forces.²³

¹⁹ Christoph Scheuermann and Andreas Ulrich, “Disillusionment in Afghanistan the Fate of 11 Aspiring Jihadists from Germany,” *Der Spiegel*, October 18, 2010; Comments made by David Gartenstein-Ross, during the “Somalia case study” panel.

²⁰ Jeni Mitchell, “The Contradictory Effects of Ideology on Jihadist War-Fighting: The Bosnia Precedent,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008), pp. 808–828.

²¹ Andrew Philips, “How Al Qaeda Lost Iraq,” *Australian Journal of International Relations*, March 2009, pp. 64–84.

²² For example, see *Al-Qa’ida’s (mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

²³ Comments made by Brian O’Neill, during the “Yemen case study” panel discussion from the FPRI’s “The Foreign Fighter Problem” conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 28, 2010.

Terrorists and Planners of Terrorist Attacks

Foreign fighters may be more useful when it comes to terrorism. An important distinction needs to be made between “foot soldiers” and experienced foreign fighters. Foot soldiers often play a valuable role as cannon fodder, for example by becoming suicide bombers. In such a role, they do not need many skills but only the willingness to kill themselves in the midst of their target. Whereas prior to 9/11 the common foreign fighter received extensive training in combat and terrorism roles, in recent years an increasing number of foreign volunteers are deployed as human bombs. The experience in Iraq indicates that these are often one-time, one-event fighters. This development is not simply a reflection of the growing popularity of suicide bombings and the view of jihadi leaders that this is their most effective weapon,²⁴ but can also be attributed to the diminishing numbers of experienced mujahideen and the difficulties of properly training new volunteers to carry out other roles.

A subset of the foot soldiers group—holders of Western passports—can be particularly useful volunteers, but usually not as foreign fighters in the traditional meaning. They are regarded as more beneficial when used outside the arena, mostly for terrorist attacks in their home countries. These fighters are especially valued for their ability to travel and enter Western countries with relative ease. Moreover, in contrast to the group of Saudis that participated in 9/11 and had to live for months in the United States—often without knowledge of the language or culture—these volunteers are familiar with the language, the culture, and the area in general.

Experienced foreign fighters, on the other hand, represent a much smaller group that largely engages in planning and coordination. Due to increased security measures worldwide and the relentless American campaign to eliminate them, their numbers are dwindling. Unfortunately, the recent release of al Qaeda leaders from their detention in Iran infused the organization with highly skilled commanders—most importantly the Egyptian Saif al-Adl, who assumed his old position as al Qaeda’s military chief.²⁵ Moreover, in places like Pakistan there are numerous candidates to replace fallen al Qaeda field operatives. Thus, even as al Qaeda’s Egyptian bench gradually empties out, it can poach Pakistani groups for talent.²⁶

²⁴ See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Knights under the Banner of the Prophet,” Serialized in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 2001.

²⁵ Yassin Musharbash, “Saif al-Adel Back in Waziristan: A Top Terrorist Returns to Al-Qaida Fold,” *Der Spiegel*, October 25, 2010.

²⁶ The prominent example for this is Ilyas al-Kashmiri. See Sami Yousafzai, Ron Moreau, Christopher Dickey, “The New Bin Laden,” *Newsweek*, October 23, 2010. www.newsweek.com/2010/10/23/is-ilyas-kashmiri-the-new-bin-laden.html.

Conveyers of Knowledge

Former foreign fighters are instrumental in training new fighters for guerrilla fighting as well as terrorism (especially bomb-making). Knowledge acquired on the battlefield in Iraq, particularly regarding improvised explosive devices (IEDs), was later used in such remote areas as Afghanistan and Somalia. Of course, such knowledge can travel online; but the numerous failed terrorist plots in the West reveal that the Internet is a poor substitute for real contact and careful on-site guidance. Under the pressure of American forces, al Qaeda and its affiliates can no longer run long training sessions, and as the case of the Times Square bomber indicates, even when they provide some on-site training it tends to be short and of questionable utility.²⁷

Note that the question of the importance of the “foreign” part in such enterprises is still unclear. On its face, any knowledge transmission across borders inherently involves the element of foreign fighters. Understood this way, the transfer of knowledge among various jihadi fronts (normally from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and later to Somalia, Algeria, and Yemen) proves the importance of foreign fighters. Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent the size of the foreign fighters’ contingency is important for such a task. However, it appears that the greater the number of fighters, the greater the odds that some of them will excel and also survive to transmit the knowledge.

Recruiters

During the 1990s, former foreign fighters were crucial elements in the recruitment of the next generation of foreign fighters, serving as contacts for attracting disaffected youth, seeking purpose and excited by the recruiters’ stories of glory and comradery. Such recruiters were able to gain large numbers.²⁸ Although prior to 9/11 a presentation by a contact point to the jihadi movement was less critical than in the more security conscious post-9/11 environment, these recruiters still served an important purpose in feeding the pipeline, acting as facilitators, and helping to make the wishes of a volunteer to join the jihad a reality. But following 9/11, physical recruitment seems to be on the decline as states have started paying considerably greater attention to individuals with experience in jihadi battlefields and taken measures to prevent recruitment.

Jihadi groups have sought to adapt by moving online. However, recruitment online has some major deficiencies: the fear of infiltration by security services has made online recruiters and volunteers hesitant to put their

²⁷ Comments made by Marc Sageman, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

²⁸ Comments made by Clinton Watts, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

trust in people they do not know.²⁹ Moreover, because volunteering to fight in foreign lands ultimately requires some physical contact, online recruitment could go only so far. While some individuals managed to join the jihad through connections created online, many others failed to do so. In some cases (for example, the Virginia five), online recruitment led volunteers to travel to Pakistan only to be rejected by the groups they sought to join, who feared they were plants by the security services.³⁰ The Sinjar records demonstrate that despite the difficulties, al Qaeda in Iraq still preferred to recruit through physical contact rather than online.³¹

Media Production

One aspect of clear growth is in the foreign volunteers' role in creating media products, from running production companies, releasing statements and videos, translating messages in English, and even appearing in videos appealing to Western Muslims or warning Western governments. In some ways, it resembles the early days of the jihad in Afghanistan, when the bulk of the Arab Afghans served in support roles and Abdallah Azzam established the magazine *al-Jihad*.³² While foreign fighters may still participate in insurgent and terrorist operations, the Western volunteers, many of them more technologically savvy and less capable as fighters than their local brothers-in-arms, are now being channeled to roles in which their qualifications could best be utilized. Thus Adam Gadahn, also known as Azzam al-Amriki, is a regular spokesman in al Qaeda's messages to the American audience, and may even be the new head of the organization's media committee. From Yemen, the imam Anwar al-Awlaki regularly releases sermons and messages calling for jihad against the United States, with particular appeals for Muslim Americans to attack targets in their country. The American Samir Khan edits *Inspire*, the English magazine produced by AQAP.³³ The late German Bekkay Harrach (alias Abu Talha al-Almani) and the American Abu Mansour al-Amriki are additional foreign media personalities.

Although the evolution in the roles and significance of foreign fighters is affected by diverse factors, no element has generated more debate than the impact of the Internet on the nature of the jihadi threat and its influence on the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Their experience was not unique. See Paul Cruickshank, "Enlisting Terror: Al-Qaeda's Recruitment Challenges," in *Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership* (Jane's Strategic Advisory Services, November 2009), pp. 12–15.

³¹ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records," in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, pp. 45–46.

³² Ahmad Muaffaq Zaidan, *The "Afghan Arabs": Media at Jihad* (Islamabad: The Pakistani Futuristic Foundation & Institute, 1999), pp. 36–49.

³³ Dina Temple-Raston, "American Editor Brings U.S. Savvy to Jihad," *NPR*, October 12, 2010; Dina Temple-Raston, "Two Americans Become Al-Qaida Media Strategists," *NPR*, October 14, 2010.

foreign fighters' problem. According to some, the Internet has become the instrument of choice (or necessity) for recruitment. Its role in recruitment begins early, as the Internet offers sympathizers a means of gaining information and access to propaganda tapes, potentially motivating them to get physically involved with the jihadi movement. Without the Internet, some potential recruits would probably not be aware of events outside their small universe and of the opportunities to get involved. While some of these enthusiasts will then seek real live connections that will enable them to volunteer and head to one of the battle arenas, others may find that technology allows them to contribute to the jihad without leaving their countries. Training widely available online could provide a jihadi sympathizer with instructions on how to prepare bombs in one's own kitchen, learn surveillance techniques and how to select a target. Moreover, they support the repeated calls on sympathizers to carry out jihad on their own by carrying out terrorist attacks at home.

Yet, the record suggests that despite its enormous potential to change the jihadi scene, the Internet has yet to fully realize its revolutionary potential. Online teaching is still not a reliable substitute for hands-on, prolonged training. Knowledge acquired online has not reached a level that would make travel to a sanctuary unnecessary. Similarly, online recruitment has yet to make real physical connection obsolete. Unfortunately, there is a clear silver lining for jihadis. As the Internet allows them to reach an increasingly larger audience, the potential for expanding jihadi activity has risen tremendously. When jihadi leaders find a way to tap into these potential resources, an already troubling threat will increase by bounds.

Are Foreign Fighters Still a Problem?

The evidence presented above demonstrates the evolving nature of the foreign fighter phenomenon as it is tied to development in the jihadi movement and its struggle with diverse enemies. There are some indications that while the international community still struggles with jihadi groups and homegrown, independently operating jihadi terrorists, foreign fighting has gone out of fashion somewhat.

Al Qaeda and its allies may still be welcoming newcomers to the jihad, but they have reservations about their ability to use them effectively in an arena away from their homes. Many European volunteers who have arrived in Pakistan seeking to join the fight have been frustrated to find that the local groups are suspicious of them, fearing they may have been sent by foreign intelligence services. Some have spent months closed in an apartment, unable to get training, let alone fight for the cause for which they had left their homes.³⁴ Since the collapse of the system through which volunteers were channeled to

³⁴ Paul Cruickshank, "Enlisting Terror," p. 12.

the training camps in Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban's rule, the diverse jihadi groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan arena have lost their ability to pre-screen volunteers. At the same time, the price for mistakes has risen sharply, with drones circling above Pakistan's tribal areas waiting for information to help identify al Qaeda operatives and ultimately kill them.

Fear on the part of al Qaeda and its allies is not groundless. Hammam Khalil Abu Mallal al-Balawi, known as Abu Dujana al-Khurasani, the Jordanian double agent who carried out a suicide bombing inside Base Chapman near Khost, killing seven CIA officers and a Jordanian handler, was sent by Jordanian intelligence to spy on al Qaeda under the cover of an enthusiastic foreign fighter. In his case, the cover was a very accurate representation of reality. But it is likely that in other cases, foreign volunteers are indeed infiltrators.

The older generation had significant battle experience, and its services were welcomed in any arena. Many of the icons of the jihadi movement, like the deceased Saudi Abdul Aziz Mukrin, were known for serving in various fronts. But the new crop of foreign fighters is often poorly trained and of limited worth to the organization. It is no wonder that in Iraq, foreign volunteers usually served as suicide bombers. Their commanders did not always have the capacity to absorb them into their ranks. Messages from both Afghanistan and Iraq suggested that al Qaeda may prefer its supporters to send financial contributions rather than join them on the front.

Moreover, jihadi leaders may discourage volunteers from joining far-away jihad arenas because they see these volunteers, especially those from Western countries, as more valuable for attacks in their home country. Indeed, a recent *Inspire* magazine published a clear call for supporters not to come to Yemen but to follow Fort Hood shooter Nidal al-Malik and take action in the United States. In one of the articles, an author explains that although group members will welcome a new volunteer, they will wonder why he decided against fighting the umma's enemies in his own country.³⁵ In line with this development, foreign volunteers who arrive in Pakistan with the hope of fighting U.S. and NATO forces (and successfully surpass the barriers to entry) receive some training in small camps along the border and are redirected back to the United States and Europe with assignments for attacks there. Faisal Shahzad and Najibullah Zazi are only two recent examples.

The decreasing value of foreign fighters may also be linked to the expansion of al Qaeda's organizational reach. In recent years, al Qaeda has been engaged in deepening its alliances and formal presence through mergers and establishment of new formal branches.³⁶ The consequent expansion of the

³⁵ Mukhtar Hassan, "What to Expect in Jihad," *Inspire*, no. 2 (2010), 24; Yahya Ibrahim, "Tips for Our Brothers in the United States of America," *Inspire*, no. 2 (2010), pp. 55–57.

³⁶ Barak Mendelsohn, "Expansion as Decline: Analysis of al Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," Unpublished manuscript.

battlegrounds, a conscious jihadi effort to open new fronts in order to exhaust U.S. nerves and resources, required more rational resource allocation. Instead of sending volunteers to fight away from home, often there is a struggle to be fought in one's home country. Yemeni youth bent on joining jihad would better avoid the difficult travel to Afghanistan and stay at home, join the APAQ, and fight in a familiar environment.

And yet it would be premature and highly risky to dismiss the importance of foreign fighters altogether. Their significance has never been simply a function of their numbers and clearly cannot be measured only in terms of the capabilities gained by introducing them into an arena. Their impact is often indirect and includes political, social and psychological elements that are not easily measurable. Policymakers will underestimate them at their own peril.



Somalia



http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/somalia_pol02.jpg

Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia

by David Shinn

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***Abstract:** This article focuses on the threat to Somalia by al Shabaab (The Youth), an extremist organization that controls most of southern and central Somalia. It learned its strategy and tactics from al Qaeda and the Taliban and relies heavily on a relatively small number of foreign fighters, most of whom are Somalis with foreign passports from the large Somali diaspora. The non-Somali contingent probably numbers only about 200 to 300, although it brings battlefield experience from Afghanistan and Iraq and provides al Shabaab with expertise in bomb making, remote-controlled explosions, suicide bombing and assassinations. Some of the foreigners occupy key positions in al Shabaab. The connection between al Shabaab and al Qaeda is growing stronger but has not yet reached the level of operational control by al Qaeda. Al Shabaab's draconian tactics, which are imported from outside and are anathema to most Somalis, and its foreign component may be its undoing.*

Al Shabaab now controls nearly all of central and southern Somalia and much of the capital of Mogadishu. It opposes Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which has the backing of the United Nations, African Union and Arab League but which controls very little territory. Thousands of troops from neighboring Ethiopia supported the TFG inside Somalia from late 2006 until they departed at the beginning of 2009. A peacekeeping force established by the African Union began arriving early in 2007 to assist the TFG.¹ That force now numbers about 8,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi, all located in Mogadishu to protect TFG officials and keep open the port and airport. The goal of al Shabaab is to topple the TFG,

¹ See Paul D. Williams, "Into the Mogadishu Maelstrom: The African Union Mission in Somalia," *International Peacekeeping*, August 2009, pp. 514–530.

seize power throughout Somalia, reincorporate Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya and Ethiopia, and create an Islamic caliphate.

Early Foreign Influence on Somali Islamist Movements

Militant Islamic influence has existed in Somalia for decades but did not have a meaningful impact on the political situation during the dictatorial rule of President Siad Barre. With his overthrow in 1991, followed by the total collapse of the central government, a number of different Somali forces quickly took advantage of the political vacuum and expanded their influence. For the first fifteen years or so, Somali warlords held most of the power, although various Islamic groups also became more assertive. Some of the Islamist organizations were benign and had a strictly Somali agenda. Others, including al Shabaab, developed a program based on Islamic power and increasingly became subject to foreign influence.

Small numbers of Somalis studied the Salafi views of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Wahhabi teachings in Saudi Arabia beginning even before Somali independence in 1960. As they returned to Somalia, the followers of these schools of Islamic thought had little initial success in propagating their views among Somalis who overwhelmingly followed Sufi Islamic beliefs. In the 1970s, some of the Wahhabi believers created The Unity of Islamic Youth (Wahdat al Shabaab al Islamiyya) and The Islamic Group (al Jama'a al Islamiyya). These two organizations merged in 1982 and changed their names to The Islamic Union (al Ittihad al Islamiyya or AIAI). All of the adherents were Somali, although they imported Islamic fundamentalist concepts from Salafism and Wahhabism. AIAI conducted terrorist attacks in the Somali-inhabited parts of Ethiopia and against an Ethiopian minister of Somali origin in Addis Ababa. AIAI reached the peak of its activity in the mid-1990s. Ethiopian security forces responded forcefully, and AIAI effectively disappeared early in the twenty-first century.²

The failure of the Somali state offered an opening to both indigenous and foreign Islamist groups. Osama bin Laden moved to Sudan in 1992 accompanied by one of his most trusted and talented al Qaeda lieutenants, Abu Hafis al Masri. Based on declassified al Qaeda documents, it is clear that Abu Hafis, an Egyptian by birth, made multiple trips to Somalia beginning in 1992. He met with Somali Islamists, assessed capabilities and made arrangements to provide training and arms for fighters. Abu Hafis apparently took orders from al Qaeda's headquarters in Khartoum. In January 1993, he

² Matt Bryden, "No Quick Fixes: Coming to Terms with Terrorism, Islam, and Statelessness in Somalia," *Journal of Conflict Studies* (Fall 2003), pp. 28–33; "Somalia's al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI; Islamic Union)," (www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/AIAI.pdf).

created a team of al Qaeda veterans to conduct operations in Somalia. Al Qaeda believed that Somalia offered a safe haven for its operations in the region and encouraged it to target the United States in Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. The first al Qaeda operatives left Peshawar, Pakistan, transited Kenya, and arrived in Somalia in February 1993. The group worked closely with AIAI and established three training camps in Somalia.³

Abu Hafs expected Somalia would become a low-cost recruiting ground where disaffected Somalis in a failed state would readily accept al Qaeda and enthusiastically join the fight to expel the international peace-keeping force, briefly led by the United States, which began arriving in Mogadishu in 1992. Somalia appeared to be, in the eyes of al Qaeda, another Afghanistan. The reality of the situation was quite different. Al Qaeda underestimated the cost of operating in Somalia. Getting in and out of the country was costly while expenses resulting from corruption in neighboring states were high. Al Qaeda experienced regular extortion from Somali clans and unanticipated losses when bandits attacked their convoys. It overestimated the degree to which Somalis would become jihadis, especially if there were no financial incentive, and failed to understand the importance of traditional Sufi Islam. Unlike the tribal areas of Pakistan, it found a lawless land of shifting alliances that lacked Sunni unity. The primacy of clan ultimately frustrated al Qaeda's efforts to recruit and develop a strong, unified coalition. The jihadi foreigners from al Qaeda concluded during this early initiative in Somalia that the costs outweighed the benefits.⁴

Al Qaeda did manage, however, to recruit a number of young Somalis to the jihadi cause and found wider acceptance at a few Somali locations such as Ras Kamboni, a small Indian Ocean port town near Somalia's southern border with Kenya. The longer that the central government was unable to establish authority throughout Somalia and the warlords fought among themselves for power, the greater the opportunity for the Islamic groups to increase their following, in part by imposing stability. In the meantime, three al Qaeda operatives involved in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, took refuge in Somalia with the help of AIAI. Two of them have since been killed. Abu Talha al-Sudani of Sudan died in a 2007 battle with Ethiopian troops while American special forces killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, born in Kenya of Yemeni heritage, on a

³ "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point (<http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Al-Qa%27ida%27s%20MisAdventures%20in%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.pdf>); "Abu Hafs al-Masri," (www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Abu_Hafs.pdf); David H. Shinn, "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," *Journal of Conflict Studies* (Summer 2007), p. 56.

⁴ "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," pp. 14, 19–23 and 42–43; "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," pp. 57–58. Abu Hafs died in an airstrike on an al-Qaeda safe house in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2001.

road south of Mogadishu in 2009. The third, Fazul Abdullah Mohamed of the Comoro Islands, remains at large.

By early 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) had gained ascendancy in Mogadishu and much of southern Somalia. This alarmed the TFG, Ethiopia and the United States, which ill-advisedly financed a group of warlords in Mogadishu known as the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism opposed to the courts. By mid-2006, the UIC, which consisted of both moderates and radicals, soundly defeated the U.S.-sponsored warlords. By the end of the year, the UIC had taken control of most of southern and central Somalia and threatened a jihad against Ethiopia. The intervention of Ethiopian troops forced the UIC from Mogadishu early in 2007. The Islamist leaders and their militia went into hiding, migrated to southern Somalia or took refuge in Eritrea, which has supported and funded extremist Islamic organizations in Somalia. Some of the foreign fighters linked to the UIC fled across the border into Kenya where they were captured by Kenyan forces and sent back to then TFG-controlled Mogadishu. They reportedly included nationals from Yemen, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sweden, Comoro Islands and Morocco.⁵ The foreign fighters were never an important component of the UIC, but they tended to support that wing of the UIC that later became known as al Shabaab.

In the following months, the UIC formally fractured into moderate and extremist wings. The moderates led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed eventually joined the TFG, and Ahmed actually became president of the TFG early in 2009. The extremists divided into two main factions: al Shabaab and the Islamic Party (Hizbul Islam) led by Hassan Dahir Aweys. The intervention of Ethiopian forces in Somalia served as a rallying cry for both of these groups, allowing them to attract new followers to force out the “foreign invaders.” In the case of al Shabaab, it also resulted in renewed interest in the organization by al Qaeda and foreign fighters.

The Origins of al Shabaab and Impact of the Taliban and al Qaeda

The name al Shabaab was not widely used until 2007, although the group formally incorporated in 2003 at an AIAI alumni conference in Las Anod, Somaliland. About a dozen young battle-hardened, Afghan-trained Somali men stormed out of the AIAI conference in opposition to a proposed agenda that stressed creation of a Salafi political organization that seemed too willing to accommodate the status quo. Days later, the radical dissidents organized a parallel conference in Las Anod and launched al Shabaab as a Salafi-jihadist movement. The principal leaders of the breakaway faction were Aden Hashi Ayro, killed in 2008 during an American missile strike on his home in Dusamareb, Somalia, and Ahmed Abdi Aw-Mohamed “Godane,” until recently

⁵ “Kenyan Police ‘Hack Al Qaeda Laptop,’” *UPI*, Jan. 31, 2007.

the head or “emir” of al Shabaab. Ayro trained in Afghanistan with al Qaeda during the late 1990s. Godane fought with al Qaeda in Afghanistan until the end of 2001 and has put in place a chain of command patterned after the one used by al Qaeda.⁶

Al Shabaab subsequently moved steadily closer to al Qaeda and adopted a modus operandi that increasingly resembles that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, especially since Ethiopian forces defeated the UIC early in 2007. The foreign impact on al Shabaab takes two forms—the transfer of strategy, tactics and ideology learned by Somali al Shabaab leaders during their association with the Taliban and al Qaeda and the recruitment of foreign fighters. The former may be more important than the latter to the overall success of al Shabaab in Somalia. Unlike the TFG, al Shabaab has a well-defined vision and is prepared to use just about any tactic, however repressive and vicious, to achieve its goals. The TFG argues that al Shabaab’s extremist ideology, which it describes as “new and dangerous,” has profound negative consequences for the region.⁷

Public statements by both al Shabaab and al Qaeda, usually on their respective websites, have inexorably moved the two organizations closer to each other. In 2008, the U.S. State Department designated al Shabaab a terrorist organization. In June 2008, Godane praised Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, and the larger global jihad movement. He also explicitly declared al Shabaab’s intention to attack the United States and implied that al Shabaab had become part of the al Qaeda movement. Four months later, al Shabaab released a video that pledged loyalty to al Qaeda and urged young Muslims to join its cause. At the end of 2008, al Shabaab sent warm greetings to several violent Islamist groups, most of which are affiliated with al Qaeda. In July 2009, Godane made a speech that referred to senior figures in al Qaeda as the leaders of global jihad and linked the war in Somalia to those in Afghanistan and Iraq. In September 2009, al Shabaab released a video titled “At Your Service, Oh Osama,” which pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Al Shabaab’s overtures to al Qaeda continued into 2010 when it issued a statement that linked jihad in the Horn of Africa to the one led by al Qaeda and bin Laden.⁸

⁶ Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, “The Anatomy of al Shabaab,” June 2010, unpublished paper, pp. 11–16; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” UN Security Council document S/2010/91, March 10, 2010, p. 14 (<http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MUMA-83N2WN>); Jacob A. Zenn, “Al Shabaab’s Unavoidable Clash with Somaliland Democracy,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Aug. 19, 2010, p. 5; Christopher Harnisch, “The Terror Threat from Somalia: The Internationalization of al Shabaab,” American Enterprise Institute Report, Feb. 12, 2010, p. 20; “A Diagnosis of Somalia’s Failing Transitional Government,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2009, p. 10.

⁷ Comments made by then TFG Foreign Minister, Ahmed Jama Jangali, on June 4, 2010, at a conference attended by the author in Lund, Sweden.

⁸ Harnisch, “Terror Threat from Somalia,” nicely summarizes these al Shabaab messages on pp. 24–27. See also Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al Shabaab: Dimensions of Jihad,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Fall 2009), pp. 25–36; Sarah Childress, “Somalia’s Al Shabaab to Ally with Al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 2, 2010.

For its part, al Qaeda reciprocated by regularly voicing support for jihad in Somalia beginning in 2006. In June 2008, one of al Qaeda's most senior commanders, Abu Yahya al-Libi, recognized al Shabaab for the first time and said Somalis should accept nothing less than an independent Islamic state. The three top leaders of al Qaeda made statements in 2009 supporting al Shabaab's campaign in Somalia and even put it on the same level as Afghanistan and Iraq. Osama bin Laden released only five statements in 2009, but devoted one of them to Somalia, calling the conflict a war between Islam and the international Crusade. By recognizing Somalia's significant role in global jihad, al Qaeda gave credibility to al Shabaab.⁹

In spite of their common cause and the mutual statements of support voiced by al Shabaab and al Qaeda, most observers do not believe that al Shabaab is a branch of nor is it under the operational control of al Qaeda. The 2009 State Department annual report on terrorism stated explicitly that al Qaeda and al Shabaab are not formally merged, but acknowledged there are many links between the two organizations. The United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia concluded that extremists within al Shabaab are seeking, with limited success, to align the organization more closely with al Qaeda. To the extent there are policy differences within al Shabaab's leadership, they seem to center on those who seek a closer alignment with foreign jihadi organizations such as al Qaeda and those who want to pursue a narrower Somali agenda. Recent al Shabaab actions suggest the extremists are prevailing. In 2009, al Shabaab formally renamed itself Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahidin (Mujahideen Youth Movement) to underscore its jihadist identity and the global nature of its agenda.¹⁰

From a tactical point of view, al Shabaab has borrowed heavily from the Taliban and al Qaeda playbooks. Suicide bombings, which were unknown in Somalia prior to 2006, and are even alien to Somali culture, have become commonplace under al Shabaab. In fact, this tactic, which has killed many innocent Somalis, is undermining support for the organization. There is an acceptance of death worshipping among its leaders. Al Shabaab's rhetoric increasingly resembles that of al Qaeda. It avoids Somali nationalist slogans and refuses to use the traditional Somali flag, which it replaced with a black flag emblazoned with the Shahaada (declaration of the faith) in white text. It often holds press conferences in Arabic rather than the more common Somali language. Al Shabaab militia members are known as the "masked men" because they obscure their faces with red scarves. The organization forces

⁹ Harnisch, "Terror Threat from Somalia," pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19; U.S. State Department, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2009," (www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/140883.htm); "Report of the Monitoring Group Report on Somalia," 15; Alisha Ryu, "Al-Shabab Militants Divided over Tactics, Foreign Control," VOA, Dec. 22, 2009; "Somalia's Divided Islamists," International Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 74, May 18, 2010, p. 7. See testimony on March 11, 2009, by Ken Menkhaus before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Somali women to marry foreign fighters. As in the case of al Qaeda, it has developed an effective communications and media effort to get its message out and for recruitment purposes. In short, al Shabaab is looking more and more like the Taliban of the 1990s.¹¹

Foreign Leaders and Fighters

Al Shabaab is organized in three layers: the top leadership (qiyadah), the foreign fighters (muhajirin) and local Somali fighters (ansar). The top leaders include Ibrahim Jama “al-Afghani”, who recently replaced Godane, and Fuad Mohamed Khalaf “Shongole.” All three are Somali but Shongole lived in Sweden for a number of years. They preside over a leadership structure that is strongly influenced by those with foreign ties. The key individual is Fazul Abdullah Mohamed from the Comoro Islands, referred to variously as al Shabaab’s “chairman of the board” and commander in chief and who became al Qaeda’s leader in the Horn of Africa in 2009. Others include financier Sheikh Mohamed Abu Faid from Saudi Arabia; Godane’s adviser Abu Suleiman al-Banadiri, a Somali of Yemeni descent; director of training Abu Musa Mombasa from Pakistan; Omar Hammami, aka Abu Mansur al-Amriki, in charge of financing foreign fighters, from the United States of Syrian and American parents; and Mohamoud Mujajir, in charge of recruitment of suicide bombers, from Sudan. The 85 member executive council of al Shabaab includes 42 Somalis and 43 foreigners. The International Crisis Group has concluded that “the hardliners, led by the foreign jihadis, wield enormous influence and have access to resources and the means to dictate their wishes to the less powerful factions.”¹²

Current estimates of al Shabaab’s armed strength range from a low of 3,000 to a high of 7,000, although it can mobilize larger numbers on short notice. Most of these fighters are Somalis who never left Somalia. Counting or even defining foreign fighters is an inexact science, although there is general agreement on the nature and magnitude of the foreign involvement. There are three kinds of “foreign” fighters: Somalis who were born across the borders in neighboring countries, primarily Kenya, and have the nationality of those

¹¹ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Revenge or Reward? The Case of Somalia’s Suicide Bombers,” *Journal of Terrorism Research*, issue 1, 2010, pp. 21–24; Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, pp. 22–23; Jason Straziuso and Mohamed Olad Hassan, “Somali Rebels Looking Increasingly Like Taliban,” *AP*, Aug. 22, 2010; Markus Virgil Hoehne, “Counter-terrorism in Somalia: How External Interference Helped to Produce Militant Islamism,” unpublished paper, Dec. 17, 2009, p. 25 (<http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Somalia/>); Tim Pippard, “Al Shabaab’s Agenda in the Wake of the Kampala Suicide Attacks,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2010, p. 5.

¹² “Somalia’s Divided Islamists,” pp. 7–9; Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, pp. 17–18; Bill Roggio, “Al-Qaeda Names Fazul Mohammed East African Commander,” *Long War Journal*, Nov. 11, 2009; “Somalia: Al-Qaeda Foreign Operatives Dominate Al Shabaab Executive Council,” Sept. 8, 2010 (<http://sunatimes.com/view.php?id=392>).

countries; Somalis who were born in Somalia or whose parents were born in Somalia but have grown up in the diaspora and now carry a foreign passport; and foreigners who have no Somali ethnic connection. It is important to distinguish among these groups as some estimates of foreigners apply only to the last and smallest category. Most of the “foreigners” who have joined al Shabaab are Somalis from neighboring Kenya or from the diaspora. The large Somali community at Eastleigh in Nairobi is a breeding ground for al Shabaab where radical preachers play a key role in recruiting and fundraising. Kenya’s anti-terrorism police chief, Nicholas Kamwende, commented that “Eastleigh provides the best grounds for recruitment.”¹³

When asked in September 2009, at a public session organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, about the number of foreign fighters in al Shabaab, TFG President Ahmed acknowledged that he did not know exactly. He estimated, however, that Somalis with foreign passports and non-Somalis totaled between 800 and 1,100. An al Shabaab defector, commenting in November 2009, said there were about 400 jihadi fighters, most of them from Sub-Saharan Africa, but he seemed to exclude Somalis from the diaspora in this figure. In June 2010, anonymous sources in the U.S. military and intelligence community put the number of foreigners in Somalia affiliated with al Qaeda at up to 200. In September 2010, Terrance Ford, AFRICOM’s Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development, said there are 200 foreign fighters and another 1,000 ethnic Somalis from outside Somalia. There are probably between 200 and 300 non-Somali foreign jihadis fighting alongside al Shabaab. The non-Somalis come primarily from Kenya’s Swahili coast, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

The Afghan-trained Somalis and the foreign veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq play an important role as al Shabaab field commanders because of their military experience. They also brought specialized skills with them to Somalia and often lead the training and indoctrination of al Shabaab recruits. They teach the techniques of suicide attacks, remote-controlled roadside bombings, kidnappings and assassinations of TFG officials, journalists, and humanitarian and civil society workers that constitute a threat to al Shabaab’s

¹³ Quoted in Sudarsan Raghavan, “In Kenya’s Capital, Somali Immigrant Neighborhood Is Incubator for Jihad,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 22, 2010; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” pp. 25–27.

¹⁴ “Ex-Somali Fighters Tell Why They Abandoned Jihad,” *AFP*, Nov. 28, 2009; Barbara Starr, “Up to 200 Foreign Fighters in Somalia, U.S. Officials Say,” *CNN*, June 4, 2010; Francis Njubi Nesbitt, “Al Shabaab’s Wakeup Call,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 26, 2010; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” p. 15. In mid-2009, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Meles put the number of foreign fighters in Somalia between 1,000 and 2,500, well above most other estimates. See Andrew Cawthorne, “Ethiopia’s Meles Eyes ‘Long Rest’ Post Retirement,” *Reuters*, July 8, 2009. Comment by Ford on Sept. 27, 2010, at a conference in Washington sponsored by the Reserve Officers Association.

goal of establishing a strict Islamic state completely under its control. The foreigners are the principal link to al Qaeda and by most accounts are exerting growing influence on the organization.¹⁵

The foreign element of al Shabaab plans the suicide bombings and has even provided several of the suicide bombers. In October 2007, a Somali from the United Kingdom carried out a suicide bombing against an Ethiopian military position in Baidoa in central Somalia. In October 2008, Shirwa Ahmed from Minneapolis became America's first known suicide bomber when he drove a vehicle laden with explosives in an attack that killed as many as thirty people in Puntland in northern Somalia. In September 2009, a Somali-American from Seattle was one of two suicide bombers who drove vehicles bearing UN logos into the African Union force headquarters in Mogadishu, killing 21 peacekeepers. In December of 2009, a Dane of Somali descent blew himself up at a hotel in Mogadishu during a college graduation ceremony, killing 24 people including three government ministers.¹⁶

Foreigners have assisted and died in other attempts to increase the lethality of al Shabaab attacks. Four Ugandans admitted involvement in the three bomb blasts that killed seventy-nine persons, mostly fellow Ugandans, in Kampala in July 2010. Two of the four had previous ties to al Shabaab while the other two were apparently recruited in Kampala. One of the four confessed that he escorted a Kenyan suicide bomber to the location of one of the attacks.¹⁷ In an apparent premature car bomb explosion, the TFG reported that at least ten insurgents died in August 2010 at a house in Mogadishu used by al Shabaab. The TFG said the dead included three Pakistanis, two Indians, one Afghan and an Algerian. In September 2010, a Somali-American, Dahir Gurey Sheikh Ali Guled, died on the streets of Mogadishu following a battle with pro-government forces. An estimated twelve U.S. citizens have been killed fighting alongside al Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁸

Recruitment from the Diaspora and Its Friends

Al Shabaab has developed an effective media recruitment program that has been particularly successful in the large Somali diaspora in Europe, North

¹⁵ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2009"; Sudarsan Raghavan, "Foreign Fighters Gain Influence in Somalia's Islamist Al Shabaab Militia," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2010.

¹⁶ Stig Jarle Hansen, pp. 30–32; "FBI Chief: Suicide Bomber Indoctrinated in Minnesota," *Star Tribune*, Feb. 24, 2009; "Foreign Fighters Gain Influence"; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, June 2009, p. 7.

¹⁷ "We Are Sorry, Say 7/11 Suicide Bombers," *New Vision* (Kampala), Aug. 12, 2010; "Suspect Says Rage at US Led Him to Plot Ugandan Bombs," *Reuters*, Aug. 12, 2010.

¹⁸ Mohamed Olad Hassan, "Indians among Foreign Fighters Killed in Somalia," *AP*, Aug. 21, 2010; Dana Hughes, Kirit Radia and Jason Ryan, "American Jihadi Killed in Somalia Shootout," *ABC News*, Sept. 10, 2010.

America, the Middle East, Africa and Australia. There are at least two million Somalis living in the diaspora. While the number of Somali recruits is tiny compared to the number living in the diaspora, the relative success of the recruitment program has focused unprecedented international attention on al Shabaab, particularly in the United States. The Union of Islamic Courts, of which al Shabaab was once a part, began the recruitment process as early as 2006 when a group of young British Somalis came to fight in Mogadishu. The earliest American recruits had a mixture of backgrounds. Amir Mohamed Meshal, Omar Hammami, as well as Daniel Joseph Maldonado and Ruben Shumpert, both American converts to Islam, arrived in Somalia late in 2006. Meshal and Maldonado fled to Kenya in 2007 where Meshal was freed without charge. Maldonado pleaded guilty in a U.S. court and received a ten-year sentence. Shumpert died in a 2008 air strike in Somalia. Hammami still holds a senior position in al Shabaab. By early 2007, recruitment had begun in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, the location of the largest Somali community in the United States. Small numbers of young Somalis also began leaving for Somalia from Seattle, Boston, Portland, Maine, and Columbus, Ohio.¹⁹

By mid-2009, more than twenty young Somalis, most of them from Minnesota, joined al Shabaab in Somalia. This constituted a miniscule number of the more than 100,000 Somalis who had moved to the United States. The question arises as to why so few have joined al Shabaab. One partial explanation concerns the Somali remittance system, which is the backbone of the Somali economy. The diaspora does not want to risk the destruction of this system, which an al Shabaab victory would do.²⁰ The recruits represent a wide variety of backgrounds. Some have criminal and gang backgrounds; others are good students and were thought to be upstanding citizens. They seem to have been motivated by a complex mix of politics and faith. The arrival of Ethiopian troops in Somalia late in 2006 and a surge of nationalism among young Somalis in the diaspora to expel the Ethiopians motivated many. Al Shabaab recruiters came to Minnesota and paid cash for their air fare to the region. By the time some of them finished training, the Ethiopian troops had departed Somalia and increasingly they questioned who they were fighting. Several of them returned to the United States and al Shabaab reportedly killed a couple of others who tried to leave Somalia. In August 2010, the United States filed charges against fourteen persons, all but two of them from Minnesota. Some of them travelled to Somalia and some did not.²¹

¹⁹ Harnisch, "Terror Threat from Somalia," pp. 29–31; "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia," p. 31; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," p. 7. For an excellent study of Omar Hammami, see Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 31, 2010.

²⁰ Remarks by Ken Menkhaus, professor at Davidson College, during Sept. 27, 2010 conference in Washington, D.C., hosted by Reserve Officers Association.

²¹ Andrea Elliott, "A Call to Jihad from Somalia, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009; "Joining the Fight in Somalia," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009; "Suspects Free with Conditions in Minn. Terror Case," *AP*, July 17, 2010.

As the FBI intensified its efforts to identify Americans recruited by al Shabaab, it encountered additional cases, not all of whom are Somali. In June 2010, for example, U.S. authorities arrested two New Jersey men, Mohamed Mahmood Alessa and Carlos Eduardo Almonte, at Kennedy International Airport as they prepared to depart for Egypt and then join al Shabaab. Almonte is a naturalized U.S. citizen born in the Dominican Republic and Alessa was born in the United States to Palestinian and Jordanian parents. At least 26 men and women have now been charged in the United States for either joining al Shabaab, planning to do so or for helping others to get there. At least five have pleaded guilty. In an effort to staunch the problem in the Minnesota diaspora, Somali elders and community leaders have begun speaking out against al Shabaab and urging young Somalis to resist the organization's recruitment efforts.²²

Diasporas in other countries have also been subject to successful al Shabaab recruitment. The Somali community in the United Kingdom, estimated at 250,000, is the largest in Europe. Somali community leaders there fear that up to 100 young men and women have joined al Shabaab. The recruits from the United Kingdom also include a few of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and West African origin. Al Shabaab videos have portrayed young Somalis with British accents urging others to come and join the fight. The head of MI5, Jonathan Evans, said it is only a matter of time before there are terrorist attacks in the UK inspired by those fighting with al Shabaab. There are about 25,000 Somalis in Sweden. The Swedish state security police estimate that about twenty have joined al Shabaab or one of the other armed opposition groups in Somalia. The Swedish government believes that five have been killed and at least ten remain at large in Somalia. The Australian government charged several young men linked to al Shabaab with a plot to attack a Sydney military base. The security and intelligence service in Denmark, which has a Somali community of about 10,000, warned that several members of this community have been recruited by al Shabaab. A small number of Somalis in Canada, Germany and Norway have also responded to al Shabaab's call to arms. These are only the cases that we know about. There is almost no capacity to track the movement in and out of the Somali diaspora in Africa and the Middle East.²³

²² William K. Rashbaum, "Two Arrested at Kennedy Airport on Terror Charges," *New York Times*, June 6, 2010; Mike Levine, "After Crawling Onto U.S. Radar, Somalia Extremists Pose Threat—But Will They Go Global?" *Fox News*, Aug. 20, 2010; Amy Forliti, "Minneapolis Somalis Meet with FBI, Denounce al-Shabab," *AP*, Sept. 1, 2010.

²³ Mark Townsend, "Britons Join the Jihadist Ranks to Fight in Somalia," *Observer*, May 2, 2010; Harnisch, p. 32; Karl Ritter, "Sweden Rattled by Somali Militants in Its Midst," *Washington Post*, Jan. 24, 2010; Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding the Al Shabaab Networks," Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Analysis, Oct. 13, 2009, pp. 3–4; "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia," p. 32; "Somali Bomber 'Was from Denmark'," *BBC*, Dec. 10, 2009; "Kenyan Reporter Recounts Somali Americans' Journey to Join Al Shabaab," *Star* (Nairobi), Aug. 25, 2010; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," p. 8; Richard Norton-Taylor, "MI5 Chief Warns of Terror Threat from Britons Trained in Somalia," *Guardian*, Sept. 17, 2010.

Conclusion

The employment of foreign fighters by al Shabaab is both a strength and a weakness. In some cases, they bring specialized skills such as bomb making, battlefield experience and fluency in English. On the other hand, al Shabaab attracted much of its support by condemning the engagement in Somalia of foreign troops from Ethiopia and the African Union. Somalis generally do not want foreigners involved in their political life. Somalis from the diaspora who are supporting al Shabaab are probably fully accepted by indigenous Somalis. Non-Somalis, on the other hand, are looked upon with disapproval and may become the Achilles' heel of al Shabaab. The skills provided by foreign fighters are likely to diminish over time as al Shabaab develops these same skills within its Somali supporters.²⁴ Even now, al Shabaab makes every effort to minimize the overt role of non-Somalis in the organization. When al Shabaab militia, for example, took control of Afmadow District in the Lower Juba, the visible fighters were all Somalis. Behind the scenes, however, were several non-Somalis who made the key decisions.²⁵

A huge question, for which we do not yet have an answer, is the degree to which al Shabaab's draconian tactics such as suicide bombings, occasional beheadings, forced marriages between Somali women and foreign fighters, etc. will alienate a critical mass of Somalis. In 2010, during the holy month of Ramadan, al Shabaab even stepped up its reign of terror against the TFG and African Union forces in Mogadishu.²⁶ In October 2010, al Shabaab deputy commander in chief, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, reportedly sent his Rahanweyn clan fighters from Mogadishu to his stronghold in Baidoa in south-central Somalia over disagreements with Godane.²⁷ However, speaking from a mosque in Baidoa, Robow subsequently denied any rift within al Shabaab.²⁸ As of late 2010, there was no clarification of Robow's status. If the initial report is accurate, however, it would be a major blow to al Shabaab. Although Somalis are speaking out increasingly against imported foreign tactics, the situation has not reached a point where it endangers al Shabaab's control over nearly all of southern and central Somalia. Al Shabaab filled a political vacuum and there is not yet any equivalent, opposing force to challenge its control.

²⁴ Comment by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Director of the Center for the Study of Terrorist Radicalization at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, at Sept. 27, 2010, conference in Washington hosted by Reserve Officers Association.

²⁵ Conversation in Nairobi, Kenya, on July 26, 2010, between author and a Somali who was in the area at the time of the takeover.

²⁶ Abdulkadir Khalif, "Al Shabaab Continues Its Rule of Terror. . . Even in the Holy Month," *East African*, Sept. 6, 2010.

²⁷ African Union, "Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Situation in Somalia," Oct. 15, 2010, p. 7.

²⁸ Oct. 13, 2010, report on Somali website www.somaaljecel.com.

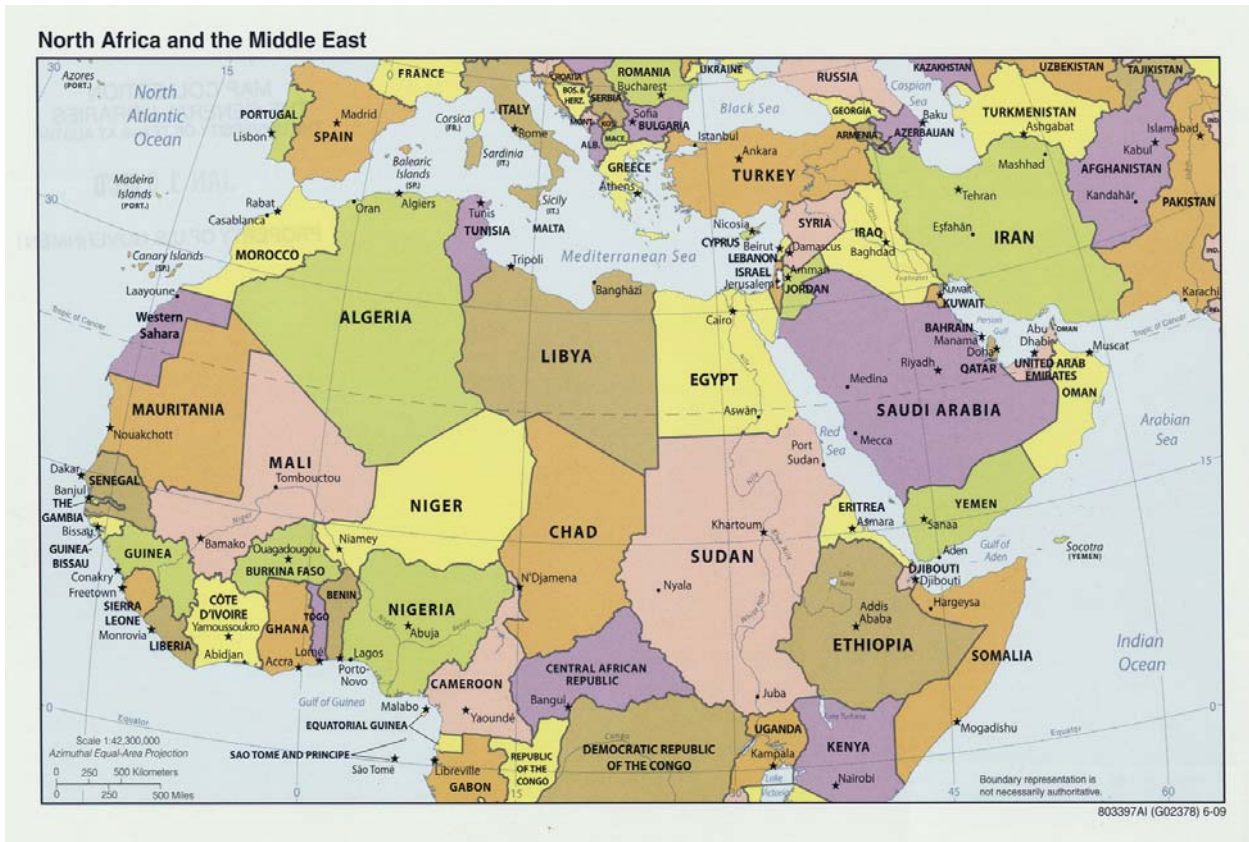
One recent hypothesis suggests that al Shabaab wants to maintain the status quo rather than capture all of Mogadishu and then be saddled with responsibility for governing Somalia. It is true that al Shabaab has sub-contracted governance to local groups in many but not all of the areas that it controls.²⁹ While preferring the status quo is an interesting concept, the evidence does not support this hypothesis. Al Shabaab continues to make every effort to dislodge from Mogadishu African Union troops, the only military force that permits the TFG to maintain its presence in the capital. To underscore its intentions, al Shabaab conducted suicide bombings in Kampala in an effort to force Uganda to remove its troops from the African Union force in Mogadishu. In August and September 2010, al Shabaab initiated major attacks, without success, to seize parts of Mogadishu under the control of African Union forces. These are not the actions of an organization satisfied with the status quo. Rather, they reflect a desire to control as much of Somalia, and probably beyond, as it can seize.

Perhaps a more important question is whether al Shabaab's priority is to take political power in Somalia or transform Somali society into a strict Islamic state. Different al Shabaab leaders probably have different priorities, but for the time being the organization seems committed to achieving both goals.



²⁹ Comments by Menkhaus and Gartenstein-Ross at Sept. 27, 2010, conference in Washington, D.C.

Maghreb & Sahel



http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/n_africa_mid_east_pol_2009.jpg

Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

by J. Peter Pham

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Abstract: This article details how prior to the establishment of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Meghrebis—that is, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and others—made up a significant percentage of the foreign fighters in the al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq, thus helping to build the trust networks between al Qaeda central and the Maghreb-based groups, culminating in the the 2007 formal affiliation of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) with al Qaeda. Since then, an emboldened AQIM has evolved significantly, both strategically and operationally.

In a video produced for the fifth anniversary of al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the American homeland, the group's deputy head, Ayman al-Zawahiri, declared that Osama bin Laden had instructed him to announce that "the GSPC [*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat] has joined al Qaeda." The Egyptian terrorist leader went on to hail the "blessed union" between the GSPC and al Qaeda, pledging that it would "be a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous sons of [former colonial power] France." Urging the group to become "a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders" in the region and beyond, he prayed that "our brothers from the GSPC [would] succeed in causing harm to the top members of the crusader coalition, and particularly their leader, the vicious America."¹

Thanks to John Entelis, Audra Grant, and Lianne Kennedy Boudali for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

¹ "Al-Qaeda "Issue France Threat," BBC News, September 14, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5345202.stm> (accessed December 10, 2010).

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Since then, the meaning of this change on both a regional and global level has been the subject of considerable debate among policymakers, analysts, and scholars. For some, this was merely the rebranding of a failed organization—one still largely focused on Algeria. Others saw “the culmination of a multiyear evolution toward the current structure from the Algerian Islamist insurgency of the 1990s toward full integration with the contemporary al-Qaeda.”² In any event, the formal linkage with al Qaeda was certainly not the group’s first contact with foreign jihadist elements—quite to the contrary, the affiliation was the result of prior interaction with combatant groups abroad and not the other way around. Moreover, it can be shown that the ongoing evolution of the group was very much driven by such contacts.

As it turned out, “al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM, *Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami*) has distinguished itself from its predecessors in its political objectives, tactics, and organizational structure. This is the case, even as it has had to confront significant challenges from local governments with increasingly effective counterterrorism capabilities, a civilian population that is generally indifferent—if not always entirely unsympathetic—to its newfound pan-Islamist ideology, and increased involvement in the region by the United States and its European allies. To better assess the threat that this phenomenon currently poses, it is necessary to review the origins and development of AQIM, including those of its antecedents, before surveying the strategic and operation evolution of the group as it has adapted itself since its al Qaeda affiliation.

Islamism in the Maghreb

While political Islamism and the associated manifestations of violent extremism are not new to the Maghreb, the objectives pursued by its adherents have varied considerably.³ During their anti-colonial struggle, the vocabulary of “jihad” and “martyrdom” was appropriated by Algerian nationalists to good effect in consolidating their support among the populace. The emergence of a secular socialist state after independence, thus, came as a disappointment to those who had sought the establishment of an Islamist regime, and the political and economic malaise of the late 1980s attracted others to their cause.

The same period saw the return of an estimated 1,000 Algerians who had gone to join the Afghan mujahedin in the fight against the Soviet invasion of their country. Overall, it is believed that between 3,000 and 4,000 Algerians had gone through the training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan; in addition to the 1,000 who returned home, another 1,000 drifted to the conflicts in Bosnia

² David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror,” *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, December 2008, p. 91.

³ See Carlos Echevarría Jesús, “Radical Islam in the Maghreb,” *Orbis*, Spring 2004, pp. 351-364.

and Chechnya. Some have noted that on their return, *les Afghanis*, as they became known, continued wearing Afghan-style clothing, beards, and turbans.⁴ These Algerian “Afghans” had been among the most numerous of the Arab contingents in the Pakistan-based jihadist community and, once returned home, often equated the “infidel” regime in Moscow that, at least according to their narrative, they had defeated with the “infidel” regime in Algiers which still ruled their homeland.⁵

At this time, in 1989, the Algerian government decided to legalize *al-Jabba al-Islamiya li' l-Inqadb* or *Front Islamique du Salut*, (FIS, “Islamic Salvation Front”) as an opposition party, deeming it more prudent to at least keep Islamist activities out in the open where they could be better monitored and controlled. The FIS garnered goodwill for itself and, thus, popular support for its platform of an Algerian state based on Islamic principles by providing, through a burgeoning network of mosques, a variety of welfare and other social services largely neglected by the government. When, in an effort to shore up its rapidly declining legitimacy, the government called elections in 1991, the FIS swept many local races as well as the first round of the parliamentary poll, bringing it to the threshold of power. At this point, the military intervened and, nullifying the election results, seized power.

The subsequent imprisonment of many FIS leaders and the banning of the group itself removed the possibility of incorporating Islamists within the political system and vindicated those radicals among them who held that the violent overthrow of the secular regime in the tradition of the Afghan jihad would be the only way to obtain the establishment of a government based on Islamic principles.

The GIA and GSPC Precursors

When civil war broke out following the assassination, in June 1992, of Mohammed Boudiaf, the nationalist recalled from exile by the military junta to serve as titular head of the Algerian state, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA, “Armed Islamic Group”) quickly acquired predominance among the factions opposing the regime. Heavily influenced by returning veterans of the Afghan jihad, the GIA aimed at more than reforming the state along the lines of the Islamist agenda. Rather, it sought the wholesale transformation of society, viewing those who did not share its convictions as apostates from Islam who could be legitimately killed (the doctrine of the “collective excommunication of Muslims,” *takfir al-Mujtama*). As “its bloody massacres of civilians caused public support for the group to dwindle, and persistent rumors of the group

⁴ See Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series 144 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2008), p. 32.

⁵ See Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Middle East Journal*, Spring 2009, pp. 215-216.

being manipulated by the Algerian intelligence agencies further discredited it,”⁶ various splinter groups emerged.

Created in 1998 by a former GIA regional commander, Hassan Hattab, as a corrective to the strategic and tactical mistakes of the organization, the GSPC became the numerically strongest of the breakaway groups. Repudiating the GIA doctrine of the apostasy of society, the GSPC directed its attacks at government and military targets. In this respect, Hattab was influenced by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who by then was the chief ideological influence on al Qaeda. In contrast to those adhering to the GIA’s more extreme position, al-Zawahiri was more conventional in his thought and “considered that *al-takfir* applied only to the state and refused to declare the whole society apostate.”⁷

At the same time, albeit somewhat ironically, the various attempts by the Algerian government to achieve national reconciliation—including the 1999 referendum on “Civil Concord,” the amnesties repeatedly offered Presidents Liamine Zéroual and Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and the 2005 referendum on the “Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation”—actually helped the GSPC to expand. GSPC’s national emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, who eventually acceded to the leadership after Hattab, was displaced for trying to make his peace with the regime. He was reported to have even created four units with the specialized mission of recruiting newly released militants, indicating that the group had “made a particular utilitarian and rational reading of amnesty and that it has gone through a methodic process of recruitment.”⁸

While it organized zones of command throughout Algeria, the GSPC focused its energies and operations in two key areas in particular: the Kabylie region in the north, which gave ready access to the major cities along the Mediterranean coast while still providing in its forests and mountains considerable sanctuary for bases, and the vast southern region along Algeria’s border with Mali and Niger, which offered access to long-established smuggling routes.⁹

While it emphasized a nationalist rather than an internationalist agenda, concentrating its efforts on toppling the Algerian government and replacing it with an Islamist regime, the GSPC nonetheless had relationships with other *salafi-jihadi* groups in the Maghreb, built on the convergence of interests and facilitated by both ties developed in battle fronts like Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion in late 2001, and the tangle of logistical support

⁶ Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (November 2007), p. 408.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Islamism, Violence, and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, ICG Middle East Report 29, July 30, 2004, p. 14.

⁸ Jean-Luc Marret, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A ‘Glocal’ Organization,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, June 2008, p. 544.

⁹ See Gregory A. Smith, “Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 2, May 2009, pp. 65-66.

networks in the diaspora.¹⁰ These included the *Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain* (GICM, “Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group”); the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (*al-Jama’ a al-Islamiyya al-Muqatilah fil-Libya*), led by Abu Abdallah Al-Sadek, some of whose members were reportedly trained in Tunisia by Algerian militants; and various Tunisian groups like the nebulous *Jeunesse de l’Unification et du Jihad (Tawhid wal-Jihad)*, for which the GSPC provided training support, and infiltration.¹¹

The GSPC also proactively recruited and sent Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian volunteers to join in the al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq following the American invasion and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. This active support resulted in a significant number of Maghrebis in the ranks of the foreign fighters there. In June 2006, the U.S. military even announced that approximately 20 percent of suicide bombers in Iraq were Algerian, while another five percent were Moroccan or Tunisian.¹² In July 2005, Algerian authorities arrested an Egyptian named Yasir al-Misri, who had been using a travel agency in Algiers as a front for moving GSPC fighters to Iraq. A year later, in September 2006, an al Qaeda suspect name Abu al-Ham was also arrested in the same capital on charges of helping the GSPC funnel fighter to Iraq through Syria, where he had lived until he moved to Algeria to pick up where the Egyptians left off.¹³

Al Qaeda’s Franchise in Northwest Africa

The sending of its recruits to be foreign fighters in Iraq would ultimately lead to the GSPC’s transformation into al Qaeda’s recognized affiliate in North Africa. It is often forgotten that the GSPC reached out to al Qaeda as early as 2003, but the latter’s leadership was reluctant to embrace it. First there was the question of whether the GSPC brought anything to the broader jihadist network since the combination of crackdowns and amnesty programs had severely weakened it, causing its membership to plummet from about 4,000 in 2002 to less than 500 in 2006.¹⁴ Then there were doubts about the GSPC’s commitment to the global agenda given its prioritization of the

¹⁰ See Kathryn Haar, “Emerging Terrorist Trends in Spain’s Moroccan Communities,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 9 (May 4, 2006), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=758&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1 (accessed December 10, 2010).

¹¹ See Marret, pp. 542-543.

¹² Ibid., p. 545.

¹³ See Emily Hunt, *Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa: A ‘Thorn in the Neck’ of the United States?* Policy Focus 65 (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007), pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ Alex Grynkewich and Chris Reifel, “Modeling Jihad: A System Dynamics Model of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat Financial Subsystem,” *Strategic Insights* 5, November 2006, <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2006/Nov/grynkewichNov06.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2010).

struggle in Algeria. The sending of fighters to Iraq addressed the concerns about the Algerian group's loyalties, while its reduction in numbers "formed an evolutionary bottleneck" through which members emerged "convinced of the merit of their internationalist cause and were ready to capitalize on the lessons learned from interaction with the global jihadist movement."¹⁵

The association made sense for both sides. The expansion into a new theater of operations was consistent both with al Qaeda's global ideology and with its operational interest potentially gaining access to an extensive network among the North African immigrant communities in France, Spain, and other Western European countries which the GSPC had inherited from its precursors. The Algerian group gained the prestige of the al Qaeda "brand name" which, within the year, had actually brought to it "a considerable number of Mauritians, Libyans, Moroccans, Tunisians, Malians, and Nigerians," according to the statements made by its emir in a wide-ranging interview he gave the *New York Times*, published in July 2008.¹⁶

Unlike its precursor organizations, especially the GIA, AQIM has not managed to control large areas within Algeria for any sustained period of time. However, it has compensated by the adaption of terrorist tactics imported from other fronts in the global *salafi-jihadi* struggle—like the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) in repeated attacks against high-profile public targets, resulting if not in a significant increase in the number of operations, certainly a spectacular increase in the casualties resulting from each. This is especially the case where they deployed near-simultaneous or otherwise coordinated bomb attacks,¹⁷ such as the spectacular December 11, 2007, suicide truck bombings in Algiers of the Constitutional Council and the United Nations building, which left 41 people dead and more than 170 others wounded. It ought to be noted that suicide attacks were very rare in North Africa, even during the height of the Algerian civil war which left hundreds of thousands dead or wounded, until more recent years when "legitimized by ideologues close to al-Qaeda, it became increasingly commonplace."¹⁸

The diffusion of videos highlighting the attacks to radical websites on the Internet is another practice imported from other al Qaeda-linked terrorist networks. In fact, one of the first ones of this genre, a video claiming responsibility for a December 2006 attack on a bus in Bouchaoui, Algeria,

¹⁵ David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2, December 2008, p. 94.

¹⁶ "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

¹⁷ See Hanna Rogan, "Violent Patterns: A Quantitative Study of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb" (paper, Conference on "Understanding Jihadism: Origins, Evolution and Future Perspectives," Oslo, Norway, March 19-21, 2009).

¹⁸ Mohamed Sifaoui, *Al-Qaïda Maghreb Islamique. Le groupe terroriste qui menace la France* (Paris: Éditions Encre d'Orient, 2010), p. 189.

which left one person dead and many more wounded, including one American and one Briton, featured an introductory speech by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In fact, a cable sent by the U.S. embassy following the December 2007 Algiers bombings, and recently published by WikiLeaks, focused on the how the attacks “demonstrated the influence of Iraqi jihadis,” citing how “AQIM videos strongly resemble videos from Iraq in terms of the music, Quranic citations and filming of hits on enemy targets they show.”¹⁹

While kidnapping for ransom by AQIM is not a new tactic—recall the mass abduction of 32 German, Austrian, and Dutch tourists by the GSPC in 2003, to say nothing of the fairly routine taking of Algerians—the focus on Western prisoners and extraction of spectacular ransom payments and concessions can certainly be said to represent a qualitative jump that was facilitated by both the “rebranding” of the organization and the ideological influence which accompanied it. The group definitely received a fillip from the affiliation and, with the benefit of hindsight, Droukdel’s concluding statement in his *New York Times* interview seems less braggadocio than a strategic plan for consolidation and expansion:

We believe that our greatest achievement is that the jihad is still continuing in the Islamic Maghreb for sixteen years. And today it is developing and climbing. By the generosity of God we were able to transfer our jihad from the country to regional, and we were able to expand our activity to the Maghreb states and the African coast, and we could participate in the regional awakening jihad. Based on their sacrifices and their blood, our mujahedeen could keep the jihad reason and carry the flag generation after generation, and revive the absent duty in the hearts of the Muslims. Today, we receive a lot of requests from some Muslims who want to do martyrdom operations. In Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia we see Muslim youths who support our matter, they are ready to sacrifice themselves and their money for the sake of supporting Islam. We consider this as one of our greatest achievements. Among our greatest achievements is that we realized unity with our brothers as an important step towards the adult succession. Also, we did not weaken and we remained on the road, we developed our jihad and we revived the jihad matter in the heart of our nation after it was absent for a long time. This is a big change in the region and we thank God that he enabled us to participate in its achievement.²⁰

Mohktar Belmoktar, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, and AQIM’s New Horizons

Perhaps the most interesting—and, potentially, most dangerous—developments in the ongoing evolution of AQIM are taking place with respect to the group’s southern command, what was formerly its Zone 9, covering most of southern Algeria (the *wilayas* of El Oued, Ouargla, Illizi, Tamanghas-

¹⁹ “U.S. Embassy Cables: Al-Qaida in the Maghreb’s Deadly Blows,” *The Guardian*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/135155> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁰ “An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdal,” *op. cit.*

set, and Adrar). Under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a.k.a. Khaled Abou al-Abbas, a.k.a. Laâouar (“one-eyed”), an acquaintance of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi from the year-and-a-half he had spent in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, receiving military training in the Khaldin and Jihadwal camps, as well as at al Qaeda camps in Jalalabad,²¹ AQIM has spread its operations across the Sahel into Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and elsewhere.

In many respects, the Sahel, the belt connecting North Africa and West Africa and straddling ancient trade and migration routes, was the ideal next step for AQIM. The region is strategically important for several reasons, including its role as a bridge between the Arab Maghreb and black Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as its important natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable. Moreover, the Sahel belt touches several countries—including Algeria, Nigeria, and Sudan—with serious security challenges of their own that could easily spill over their borders. Despite all this, the borders there are virtually unguarded, permitting ease of movement, as well as access to populations which, if not exactly clamoring for AQIM’s message, are at least somewhat receptive to it due to both their social, economic, and political marginalization and historical memories of jihad out of the desert. In fact, it was not long before training camps were operating in Mauritania, for example,²² and the country saw its first suicide bombing, an August 2009 attack in Nouakchott on the street between the French and Libyan embassies that killed the native militant who carried it out and injured three others.²³

That Belmokhtar has been able to emerge in such a pivotal role of presiding over this geopolitical shift in the terrorist groups operations despite his “being at odds with AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel,” including “even going so far as to criticize Droukdel’s leadership of the organization,”²⁴ is due to the increasingly decentralized nature of the extremist group as a whole. For it has sought to adapt itself to the changing conditions in its Algerian base where robust anti-terrorism measures and better counterinsurgency efforts have led to large numbers of the militants being killed or captured while amnesty programs have whittled away even more of the group’s strength. More recently, Belmokhtar is thought to be in direct command of one of the two main units (*katibats*)²⁵ operational in AQIM’s southern flank.

²¹ See Botha, p. 50.

²² Nicholas Schmidle, “The Saharan Conundrum,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²³ Daniel Magnowski, “France Condemns Mauritania Suicide Attack,” Reuters, August 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5780LZ20090809> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁴ Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, May 8, 2009, p. 9.

²⁵ AQIM is thought to be organized into geographical zones, each of which has one or more operational battalions (*katibats*), which are further subdivided into several companies (*fassilas*). A *fassila* is made up of two “platoons” (*sarayas*), each with twelve to eighteen members, who may be further organized into smaller cells.

The links that Belmokhtar has forged with local communities in the harsh desert environment, including the fabled nomadic “blue men” of the Tuareg, a people native to the region whose members have had a contentious history with the national governments, have been the key to his success. According to one senior Malian military commander, following his intermediary role in resolving the 2003 kidnapping of the European tourists, Belmokhtar was granted *de facto* asylum in Mali: “We promised him we would leave him alone under the condition that he did not carry out hostile actions on our soil.”²⁶ Belmokhtar used the opportunity to get married, taking as his first bride a young Malian woman from an Arab family in Timbuktu. He subsequently also took additional wives from Tuareg and Brabiche Arab tribes.²⁷ The marital alliances helped gain him entrée into smuggling and other extralegal activities for which the region is infamous. While Belmokhtar clearly profited personally from these criminal enterprises—one regional newspaper described him as “controlling the majority of the traffic in arms, cigarette, drug, and stolen car in southern Algeria and the Sahel,” as well as having a hand in human trafficking—he also used the desert routes and smuggling networks to funnel arms to AQIM in northern Algeria.²⁸

Evidence has also emerged of AQIM’s involvement in the burgeoning drug traffic transiting Belmokhtar’s operational area.²⁹ In October 2010, Moroccan authorities broke up an international drug trafficking ring, with links to South American cartels, that was transporting cocaine and marijuana between Latin America and Europe, via North Africa. The Moroccan interior minister claimed that with the arrests there was established, what he called, “an apparent coordination and confirmed collaboration” between drug traffickers and AQIM, noting that the terrorist group was making money by using its members’ knowledge of desert routes, weapons, and means of transportation to protect the traffickers.³⁰ The potential for the region being the setting for an explosive mix of Islamist terrorism, secular grievances, and criminality was underscored barely a month later when authorities in Mali arrested six major

²⁶ Colonel El Hadj Gamou, quoted in “Sur les traces des djihadistes du Sahara,” *Le Figaro*, March 19, 2007, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/20070319.FIG000000262_sur_les_traces_des_djihadistes_du_sahara.html (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁷ See Sambou Diarra, “Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar: Profession, preneur d’otages,” *L’Aube* (Bamako), April 9, 2009, <http://www.afribone.com/spip.php?article18583> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁸ See J. Peter Pham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Ongoing Evolution of Jihadist Terrorism in North Africa,” *World Defense Review* (May 14, 2009), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham051409.shtml> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁹ See Christophe Champin, *Afrique noire, poudre blanche. L’Afrique sous la coupe des cartels de la drogue* (Brussels: André Versaille Éditeur, 2010), pp. 136-140.

³⁰ Taieb Cherqaoui, quoted in Anne Look, “Morocco says Dismantled International Drug Trafficking Ring Linked to Terrorists,” *Voice of America*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/north/Morocco-says-Dismantled-International-Drug-Trafficking-Ring-Linked-to-Terrorists-105188824.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

drug traffickers whom they linked with a criminal gang that had aligned itself with AQIM and whose leader had been detained just earlier in the week next door in Mauritania. The Malians identified the six as “coming from the ranks of the Polisario Front,” the Algerian-sponsored group that has unsuccessfully sought for nearly four decades to wrest control of the Western Sahara from Morocco,³¹ and were “one of the three major networks of traffickers who pass through the Sahara and sell the drugs to Europe.”³²

While the question of whether or not AQIM itself has taken on a direct role in illicit trafficking is still subject to often fierce debate, but a substantial body of evidence seems to indicate that it has worked with traffickers of cocaine and other contraband, offering them protection. And certainly AQIM is well positioned to benefit financially from the lucrative illicit trade networks that cross the Sahara. With the group’s members familiar with the areas in which they operate, they are able to offer protection to the traffickers and tax the trade, especially in the absence of effective countervailing governmental structures.

The safe haven Belmokhtar acquired in the Sahel has enabled AQIM to establish “mobile training camps, in particular those in northern Mali [which] provided training to nationals as far south as Nigeria, nationals from neighboring countries, other countries in West Africa, as well as individuals recruited in Europe.” As a result, “GSPC/AQIM migrated from a domestic to a transnational terror group.”³³

Belmokhtar’s style has been characterized by a remarkable pragmatism. His apparently all-but-independent branch of AQIM is increasingly willing to make common cause with criminal elements in the interest of both augmenting its tactical and operational capabilities and extending its strategic reach. In the case of the three Spanish aid workers from the Catalan non-governmental organization Barcelona Acció Sòlidària who were abducted in November 2009 when their convoy, which was carrying humanitarian relief materiel, was ambushed by armed men in northwestern Mauritania, approximately 170 kilometers from the capital of Nouakchott, while AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack, an investigation by Mauritanian security services led them to one Omar Sid’Ahmed Ould Hamma, a.k.a. Omar le Sahraoui (“Omar the Sahrawi”), who was arrested in Mali in February 2010 and extradited to stand trial in Mauritania. Subsequently nearly two dozen accomplices were rounded up by Mauritanian officials.

³¹ See J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Toward a Realistic Solution of the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, Spring 2010, pp. 1-24.

³² “Six ‘Major’ Drug Traffickers Arrested in Mali,” AFP, December 9, 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hkrHwHj7tdxQRWZLlbi0R5gWs2NA?docId=CNG.62a22137f469f072689fa6696afc6142.c31> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³³ Anneli Botha, “Islamist Terrorist Threat in the Maghreb: Recent Developments in Algeria,” *Circunstancia* 7, no. 18 (January 2009), http://www.ortegaygasset.edu/contenidos.asp?id_d=802 (accessed December 10, 2010).

What is interesting, as the Spanish daily *ABC* reported last year, is that Omar le Sahraoui was never a member of AQIM. Rather he is, as the newspaper's headline noted, a mercenary working for the regional al Qaeda franchise. In fact, Omar le Sahraoui, as his *nom de guerre* suggests, "was part of the hierarchy of the Polisario Front." A source quoted by the Spanish newspaper described him as "a man of the desert," who "placed his expert knowledge of the territory gained over the decades at the service of terrorists and traffickers of drugs and other contraband."³⁴ At his subsequent trial, it was further revealed that he had been paid by Belmokhtar to organize and carry out the attack. According to European analysts, those rounded up with Omar le Sahraoui represented a veritable cross-section of Saharan and Sahelian rogue outfits. They included at least three other Polisario veterans, Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali Ould Rguibi, Mohamed Salem Hamoud, and Nafii Ould Mohamed M'Barek.³⁵ In July, after an exhaustive trial, Omar le Sahraoui was convicted by a Mauritanian court for his role in organizing the abduction of the three Spaniards and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor.

Regrettably, less than a fortnight after the terrorist mercenary's conviction was confirmed on appeal by the Mauritanian judiciary in early August, he was a free man. His release was part of the price that AQIM demanded in exchange for the two Spanish men they still held (the third hostage, a woman, was released in March).³⁶ Although Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero will neither confirm nor deny it, Spain's Socialist government apparently also forked over a significant ransom to the terrorists, estimated between five and ten million euros.³⁷ If true, this would make the kidnapping of the three Spaniards the most profitable operation of its kind that AQIM has ever orchestrated, possibly topping even the \$8 million it reportedly collected in early 2009 in exchange for freeing Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay and several German and Swiss civilians. Worse, it seems that AQIM does not waste any time in putting new resources it acquires to work, as evidenced by the ratchet upwards of activity since the latest ransom was collected, including the September 16, 2010, raid on Airlit in northern Niger and the kidnapping of seven expatriates, among whom were five French citizens, connected with the French nuclear group AREVA. According to

³⁴ See Luís de Vega, "Mercenario de Al Qaida," *ABC*, April 12, 2010, http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-12-04-2010/abc/Nacional/mercenario-de-al-qaida_14043335259.html (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁵ See Claude Moniquet (ed.), *Le Front Polisario et le développement du terrorisme au Sabel* (Brussels: European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, 2010), pp. 17-19.

³⁶ See "Omar le Sahraoui, monnaie d'échange des ex-otages espagnols," *Radio France Internationale*, August, 24, 2010, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20100824-omar-le-sahraoui-monnaie-echange-ex-otages-espagnols> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁷ See Albert Vilalta and Roque Pascual, "Liberados los dos cooperantes catalanes secuestrados en Mauritania desde noviembre," *El Mundo*, August 23, 2010, <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2010/08/22/barcelona/1282490182.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

Algerian intelligence sources, the raid was led by an Algerian extremist, Abid Hammadou, (a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abou Zeid), head of the same AQIM cell that had abducted another French citizen, Michel Germaneau, last year. Nigerien sources add that the raiders were assisted by guides speaking Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg.³⁸

Abou Zeid, who leads AQIM's other main far southern *katibat*, is a native of Ourgla in southern Algeria. An early FIS militant, he joined the GIA with his brother Bachir, who was killed in a fight with the military in the mid-1990s. Abou Zeid has been accused of involvement in the abduction dozens of Western hostages and was said to have ordered— or carried out— the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyers in 2009, after London refused his demand for ransom, but also the release of jailed militant Abu Qutada al-Filistini. He placed his “Tarek Ibn Ziad” unit (named in honor of the eighth century Muslim conqueror of Visigothic Spain) under the command of Belmokhtar when the latter was head of Zone 9 in 1998,³⁹ although some analysts have recently seen him as assuming greater prominence not only in the terrorist network,⁴⁰ but beyond.⁴¹

The September 2010 abduction of the hostages seized from Niger actually raises a number of questions. First, from their delayed reaction to the raid, it is not altogether known to what extent that the central leadership of AQIM had a hand in or even foreknowledge of the operation, despite the appointment by the group's council of Yahia Djouadi, (a.k.a. Yahia Abu Amar), as the nominal head of its southern zone.⁴² Second, there was the al-Jazeera broadcast of a videotape message from AQIM's emir, Droukdel, with the claim that Osama bin Laden alone could negotiate the release of the prisoners⁴³—which, if proven true, would represent a far closer link between al Qaeda and its North African franchise than previously thought.

In any event, AQIM's southern commanders have shown themselves to be pragmatic in using the resources which come their way to “professionalize” operations, that is, employing mercenaries like Omar le Sahraoui and others willing to work for hire for the terrorist organization irrespective of their

³⁸ See J. Peter Pham, “When Crime Does Pay: The Threat of an Emboldened al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *World Defense Review* (September 23, 2010), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham092310.shtml> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁹ See Sifaoui, pp. 143-144.

⁴⁰ Adlène Meddi and Mélanie Matarese, “Sahel: Abou Zeid, l'irrésistible ascension,” *El Watan*, October 1, 2010, http://www.elwatan.com/weekend/contrechamps/sahel-abou-zeid-l-irresistible-ascension-01-10-2010-92611_184.php (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴¹ See Alfred de Montesquiou, “Abou Zeid veut être le Ben Laden di Sahara,” *Paris Match*, September 30, 2010, <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu-Match/Monde/Actu/Abou-Zeid-veut-etre-le-Ben-Laden-du-Sahara-215426/> (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴² Interview with senior North African intelligence official, November 16, 2010.

⁴³ “France Told to Deal with bin Laden over Hostages, AFP, November 18, 2010, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g95mrzGMy_DF435jBpgtWcNNnSMg?docId=CNG.b87c37c112754e2733d81dcddf9dafdd.ce1 (accessed December 10, 2010).

ideological commitments. The six killed in the failed French raid to free Germaneau in July, for example, included three Tuareg, an Algerian, a Mauritanian, and a Moroccan. Tuareg guides were said to have assisted in the abduction of the AREVA personnel. By using personnel who are either trained or who have superior knowledge of the geographic or social space in which operations are to take place, AQIM's terrorist activities not only stand a greater chance of success, but in case of failure and capture, authorities do not gain much by way of entry into or leverage with the terrorist group itself.

AQIM and the Future

Much has been made of the alleged differences within the leadership of AQIM's most dynamic branch, the southernmost *katibats* led by Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. The former is said to be "focused less on jihad than on raising cash by protecting cigarette and cocaine smuggling that has traditionally flourished in the area," while the latter is described as more "hard line."⁴⁴ However, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive as the wealth gained from the criminal activity can be used to fuel what had been a weakened, but still active, jihad (some analysts question the extent to which the organization's capacity for violence has been diminished, pointing out that as more North African fighters return home from Iraq—presumably with improved combat and bomb-making skills—the intensity of the conflict might actually increase in the near term).

In fact, the hybrid structure that AQIM has adopted by combining the old (e.g., the grievances against the incumbent Maghrebi regime, the support networks among the North African diaspora in Europe) with the new (e.g., ideological structures, strategic planning, the local (e.g., the remoteness of the Sahara, the informal political economies of the Sahel) and the global (e.g., VBIEDs, al Qaeda "branding"), may well prove to be the model for similar regional groups—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Southeast Asia come to mind—around the globe and an even greater security challenge. One veteran intelligence analyst with extensive Africa experience has sketched out a frightening scenario:

Rebel, warlord, terrorist, and criminal organizations are complex and highly fungible structures that tend to have multiple identities. Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether a political agenda (for rebels and terrorists) or an economic agenda (for warlords and criminals) is the driving force, because groups tend to disguise and cloud their true motivations...The AQIM of the future may come to consist of only a few hundred hardcore terrorists waging international jihad against the

⁴⁴ Edward Cody, "'Emir of the South' Abu Zeid Poised to Take over al-Qaeda N.W. Africa," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102005252.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

West and its allies, while being supported by an affiliated criminal organization of several hundred. . .

A smaller, more close-knit AQIM terrorist network will prove increasingly difficult to penetrate and collect intelligence against. A leaner organization may also mean fewer terrorist incidents, but those that do occur will likely be more high profile and extremely violent to achieve maximum impact. Counter-terrorism strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds almost certainly will prove ineffective against these hard core terrorists; a strategy of containment may be the most realistic option.⁴⁵

Of course, the notoriously porous borders of the Maghrebi and Sahelian countries require that any effective effort to counter AQIM must be regional. And while tremendous progress has been achieved in recent years thanks in part to external efforts to encourage coordination like the U.S.-sponsored Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which brings together Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia,⁴⁶ rivalries between states in the region have proven an obstinate obstacle to greater integration. Last year, a senior U.S. counter-terrorism official observed that “while the Maghreb governments have had some success in combating AQIM and terrorism, there remains much to be done.” “Unfortunately,” he noted, focusing on the perennial conflict between the two most powerful states, Morocco and Algeria, over the latter’s support of the Polisario Front, “the lack of resolution of the Western Sahara question block[s] the cooperation and integration the region needs. For the region to achieve real success, the key differences must be resolved or at least bridged.”⁴⁷

While facilitating greater cooperation between the states of the region is a highly desirable objective—both in itself as political goal and for the sake of more effective operations against AQIM—to really eradicate the challenge which the group presents, one must eventually confront “the current condition of political stasis, economic stagnation, social atrophy, and cultural discontinuity”⁴⁸ which has fanned the flames of political Islamism in the region. That would require a longer-term commitment both to opening up the political systems of the region and creating economic opportunities for the growing youth population.

⁴⁵ Stephen A. Emerson, *The Metamorphosis of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Occasional Paper 03/2010 (Pretoria: International Institute of Islamic Studies, 2010), p. 2.

⁴⁶ See J. Peter Pham, “U.S. Interests in Promoting Security across the Sahara,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, July-August 2010, pp. 242-252.

⁴⁷ Robert Godec, “Opportunities and Challenges for U.S.-Maghreb Cooperation” (keynote address, Conference on “The Dynamics of North African Terror,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, February 16, 2010), <http://csis.org/event/conference-dynamics-north-african-terror> (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴⁸ John P. Entelis, “The Democratic Imperative vs. the Authoritarian Impulse: The Maghrib State Between Transition and Terrorism,” *Middle East Journal*, 59, Autumn 2005, p. 555.

Conclusion

While political Islamism in the Maghreb has its origins in grievances against the governments of the states of the region, its organized groups have been open to influence by broader transnational ideological currents and, certainly, the local variant of the “foreign fighter” challenge—that is, locals who have gone for training and combat experience on various battle fronts. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the FIS was inspired by *les Afghanis*, while the GIA eventually was heavily influenced by them. The GSPC itself was born of a more serious reflection on Islamist strategy, especially al-Zawahiri’s rejection of the more extremist notion of apostasy of Muslim societies as a whole. The group’s role in facilitating the movement of Magrebis seeking “martyrdom” in Iraq following the United States-led invasion in 2003 paved the way for its formal affiliation with al Qaeda and its “rebranding” as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

In turn, AQIM has proven itself to be adept at transforming itself to cope with changing conditions in the Maghreb. Indeed the surviving active units of the group appear to have grasped that the decentralization of their organization—to say nothing of the centrifugal forces affecting al Qaeda in general—necessitate regional groups assuming responsibility for their own recruitment, operations, and sustainment. This progress on AQIM’s part was itself, however, accelerated by the group’s forced march into another foreign entanglement. In this case, its shift in focus is to a new theater of operations in the Sahel. Unlike a guerrilla army, AQIM in its current incarnation cannot be effectively combated by military means alone, even with the benefit of the counterinsurgency experience recaptured in recent years. An even broader approach will be required, one that does justice to the growing nexus between extremism, terrorism, and organized criminality. Moreover, AQIM’s increasing pragmatism—both in the operators it employs and in the partnerships it forms to garner resources—will lead to the terrorist group to continue shifting its horizons, in the process rendering it an even greater challenge, both to states in the region and those well beyond.



Yemen



http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/yemen_admin_2002.jpg

From Periphery to Core: Foreign Fighters and the Evolution of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

By Christopher Swift

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Abstract: *From the foiled assassination attempt of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Naif, to the attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has emerged as one of the most provocative regional al Qaeda affiliates. Yet unlike al Qaeda in Iraq, which is comprised mainly of foreign fighters, or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which claims tenuous links to the syndicate's leadership, this movement exhibits a more nuanced pattern of social integration and operational subordination. By grafting the foreign fighter ethos onto indigenous culture, AQAP has achieved a dynamic equilibrium between the practical realities of local insurgency and the ideological dictates of global jihad.*

On August 27, 2009, Saudi al Qaeda operative Abdullah Hassan al-Asiri detonated a suicide bomb at a Ramadan gathering attended by Deputy Saudi Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Naif. The attack was a tactical failure: Naif escaped with minor injuries.¹ The operation's political implications proved far more consequential, however. Set against the backdrop of an aggressive domestic counterterrorism campaign, al-Asiri's promise to renounce al Qaeda and pledge fealty to the Saudi Royal family raised serious questions about the Kingdom's terrorist re-education and reintegration initiatives. More significantly, it demonstrated that the recent merger between al Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni branches had produced a tenacious, reinvigorated movement committed to fomenting radical change in the heart of the Muslim world.

Formed in January 2009, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula consolidated various militant cells operating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Many of these militants spent their formative years fighting on the *ummah's* (or community's) cultural and geographic periphery. AQAP's Yemeni *amir*, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, once served as Osama bin Laden's personal secretary in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.² His Saudi predecessors, including Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin and Saleh al-Oufi, fought in theatres as diverse as Algeria, Bosnia, and Chechnya.³ These formative experiences situate AQAP's leadership within the wider foreign fighter phenomenon. Yet unlike their Arab brethren operating in distant, predominantly non-Arab regions, these militants remain grounded in their own indigenous social and political environments.

¹ "Prince Muhammad escapes assassination attempt," *Arab News* (Riyadh), August 28, 2009.

² Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: A U.S. Intelligence Breakthrough in the Persian Gulf?" *Newsweek*, February 14, 2010.

³ Rob L. Wanger, "Bitter School Dropout Who Became a Flamboyant Killer," *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh), June 20, 2004.

This distinction is both analytically and strategically significant. As a general rule, al Qaeda colonizes local conflicts by infiltrating indigenous societies and inciting foreign military intervention through terrorist provocations.⁴ The September 11, 2001 attacks were a case in point. According to documents seized from an al Qaeda office in Kabul, the primary purpose of this provocation was to lure the United States into a protracted war with the Taliban and its foreign *jihadi* allies.⁵ By provoking military retaliation, bin Laden hoped to “build universal solidarity among Muslims in reaction to the victimisation and suffering of their Afghan brothers.”⁶

The cycle of provocation and reprisal is a central element in al Qaeda’s social and political mobilization strategy. By exploiting “discontent and alienation across multiple countries,” it seeks to aggregate “the effects of multiple grass-roots actors [...] into a mass movement with global reach.”⁷ Such aggregation is not inevitable, however. Coalition forces in Iraq undermined al Qaeda’s influence by recognizing and exploiting tensions between indigenous insurgents and foreign fighters.⁸ U.S. and Philippine troops quelled the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao by adopting different approaches towards the ethno-nationalist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and *salafi-jihadi* movements like Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).⁹ Finally, NATO officials in Afghanistan have long sought to exploit the “natural tensions” between al Qaeda and the Taliban.¹⁰ In each instance, kinship networks, tribal affiliations, and customary practices can create friction between indigenous insurgents and foreign fighters. Because local militants fight “principally to be left alone,” they may resent—and, thus, ultimately resist—al Qaeda’s attempts to co-opt their struggles and reshape their societies.¹¹

AQAP’s operations in Yemen (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) are an important exception to this rule. Tempered by foreign wars, its leaders view their objectives in global, rather than exclusively local or national terms.¹² Driven by *salafi-jihadi* doctrine, they espouse an “exclusive conservatism” that tolerates neither derogation nor dissent.¹³ Grounded in their own society and culture, they navigate complex social and political dynamics with native fluency. In short, AQAP possesses the same attributes and agenda as de-territorialized *jihadi* syndicates without facing the same social and cultural constraints. By grafting the foreign fighter ethos onto indigenous culture, it has achieved a dynamic equilibrium between the practical realities of local insurgency and the doctrinal dictates of global jihad.

⁴ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 35.

⁵ Alan Cullison, “Inside Al-Qaeda’s Hard Drive,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2004, p. 58.

⁶ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, trans. A. Roberts, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 376.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 292.

⁸ David Kilcullen, “Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 29, 2007, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>.

⁹ David Maxwell, *Commander’s Summary of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines, 2006-2007*, Copy on File with Author.

¹⁰ Anard Gopal, “Bid to split the Taliban, Al-Qaeda,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 16, 2008.

¹¹ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. xiv.

¹² Nasir al-Bahri, “Al-Qaeda from Within,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), March 20, 2005.

¹³ Kepel, p. 51.

This article examines that equilibrium in three stages. First, it briefly describes AQAP's Yemeni precursors, including their role in the Yemeni Civil War and subsequent rejection of the Yemeni regime. Second, it discusses the low-level insurrection waged by al Qaeda cells and sympathizers in Saudi Arabia over the last decade. Third, it examines AQAP's current campaign against the Saudi and Yemeni regimes, together with the movement's growing emphasis on out-of-area operations. The article concludes by discussing how AQAP exploits Yemen's fragmented society and deteriorating condition in order to promote its local and global objectives.

Yemeni Precursors

Like other contemporary *salafi-jihadi* movements, AQAP's national precursors trace their roots to Soviet-Afghan War. Tempered by the rigors of modern warfare, these so-called "wandering *mujahedeen*" developed experience with guerrilla tactics, modern communications, and logistical planning.¹⁴ Collaboration across national groups also had a transformative effect, with militants coming to view their actions in global, rather than exclusively local or national terms. As Palestinian jurist and *jihadi* propagandist Abdullah Azzam observed, the Afghan crucible "changed the tide of battle, from an Islamic battle of one country, to an Islamic World *Jihad* movement, in which all races participated and all colors, languages, and cultures met."¹⁵

The 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan imbued these militants with profound confidence in their own moral and historical significance. Convinced that "they alone had brought the Soviet empire to its knees, these groups now felt themselves fully capable of bringing down other infidels in power [...]"¹⁶ Their ambitions manifested in dramatically different contexts, however. Some *jihadis* adopted expeditionary agendas, shifting their attention to new fault line conflicts in Tajikistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. Notable among them was Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi-born militant active in the Chechen separatist struggle. Operating independently from the al Qaeda network, al-Khattab funnelled foreign fighters into the North Caucasus with the goal of radicalizing the population and liberating the region.¹⁷

Other Afghan Arabs focused on domestic insurrection. Enraged by the Algerian government's decision to void the parliamentary elections in 1991, organizations like the Armed Islamic Group (*La Groupe Islamique Armé*, or GIA) mounted a vicious insurgency aimed at deposing the secular regime and imposing *shari'ah*, or Islamic law. Populated by radical *Salafis* who equated political pluralism with apostasy, GIA targeted nationalists and moderate Islamists with equal vigour.¹⁸ They also sought financial assistance from like-

¹⁴ Bureau of Intelligence & Research, "The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous," *Weekend Edition* (Washington: U.S. Department of State, Aug. 21-22 1993), p. 1-2.

¹⁵ Abdullah Azzam, *Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations*, at http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/azzam_martyrs.htm.

¹⁶ Kepel, *Jihad*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Mustafa Hamid, "The Story of the Afghan Arabs: From the Enter to Afghanistan to the Final Exodus with the Taliban," *Asbarq Al-Ansat* (London), December 9, 2004.

¹⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria," *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (1999), pp. 243-285.

minded militants, accepting \$40,000 in seed money from Osama bin Laden's nascent al Qaeda movement in 1993.¹⁹

These two trends—foreign expedition and domestic insurrection—converged in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War. Viewed symbolically, the clash between the nominally Islamist north and the former Communist south resonated with narratives constructed during the Soviet-Afghan War. Infuriated by Saudi Arabia's support for the Southern Yemeni Socialists led by Haydar Abu Bakr Al-Attas, Osama bin Laden dispatched funds and fighters from his Sudanese training camps to bolster the Northern forces.²⁰ Yemeni Afghan War veterans mobilized on a domestic basis as well, with former mujahedeen commanders like Zayn al-Abadin al-Mihdhar forming private militias to crush the southern secessionists. Leading Islamist clerics like Abd al-Majid al-Zindani also joined the fray, likening the Socialists to the pagan Quraysh tribes that once threatened the Prophet Mohammed in Mecca.²¹

This collaboration proved short-lived. As a pan-Arab nationalist and former ally of Iraq's Ba'athist dictator Saddam Hussein,²² Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh had little passion for the Afghan Arabs' *Salafi* ideology and pan-Islamist impulses. The Afghan Arabs, in turn, grew suspicious of the Zaydi *Shi'a* clique that dominated Yemen's ruling General Congress Party (GPC). In 1996, al-Mihdhar's self-styled Aden-Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA) broke with the government following Saleh's refusal to implement *shari'ah*. Two years later, it released a statement pledging to depose the regime, establish an Islamic state, and purge foreign influences from Yemeni society.²³

Al-Mihdhar's arrest and October 1999 execution did little to curb the burgeoning threat. Within a year, AAIA was implicated in the failed January 2000 attack on the *U.S.S. The Sullivans* and the successful October 2000 bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole*.²⁴ The October 6, 2002 terrorist attack on the French oil tanker *MV Limburg* followed the same operational template, with an explosive-laden dingy killing one sailor and causing extensive economic and environmental damage.²⁵ With Osama bin Laden either praising or claiming these attacks, Western policymakers saw few meaningful distinctions between the indigenous AAIA and its foreign al Qaeda allies. Yemeni officials took a more passive approach, however. Though active in suppressing militants who challenged their own authority, the Political Security Organization (PSO) and other security services seemed unwilling to antagonize Yemen's influential Islamist and *Salafist* communities by aligning itself too closely with Western interests.

September 11, 2001 swiftly altered this equation. In November 2002, a U.S. drone struck senior Yemeni al Qaeda commander Abu Ali al-Harithi and five other suspected

¹⁹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 217.

²⁰ Michael Scheuer, *Though Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam and the Future of America* (Dulles: Brassey's, 2003), p. 139.

²¹ Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, *The Duty of the Islamic Nation Towards the Battle* (Recording), June 1, 1994.

²² Judith Evans, "Gulf aid may not be enough to bring Yemen back from the brink," *The Times* (London), October 10, 2009.

²³ Jonathan Schanzer, 'Yemen's War on Terror', *Orbis*, 48, no. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 523-524.

²⁴ Gregory Johnson, "The Resiliency of Yemen's Aden-Abyan Islamic Army," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 14 (July 13, 2006).

²⁵ "Yemen ship attack 'was terrorism,'" *BBC News*, October 13, 2002.

militants travelling in a car south of Sana'a.²⁶ One year later, Yemeni security forces arrested al-Harithi's deputy, Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, convicting him and 13 lower-level operatives on charges stemming from the *Cole* and *Lumburg* bombings. These measures undermined AAIA and other militant cells, disrupting al Qaeda's local networks and degrading its capacity to mount new terrorist strikes. With Yemen's most prominent militants killed, captured, or forced into hiding, Sana'a soon diverted both its attention and forces to suppressing a rebellion led by dissident *Shi'a* cleric Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi in the north. Washington followed suit, focusing less on the foreign fighters sheltering in Yemen and more on the cadres colonizing the burgeoning Iraqi insurgency.²⁷

Saudi Insurgents

Al Qaeda's diminished influence in Yemen coincided with the rise of new cells in neighboring Saudi Arabia. Like their counterparts to the south, these militants originated from informal networks comprised of radical sympathizers. Foremost among them was al Qaeda strategist Yusef al-Ayeri, who viewed the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as an opportunity to mobilize domestic sentiment against the Saudi Royal family. Coordinating with al Qaeda's exiled leadership, al-Ayeri developed and propagated a tactical model for Iraqi insurgents through his website, *al-Nida*.²⁸ He also organized his own forces, creating five covert cells in a bid to purge apostates and infidels from the birthplace of Islam.

The ensuing campaign bore all the hallmarks of a low-level insurrection. On May 12, 2003, militants struck three residential compounds housing Westerners in Riyadh, killing 35 people and wounding 160.²⁹ Al Qaeda's leadership ultimately claimed responsibility for the attacks, releasing the suicide bombers' videotaped wills through its *al-Sahab* media center some six months later.³⁰ On June 14, 2003, militants in the holy city of Mecca opened fire on Saudi police officers after refusing to comply with a routine traffic stop. Culminating with the seizure of a militant safe house and more than 70 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the skirmish killed five police and two civilians in the middle-class al-Khaldiya neighborhood, located just three miles from the Grand Mosque.³¹

Al-Ayeri's death, in a May 31, 2003 gun battle with Saudi security forces, produced no significant change in either the frequency or intensity of terrorist attacks. On April 21, 2004, for example, militants detonated two car bombs outside the Saudi national police

²⁶ John Esterbrook, "Lakawanna 6 Link to Yemen Killings? Victim of CIA Airstrike Was Tied to Alleged Terror Cell," *CBS News*, November 9, 2002, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/11/04/attack/main527971.shtml>

²⁷ Dan Murphy, "In Iraq, a Clear-Cut bin Laden-Zarqawi Alliance," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 31, 2004.

²⁸ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 235.

²⁹ Turki al-Saheil, "Al-Qaeda Sought to Replicate 9/11 Attack in 2003 Riyadh Bombings," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), June 21, 2020.

³⁰ Gabriel Weisman, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2006), pp. 45 & 62.

³¹ Essam al-Ghalbi, "Terror Crackdown in Makkah," *Arab News* (Riyadh), June 16, 2003.

headquarters in Riyadh, killing five and injuring 148.³² Two weeks later, militants infiltrated a petrochemical plant in the Red Sea port of Yanbu' al-Bahr and killed seven civilians, including six Western engineers.³³

The violence continued well into the following year. Among the more notable incidents was the May 29, 2004 raid on the Oasis residential compound in the Persian Gulf city of Khobar. Seizing 41 hostages, the perpetrators executed 19 foreigners before Saudi security forces brought the siege to an end.³⁴ Also notable was the June 13, 2004 abduction of Lockheed Martin contractor Paul Johnson, who was beheaded five days later. As in Yemen, these operations tended to emphasize foreign—over indigenous—targets. Beginning with the Yanbu hostage siege and culminating with the storming of the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah some seven months later, Saudi cells targeted eight Western businessmen for assassination. On one level, this emphasis on sensational violence reflected an attempt to offer potential al Qaeda recruits “what they lack[ed]—power over life and death, a mission to rid the world of enemies, and violence as the path to deliverance.”³⁵ In this sense, targeting foreigners reflected a desire to situate their local struggle within the broader universe of al Qaeda’s global *jihad*.

Equally important, however, was the Saudi cell’s conflation of the near and far enemies. Casting themselves as the guardians of Islam’s two holy places, the Saudi cells saw the Prophet’s admonition that there be only one faith in Arabia as an immutable and irrevocable commandment. This religious obligation also had a practical dimension, however. Because the Saudi Royal family depended on Western markets, technology, and military assistance to maintain its preeminence, purging foreign infidels was a necessary precondition for toppling the allegedly apostate regime. The resulting emphasis on the so-called “far” enemy closely mirrored al Qaeda’s own strategy, which “primarily targets the West and its symbols.”³⁶ By pursuing global targets within their own local theatre, Saudi Arabia’s indigenous militants harmonized their global outlook and local objectives with the doctrines espoused by the broader foreign fighter movement.

The insurgency in neighboring Iraq possessed an equally potent influence. Although Saudi Arabia’s conservative *Wahhabis* had little affection for Saddam Hussein’s secular Ba’athist regime, the invasion of a neighboring Muslim country reanimated many of the same anti-imperial narratives that inspired Arab intervention in the Soviet-Afghan War more than two decades earlier. These conditions created a fertile environment for fundraising and recruiting. Inspired by Iraqi efforts to resist Western domination, Saudi Arabia’s local al Qaeda analogues came to view the presence of Western defense contractors, oil companies, and mass media on their own soil in substantially similar terms.

³² Press Release, “Saudi Ambassador Responds to Terrorist Act,” (Washington: Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, April 21, 2004).

³³ K.S. Ramkumar, “Memorial Service in Houston for Slain Yambu Engineers,” *Arab News* (Riyadh), May 6, 2004.

³⁴ Abdul Hameed Bakier, “Lessons from al-Qaeda’s Attack on the Khobar Compound,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 16, (August 11, 2006).

³⁵ Daniel Kimmage, “Al-Qaida’s Next Action Hero: An inside account of the Khobar assault,” *Slate.com*, June 16, 2004.

³⁶ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 290.

Despite these outward similarities, this new generation of Saudi *jihadis* differed from their Afghan Arab predecessors in two key respects. First, their ideological and political agenda place them in direct conflict with the Saudi state and clerical hierarchy. Having cast local political and religious authorities as unredeemable apostates, Saudi Arabia's al Qaeda analogues set themselves against the institutional elite on which their more mainstream Afghan Arab predecessors once relied. The second difference lay in their socio-economic background. Where Afghan Arabs like Osama bin Laden had some modicum of religious education, those recruited by Al-Ayeri's successors reportedly lacked even a rudimentary understanding of Islamic doctrine.³⁷ They also spent profusely, allegedly diverting funds from a charity for imprisoned Iraqis to underwrite their insurgent activities and lavish personal lifestyles.³⁸

Unlike their Yemeni neighbors, the Saudi Royal Family responded to these al Qaeda cells aggressively and systematically. Beginning in February 2003, Saudi officials indicted 90 individuals for alleged ties to al Qaeda and opened another 250 investigations. Over the ensuing months, Interior Ministry forces began raiding safe houses, seizing weapons caches, and arresting dozens of suspected al Qaeda sympathizers. The regime also strengthened its oversight of the religious establishment, arresting three clerics who had publicly endorsed the May 2003 Riyadh compound bombings and directing religious charities to suspend their foreign operations until new financial oversight mechanisms were instituted.³⁹

Counter-radicalization initiatives complemented this strategy. Cognizant of high unemployment and falling per-capita GDP, the Kingdom implemented a series of educational and employment programs aimed at creating new opportunity structures for Saudi youth. They also developed remedial measures designed to reeducate and rehabilitate convicted militants. Social marginalization was a key element in this strategy. By characterizing al Qaeda's *jihad* as a criminal rather than military enterprise, the regime undermined its romantic appeal while aggressively stigmatizing membership in the movement. Traditional authorities played a central role in this process, with Saudi officials using family and tribal networks to curb terrorist recidivism by making them vicariously liable for the violence perpetrated by their wayward sons and daughters.

None of these measures were sufficient by themselves, to be sure. Yet by late 2005 and early 2006, the combination of an aggressive counterterrorism campaign and comprehensive counter-radicalization programs helped produce a gradual yet tangible diminution in domestic terrorism. Assassinations, arrests, and eroding public support all had an appreciable effect on local al Qaeda cells, driving many militants over the border into neighboring Yemen.

Growing Saudi participation in the Iraqi insurgency may also have been a factor, however. According to one intelligence estimate, Saudis constituted as much as 41 percent of

³⁷ Mahmoud Ahmad, "Al-Qaeda Operatives are an Ignorant Lot, Say Former Members," *Arab News* (Riyadh), October 3, 2004.

³⁸ "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Portray Captured al-Qaeda Militants in a Humiliating Light," *Associated Press*, September 10, 2004.

³⁹ Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, *Saudi Counter Terrorism Efforts: The Changing Paramilitary and Domestic Security Apparatus* (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2005), p. 12.

the foreign fighters active in Iraq after August 2006.⁴⁰ With government surveillance constraining militant activity at home, aspiring *jihadis* appear to have redirected their efforts towards the more immediate and less stigmatized struggle just over the northern border. The result was an appreciable decline in violence within the Kingdom. By 2008, some analysts described al Qaeda's Saudi cells as a loosely organized and largely ineffectual group of "sympathizers, propagandists, recruiters, and fundraisers focused [primarily] on foreign jihad."⁴¹

It would be a mistake to minimize these activities, however. In March 2010, Saudi officials arrested Hayla al-Qusayir, the 40-year-old widow of slain militant Mohammed Salaiman al-Wakil, for funneling some \$293,000 in charitable donations to al Qaeda operatives in Yemen.⁴² Combined with the assassination attempt on Prince Naif the previous year, these incidents illuminate a small, tenacious network capable of concealing its activities and exploiting the local environment. Nonetheless, the combination of counterterrorism and counter-radicalization had a restraining effect on local al Qaeda sympathizers, isolating them within the Kingdom's more conservative communities and compelling them to conceal their schemes as charitable or religious activities. It also encouraged migration to more permissive operating environments. Constrained by a government crackdown at home and deterred by growing hostility toward foreign fighters in Iraq, prominent Saudi militants sought sanctuary in Yemen, when a newly reconstituted al Qaeda cell welcomed them as allies.

Sanctuary and Solidarity

The new Yemeni cell emerged following the February 2006 escape of 23 suspected al Qaeda operatives from a high-security prison near Sana'a.⁴³ Younger, more professional, and more overtly global in their outlook, this cohort embodied the foreign fighter ethos. The 2009 merger with Saudi militants further strengthened this outlook, with former Guantanamo Bay detainees like Said Ali al-Shihri, Mohamed Atiq Awayd al-Harbi, and Ibrahim Suleiman al-Rubaysh reinforcing the group's place within the constellation of *salafi-jihadi* syndicates. Unlike their predecessors in AAIA, however, this new cadre was younger, more professional, and more overtly global in their outlook.⁴⁴ And unlike al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) it focused on engaging, rather than dominating, indigenous tribal structures. The result was a more subtle, sophisticated strategy—one aimed at securing a viable sanctuary while simultaneously exploiting Yemen's endemic internal divisions.

That strategy involved three key elements. The first was *integration*. Anxious to avoid the social and political marginalization suffered by Saudi al Qaeda cells, AQAP's Yemeni militants actively embraced and exploited their tribal affiliations. Their Saudi counterparts

⁴⁰ Richard A. Oppel, Jr., "Foreign Fighters in Iraq are Tied to Allies of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2007.

⁴¹ Michal Knights, "The Current State of Al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no 10 (September 2008), p. 7.

⁴² Abdullah al-Oraifij, "Haila al-Quasayyer Funded Al-Qaeda, Recruited Women," *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh), June 5, 2010.

⁴³ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Al-Qaeda group in Yemen gaining prominence," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2009.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

adopted a similar approach, marrying Yemeni wives in a bid to weave themselves into indigenous social and political structures.⁴⁵ These relationships gave a measure of protection, allowing AQAP to establish safe houses and training facilities in the southern Abyan and Shabwah governorates. It also provided a basis for influencing Yemen's internal political dynamics, albeit indirectly. With the government in Sana'a depending on tribal leaders to extend and enforce its writ, AQAP's gradual infiltration of indigenous tribal structures contributed to the erosion of centralized authority and the creation of ungoverned spaces in which it and its allies could thrive.

The second element was *accommodation*. Rather than engaging directly in Yemen's internal conflicts, as Osama bin Laden had done in the Afghan Civil War, AQAP instead works to amplify, aggregate, and redirect indigenous grievances in a manner that benefits its own near- and long-term objectives. This strategy involves a surprising measure of tolerance for the Yemeni Social Party and its southern secessionist allies. Starting in 2007, this so-called "Southern Movement" organized demonstrations and other forms of civil disobedience to protest Sana'a's policies toward the six provinces that once comprised the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). By 2008, these protests grew increasingly violent; with government security forces killing and wounding scores of protestors. By 2009, armed factions within the Southern Movement were responding in kind, with sporadic gun battles breaking out in cities and towns across the south.

The Southern Movement's low-level insurrection reanimates many narratives and grievances from the 1994 Yemeni Civil War. Unlike the prior conflict, the Saudi government stepped up bilateral cooperation with Ali Abdullah Saleh's beleaguered regime in a bid to forestall Yemen's possible collapse and, by extension, the like flow of Yemeni migrants into Saudi territory. AQAP has also realigned its interests, with al-Wuhayshi calling for the south's secession and the creation of an Islamic state in May 2009.⁴⁶ More significantly, AQAP has minimized al Qaeda's fervent condemnation of Socialism in a bid to persuade the Southern Movement to embrace the *salafi-jibadi* model.⁴⁷ This posture is more opportunistic than substantive, to be sure. Nonetheless, it demonstrates a subtle, nuanced strategy grounded in a rich awareness of Yemen's indigenous dynamics.

AQAP's posture towards Yemen's indigenous *Shi'a* community reflects a similar degree of strategic and rhetorical nuance. Eager to aggregate indigenous opposition to Saleh's regime, it emphasized the historical and political commonalities between Sunni Islam and the Shi'a insurgents driving the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen.⁴⁸ This approach indicates an outright rejection of AQI's strategy, which fomented intra-Muslim sectarian conflict in a bid to destabilize the Iraqi state and create a safe haven for *Sunni* militancy.⁴⁹ This posture is more opportunistic than substantive. Indeed, there is no evidence that AQAP abandoned its radical Salafi particularism in the hope of making common cause with

⁴⁵ "Somalia insurgents threaten to join the new front," *Australian*, January 4, 2010.

⁴⁶ Arafar Madayash and Sawsan Abu-Husain, "Al-Qaeda Call for Islamic State in Southern Yemen," *Asarq al-Awsat* (London), May 14, 2009.

⁴⁷ "The Southern Issue: Secession or Unity. Is there another Option?" *Sada al-Malahim* (Yemen), May 13, 2010.

⁴⁸ Abu'l-Bara'a' al-Sana'i, "The Houtis are Rafidis in the Guise of the Zaydis," *Sada al-Malahim* (Yemen) (February 12, 2010).

⁴⁹ Al-Zarqawi, *Letter to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri*, trans. Coalition Provisional Authority (February 2004), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2004/02/040212-al-zarqawi.htm>.

the Houthis. Instead, its willingness to accommodate numerous sources of indigenous views demonstrates a more subtle strategy—one grounded in an acute awareness of Yemen’s local dynamics and a fresh memory of AQI’s failure in neighboring Iraq. The third element was *provocation*. Beginning in 2007, AQAP staged a series of high-profile attacks on foreign tourists in Yemen. On July 2, 2007, militants detonated a car bomb in Mareb governorate, killing eight Spanish tourists and their Yemeni drivers.⁵⁰ On January 18, 2008, the syndicate ambushed fifteen Belgian tourists travelling in the Hadhramaut, killing two and injuring several others.⁵¹ The following March, a suicide bomber killed four South Korean tourists and injured three more while posing for photographs on a hill overlooking the historic walled city of Shibam.⁵² Suicide bombers struck in Sana’a just days later, targeting a convoy carrying South Korean investigators and the deceased tourists’ families.⁵³

AQAP also launched a campaign against government targets, beginning with a motor barrage on the U.S. Embassy in Sana’a on March 2008, followed by a highly coordinated suicide attack on the Embassy just six months later.⁵⁴ On April 26, 2010, the syndicate struck a convoy carrying British ambassador Tim Torlot, who narrowly survived the assassination attempt.⁵⁵ By June 2010, AQAP cadres were sufficiently strong to attack the PSO headquarters in Aden, killing ten security personnel in a successful operation to free captured comrades.⁵⁶ Two months later, the movement sparked a new wave of violence by issuing a list targeting 54 PSO, Interior Ministry, and Military Intelligence officers in Abyan province for execution.⁵⁷

This transition toward open conflict with the Yemeni government accompanied a deliberate attempt to internationalize AQAP’s operations. This included efforts to recruit Somali militants, who allegedly fought alongside its own cadres during the Yemeni September 2010 offensive against militant strongholds in Shabwah governorate.⁵⁸ With Somalia’s radical al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen movement pledging to support AQAP’s struggle, the prospects for widening instability in the Horn of Africa soon emerged.⁵⁹ Equally significant, however, were AQAP’s efforts to renew direct strikes on the U.S. homeland. Chief among them was the failed bombing of Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit on December 25, 2009. By recruiting and radicalizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian student with no previous record of terrorist activity, AQAP strategists successfully

⁵⁰ “Yemeni Tourist Bombers Killed,” *BBC News*, August 8, 2007.

⁵¹ Baudouin Loos, “Deux Beleges tuées au Yémen,” *Le Soir* (Brussels), January 18, 2008.

⁵² “Tourists dies in Yemen explosion,” *BBC News*, March 15, 2009.

⁵³ “Fresh attack on Koreans in Yemen,” *BBC News*, March 18, 2009.

⁵⁴ Ian Black, “Yemeni police arrest 19 after deadly suicide bomb attack on U.S. Embassy,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2008.

⁵⁵ “UK Envoy in Yemen Escapes ‘Suicide Bomb,’” *BBC News*, April 26, 2010.

⁵⁶ “Yemen Gunmen in Deadly Raid on Aden Security Services HQ,” *BBC News*, June 19, 2010.

⁵⁷ “Ghamda al-Yusifi, “Report on al-Qaida Threat to Assassinate 54 Yemeni Security Officials,” *Elaph.com* (Dubai), September 20, 2010.

⁵⁸ Nassar Arrabyee, “Four al-Qaeda Fighters Killed As Army Starts All Out Attack in al-Huta,” *Yemen Observer* (Sana’a), September 25, 2010.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim Mohamed, “Al-Shabaab urges Muslims to support Yemeni Qaeda,” *Reuters* (London), January 1, 2010.

circumvented the U.S. airline passenger screening regime.⁶⁰ Less than a year later, the syndicate launched a second attack, shipping package bombs intended to detonate aboard commercial cargo jets flying over the United States.⁶¹

These out-of-area operations had three interrelated objectives. The first was to signal AQAP's growing standing within the global *salafi-jihadi* movement. Combined with an aggressive online propaganda campaign by U.S.-born Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, the attacks cast AQAP as a pre-eminent threat to U.S. national security.⁶² The second was arguably to disrupt airborne commerce and impose higher security costs—a measure consistent with Osama bin Laden's longstanding emphasis on economic attrition.⁶³ Most significant, however, was the goal of provoking foreign military intervention in Yemen. Had Abdulmutallab's mission succeeded, public pressure for military retaliation could have drawn U.S. forces into yet another fractious and failing state. In this sense, AQAP's actions reflect the same basic strategy of provocation, reprisal, and consolidation that animated the September 11th attacks nearly a decade ago.

Crisis and Collapse

To date, Western intervention in Yemen has focused primarily on the provision of foreign aid. Days after the failed attack on Northwest Flight 253, the Obama administration promised to double civilian and military assistance to President Saleh's government.⁶⁴ British Prime Minister Gordon Brown swiftly followed suit, convening a special ministerial meeting on January 28, 2010 to discuss a new multilateral assistance regime. The Yemeni government also seized on the opportunity, requesting some \$44 billion in foreign assistance with the aim of curbing radical Islamic militancy through economic and social development.⁶⁵

This link between economic malaise and Islamic militancy is credible. With per-capita GDP at \$2,500, Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the Muslim world.⁶⁶ Unemployment stands at thirty-four percent.⁶⁷ Forty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line.⁶⁸ At least sixty percent is below age twenty-five.⁶⁹ A looming ecological crisis compounds the misery. Despite falling water tables and a rapidly rising population, as much as 60 percent of the country's potable water is currently used to

⁶⁰ Andrew Johnson and Emily Dugan, "Wealthy, quiet, unassuming: the Christmas Day bomb suspect," *Independent* (London), December 27, 2009.

⁶¹ Mark Mazzetti and Robert F. Worth "U.S. Sees Complexity of Bombs as Link to Al-Qaeda," *New York Times*, October 30, 2010.

⁶² Cameron Barr, "Obama's Depiction of al-Qaeda Differs from Aides," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2010.

⁶³ Osama bin Laden, "Full Transcript of Osama bin Laden's Speech," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha) November 1, 2004.

⁶⁴ Anna Fifield and Andrew England, "U.S. Warned over military aid to Yemen," *Financial Times*, January 6, 2010.

⁶⁵ Mahmoud Assamiee, "Yemen asks for USD 44 billion from Friends of Yemen," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), April 6, 2010.

⁶⁶ "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), March 3, 2010, available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/09/200891792235256194.html>

⁶⁷ Assamiee, "Yemen asks for USD 44 billion from Friends of Yemen."

⁶⁸ "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera*.

⁶⁹ "FM meets foreign journalists," *Saba* (Sana'a), April 10, 2010.

cultivate *qat*, a narcotic plant ubiquitous in Yemeni homes and markets.⁷⁰ With national oil revenues falling by 50 percent since 2008,⁷¹ Saleh's government arguably lacks the means to mend Yemen's fraying social fabric, much less maintain the complex patronage networks that sustain his increasingly fragile regime.

Yemen's weakness is not merely a matter of economic development, however. From the Houthi rebellion in the north to the simmering secessionist insurrection in the south, Yemen's internal conflicts have gradually eroded the state's authority, legitimacy and, consequently, its capacity to act. The same is true for recent anti-government protests in Sana'a, Aden, and other cities. Although Yemen's fragmented political opposition has not yet produced the transformative changes witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt, its ability to disrupt and discredit Saleh's regime has reinforced many of the fault lines already evident in Yemeni society. Thus the more Saleh's government contends with internal instability, the less it can address the other sources of domestic disorder. And the longer that disorder persists, the more it empowers AQAP.

These dynamics empower tribal leaders at the expense of the central government. To the extent that national governance becomes intolerable or ineffectual, traditional social and political structures will invariably fill the void. They also create a permissive environment for movements like AQAP. So long as Yemen's internal divisions persist, they preserve the ungoverned space susceptible to colonization by transnational terrorist syndicates and their indigenous allies. Not surprisingly, these conditions have invited popular comparisons with Afghanistan, Somalia, and other failed states. With an estimated 9.9 million small arms circulating within a population of only 23 million, there is no shortage of speculation regarding Yemen's possible collapse.⁷²

This possibility is significant for two reasons. First, the collapse of civil order in Yemen is consistent with al Qaeda's desire for an interior base of operations in the Sunni Arab heartland. Iraq is no longer a viable option, thanks in large measure to AQI's alienation of local Sunni tribes and the subsequent realignment of indigenous insurgents against foreign fighters. Second, Yemen presents few of the barriers that frustrate Arab militants operating on the *ummah's* cultural and geographic periphery. Unlike foreign fighters in Chechnya, Xingjian, or even Afghanistan, AQAP operates in own socio-political terrain.

These conditions have no equivalent in the wider Muslim world. Although indigenous militants in distant theatres may adopt al Qaeda's ideological outlook and operational template, al Qaeda's uprooted nature makes it difficult for foreign fighters "to establish a social and political basis among Muslim populations where they do not benefit from the support [...] of indigenous contractors."⁷³ More significantly, they must tailor their agenda and approach to a cultural environment that is not their own. In this sense, AQAP is uniquely positioned to exploit local conditions in Yemen for regional and perhaps even global ends. By imbuing indigenous networks with the foreign fighter ethos, the syndicate

⁷⁰ Mahmoud Assamiee, "Water crisis threatens Yemen," *Saba* (Sana'a), May 4, 2010.

⁷¹ Ali Saeed, "Yemen introduces 20 investment opportunities in oil and minerals," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), October 21, 2010.

⁷² "Yemen: Small arms sales heading underground," *IRIN*, February 14, 2010.

⁷³ Roy, pp. 294-295.

could ultimately lay the foundation for an authentic, self-sustaining *salafi-jihadi* campaign at the heart of the Muslim world.

Afghanistan - Pakistan



http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/txu-oclc-300481561-afghan_paki_admin_2008.jpg

On the Trail of the ‘Lions of Islam’: Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980-2010

by Brian Glyn Williams

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***Abstract:** This article provides a review of the history of jihadi foreign fighters in Afghanistan over the last 30 years. It details the post-9/11 period and the invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. forces, focusing on the ethnic origin of the foreign fighters and how different groups engaged in different aspects of the conflict. Additionally, the piece explains that while the foreign fighters who came to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan included, among others, Uzbekistanis (not Afghan Uzbeks), Turks, and Arabs, there was also a significant force of Pakistanis—of both Pashtun and Punjabi origins—that joined, bolstering the Taliban army.*

In the summer of 2003, I made my way from Kabul over the Hindu Kush Mountains and across the deserts of the north to the Uzbek-dominated town of Sheberghan. There I met and lived with the Northern Alliance Uzbek warlord, General Mohammad Dostum. During my time spent with Dostum—who made headlines when he led his horse-mounted anti-Taliban troops in routing the Taliban in November 2001—he let it be known to me that he had over 3,000 Taliban prisoners of war in his custody. These captives were being held in a fortress prison on the steppes just outside of his headquarters at Sheberghan. When I asked if I could interview and video his prisoners, Dostum surprised me by obliging me. But before I left to interview them he warned me: “Be careful, until a year and half ago these men were burning our villages, enforcing shariah law with their Kalashnikovs, supporting al Qaeda, and terrorizing my people and your people.”

With that we drove off to Sheberghan prison to see these infamous foot soldiers of Islam. When we arrived, the Uzbek soldiers guarding the gates saluted us and opened the massive iron doors of the prison. We were then led through an infirmary and a soup kitchen with vats filled with some sort of gruel into an open courtyard. I then noticed three holding blocks which had the words

“Pakistan Block” and “Afghan Block” painted above them. I was intrigued as to what would make a Pakistani citizen make the journey hundreds of miles from his homeland to the deserts of northern Afghanistan to risk his life fighting Americans and Northern Alliance Uzbeks so I began my interviews there.¹

During my interviews with these foreign jihadists I came to understand the spectrum of motives that make Muslim men leave their homes and travel to other countries to risk their lives waging holy war. Those I interviewed ranged from genuine fanatics, including one bearded Pakistani Talib who proudly proclaimed that he would try killing me as an American *kafir* (infidel) if he were not a captive, to a young Punjabi who apologetically told me in English that he had traveled from Pakistan to earn money as a fighter that might allow him to afford a dowry. The men I interviewed included adventurers, the brainwashed, genuine believers, escapist-dreamers, misfits, and many who seemed to regret their adventure that had landed them in a bleak prison under the control of an Uzbek warlord in the north Afghan desert.

When I asked the Pakistanis if they had seen or fought alongside any other foreigners several of them readily admitted to having fought alongside “*Araban*.” Some respected their Arab comrades, others had contempt for them. Some prisoners also acknowledged to having seen other foreigners, Central Asians from China (Uighurs presumably), Bangladeshis, Indians, a Westerner or two, North Africans, among others. Surprisingly, no one had seen or heard of a Chechen, although a couple of them had heard of the famous American jihadi John Walker Lindh (the American Taliban) who had been pulled out of their ranks along with the Arabs by the members of ODA 595 (Codenamed “Tiger O2”, i.e. the Green Beret Special Force Team that rode on horseback with Dostum calling in bomb strikes in 2001) and sent to the United States.

Through the course of our conversations, it became obvious that these men felt they were the heirs to an ancient tradition. There was a long history of cross-border jihadism on either side of the Durrand Line (the Afghan-Pakistani border) that pre-dated the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These “Talib-ulims,” as Winston Churchill labeled them while fighting in the ranks of the British army in the region, or “mujahideen,” as they had been known for centuries, did not recognize Sir Mortimer Durrand’s artificial line delineating British India/Pakistan from Afghanistan.² And they followed a long history of borderless jihadi volunteerism that went all the way back to the *ghazis* (holy warriors) and *murabitun* (wandering fighters) of Medieval Muslim states of North Africa and the Middle East.³ Onto this ancient template had been grafted modern

¹ For photographs of these prisoners and Dostum’s world go to: www.brianglynwilliams.com (select Field Research, then Afghanistan, then Living with a Warlord).

² Winston Churchill. *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. (London: the Pioneer. 1897). This classic account of British counter jihadism on the Afghan-British frontier can be found at: http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1299483.

³ Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices* (Princeton; Princeton University Press. 2006), pp. 136-137.

notions and methods of warfare formulated by the likes of the “Patron Saint” of the modern trans-national jihad movement, Abdullah Azzam; Sayed Qutb, the Egyptian writer who revived the long dormant *fard* (duty) to wage jihad; Zia ul Haq, the Islamist president of Pakistan in the 1980s; and of course Osama bin Laden.

What Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley had been for Shiite jihad and terrorism in the 1970s, the Afghan-Pakistani border had become for Sunni jihadism by the late 1980s. What happened in this mountainous border region was both the revival of an ancient form of Islamic duty and a new trans-national movement that was a distinct product of the late twentieth century.

But how did this Central Asian frontier of the *Dar ul Islam* (Realm of Islam) come to be the epicenter of a modern manifestation of an ancient Islamic tradition of trans-border jihadi volunteerism? It is to the answering of this question that this article is devoted.

Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s

Pakistan was established by Muhammad Ali Jinnah as a secular state and Afghanistan of the late twentieth century was similarly run by such secular rulers as Amanullah Khan, Zahir Shah and Mohammad Daoud. But there were always populist Islamist currents in the countryside of both countries. During time of foreign “infidel” intervention or “infidel apostate” rule in particular they led to jihads and rebellions. These currents were especially notable following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The modern era of Islamist militancy in Afghanistan and neighboring areas in Pakistan largely began in the 1980s, as a result of a joint CIA Pakistani Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI) operation that aimed to train and equip non-state actors for jihad against the Soviets (Operation Cyclone). While the Pakistani government had made use of tribal proxies in its 1947 clash with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir, the anti-Soviet jihad was on a much larger and more systematic scale. It was an international operation involving billions of U.S. and Saudi dollars and jihadi-volunteer recruits from throughout the world. The original foreign fighter participation in this region came about in this context and was state-sponsored. That is to say it fell under the rubric of President Ronald Regan’s National Security Directorate 166 and Pakistani President Zia ul Haq’s “re-Islamization” drive.⁴

The anti-Soviet mujahideen ran their operations from a series of support bases in the Pashtun tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan that were controlled by the Pakistani ISI. Like the jihad networks themselves, these support camps would continue to be openly used by Islamist militants from the

⁴ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden* (Penguin Publishers: New York, 2006), p. 128.

1980s right up until 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom ended the process begun by Operation Cyclone.

In addition to this U.S.-Saudi-Egyptian-Pakistani funded covert operation, it is important to note, there was also a *grass-roots*, mosque-based movement in the Middle East and Pakistan that drew tens of thousands of adventurers and fanatics to the jihad in Afghanistan. Despite their common goal with Western intelligence services of driving out the Soviets, many of these militants saw Americans as “*kufurs*” or infidels. Far from being a tool of the CIA, many of the so-called Afghan-Arabs (including Bin Laden) tried to have Westerners, whom they encountered in Afghanistan in the 1980s, killed.⁵ In my interviews with Marc Sageman, one of the CIA operatives who ran the mujahideen operation from Islamabad in the late 1980s, this source adamantly rejected the widely accepted notion that the CIA had somehow armed and supplied bin Laden and other Arab Wahhabis and Salafis.⁶

This divergence of long-term interests and motives between the United States and the extremists among the grassroots foreign fighters in Afghanistan boded ill for the future of America's relations with the trans-national jihad movement that was described by Pakistani President Benazir Bhutto as a “Frankenstein.” As many as 35,000 foreign jihadis, predominately Pakistanis, Egyptians, Saudis, Yemenis, Sudanese, and Algerians, partook in the “Mother of all Jihads” in the 1980s. Few if any of these jihadis went to Afghanistan to wage holy war under the auspices of the CIA, and not all of those who settled in the lawless frontier zones trusted the ISI. They did so to fulfill their own goals.

A word must, however, be said here about the Arab contribution to the jihad in Afghanistan. It is a popular myth that bin Laden and other Arab jihadis “defeated” the Soviet Union. In actuality, the small number of Arabs fighting in Afghanistan at any given time (no more than a few thousand) did not make much of an impact on the course of war. There were, by contrast, more than a quarter of a million local Afghan mujahideen who fought with skill and tenacity against the Soviets to defend their homes, villages and nation from the invaders. These hardy Afghan rebels fought with much more effect than many of the Arabs who often came on “jihad tours” for a few weeks or months before returning home as heroes. It should also be stated that the Arabs arrived late in the game. There were no more than a 100 Arab fighters in the region in 1985 and the first Arab martyr, Yahya Senyor “Al Jeddawi” was not killed until that year.⁷

⁵ Jon Lee Anderson, *The Lion's Grave: Dispatches from Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), p. 132.

⁶ Interviews with Marc Sageman carried out at the Joint Information Operations Warfare Command, Lackland Air Base 2005 and Washington, DC 2006.

⁷ For the martyrdom epitaph of Yahya al Jiddawi written by Abdullah Azzam see: http://caravansofmartyrs.atSPACE.com/html/Yahya_Senior.htm For more on this early period see Thomas Hegghammer. “The Origins of Global Jihad: Explaining the Arab Mobilization to 1980s Afghanistan.” *Policy Memo, International Security Program, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*, Jan. 22, 2009.

Several Afghan-Tajik commanders, I spent time with, who fought for Massoud the Lion of Panjsher spoke with derision of the Arabs who traveled to their realm to partake in the jihad. Not all the Arabs, of course, were so-called “Gucci jihadis.” Some certainly were dedicated fanatics who dreamed of martyrdom in the mountains of “Khorasan” (the ancient name for Afghanistan that Arabs often used). In the late 1980s, for example, the Arab volunteer mujahideen were the first to suggest that “martyrdom operations” be carried out against the Soviets (i.e. suicide bombings). In his recent work, *Ghost Wars*, Steven Coll claims, “The Afghans whom Yousaf (a Pakistani Intelligence commander) trained uniformly denounced suicide attack proposals as against their religion. It was only Arab volunteers who later advocated suicide attacks.”⁸

Western journalists who encountered Arab volunteers while traveling with indigenous Afghan *mujahideen* also noticed this Arab-Afghan dichotomy. BBC reporter Saira Shah, for example, wrote of the Arab volunteers in Afghanistan “They don’t mind strapping explosives to themselves to become martyrs, but they are afraid of a bit of shelling.”⁹ The Arabs were often more trouble than they were worth. For instance, many of them were Wahhabi-Salifite iconoclasts who were infuriated by the local Afghans’ Sufi (mystical) form of Islam. When the Arab puritans encountered *ziyarat* (shrines where superstitious Afghan locals went for miracles and cures) they often destroyed them. On more than one occasion these Arabs got into conflicts with the local Afghans and on several occasions they were killed.¹⁰ In their most self defeating case of fanaticism, in spring of 1989 a group of Arab fighters took prisoner dozens of Afghan Communist troops who had surrendered and, in direct contradiction to Afghan tradition, hacked them to bloody pieces and sent them back to the besieged Communist garrison at Jalalabad. Far from intimidating the defenders, this inspired them to greater ferocity in their defense and the city never surrendered to the besieging Afghan mujahideen.¹¹

Regardless of their actual battlefield effectiveness it was not so much the question of the Arabs impact on the war that is at issue here, but the war’s impact on the Arabs. Many Arabs were inspired by the galvanizing leader of the modern jihad movement, Abdullah Azzam. Azzam, a Palestinian-Jordanian cleric, established a safe house organization in the Pakistani frontier town of Peshawar for foreign jihadis known as *Maktab al Khidamet* (the Special Services Office).¹² It was this organization that was taken over by bin Laden

⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 134.

⁹ Saira Shah, *The Storyteller’s Daughter* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), pp. 133 and 135.

¹⁰ Robert Abdul Hayy Darr, *The Spy of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006).

¹¹ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 58-59; and Assen Akram, *Histoire de la Guerre d’Afghanistan* (Paris: Paris Editions Balland, 1996), pp. 227-277.

¹² Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 92-96.

after the assassination of the comparatively moderate Azzam in 1989. Azzam was probably assassinated by Egyptian *takfiris* (extremists who believe in labeling others infidels) who gravitated around Ayman al Zawaheri, an Egyptian militant who later became number two in Al Qaeda. Azzam's death cleared the way for bin Laden to become the leader of a large portion of the foreign fighters in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Bin Laden, who had earned his reputation as a foreign fighter following a firefight with Russian Spetsnaz special forces at Jaji in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan in 1987, continued to lead Arabs and other fighters against the Najibullah Communist government in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the Soviets in early 1989.¹³ The Arab fighters took heavy losses, for example, in the bloody battle for Jalalabad in the spring of 1989.¹⁴ They were described as being comparatively fanatical and in search of martyrdom. Most of the Arabs fought under the auspices of, or were allied to, extremist elements among the Afghan mujahideen, in particular the Pashtun fanatical Islamists, Rasul Sayyaf, Jalaludin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

When Gulbuddin Hekmatyar failed in his effort to seize the Afghan capital following the final collapse of Najibullah's Communist government in the spring of 1992, the Arab and other foreign fighters grew disillusioned with the Muslim on Muslim fighting. Most left Afghanistan when Hekmatyar began to clash with Dostum, Massoud the Lion of Panjsher and other warlords in what became known as the Afghan Civil War of 1992 to 1996. The Muslim on Muslim struggle for control of post-Communist Afghanistan hardly fit the model for a noble jihad against the Communist infidel.

Some of those who left Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1992, a distinct minority, went on to join bin Laden's newly organized terrorist organization, al Qaeda al Jihad (or al Qaeda al Sulbah, i.e. the Solid Base). Many of these later migrated with bin Laden to Khartoum, Sudan where he lived from 1992 to 1996.

But not all former volunteer jihadis in Afghanistan were vetted and recruited by the elite al Qaeda terrorist organization. It would be hard to maintain secrecy in an organization containing 35,000 men. The vast majority of foreign mujahideen fighters went home or engaged in frontal jihad elsewhere. With the withdrawal of the Soviet 40th Limited Contingent in February 1989 and seizure of the border province of Khost by the mujahideen, the Pakistani ISI also began to discover a new use for the stateless veterans of the Afghan jihad. As the Muslim Kashmiris' struggle for *Kashmiriyat* (national independence from Hindu India) was transformed into a full-blown proxy jihad by the Pakistani ISI, foreign fighters began to serve as shock-troops and eventually *fidayeen* (suicide) fighter-terrorists against Indian Security forces.

¹³ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), pp. 110-120.

¹⁴ Bergen. *Osama Bin Laden*, p. 87.

These Arab and Afghan veterans of the Afghan jihad were both surrogates of the Pakistani state and a sign of things to come.¹⁵

To maintain the facade of deniability, these jihadi paramilitaries were trained from 1992 on by the ISI across the border in a growing archipelago of camps located in the Khost and Jalalabad regions of eastern Afghanistan. The Pakistani army then “privatized” the jihad in Kashmir by deploying “thousands” of Arabs, Afghans and Pakistani paramilitaries in such organizations as *Harkat ul Mujahideen* (Movement of Holy Warriors), *Jaish e Mubammad* (Army of Muhammad) and *Lasbkar e Toiba* (Army of the Pure), and *Lasbkar e Jhangvi* (the Army of Jhangvi) to fight against the Indian “*jawans*” (security forces). Kashmir became the primary zone for foreign jihadi fighters in Eurasia by the mid-1990s.

Kashmiris whom I interviewed in Kashmir’s capital of Srinigar in the spring of 2007 claimed to have initially been grateful for this military assistance, but this initial feeling was replaced by fear and distrust when the foreign militants spoke of establishing strict shariah Islamic law in this easy-going Sufi Muslim land. The foreign fighters it seemed had grand plans for transforming Kashmir into a base of operations for carrying the struggle into India proper.¹⁶

But more alarming developments were in the air. As militant Kashmiri jihad organizations gained strength in the 1990s, the Pakistani Islamic parties that supported them in the tribal regions began to subscribe to such militant fundamentalist ideologies as Salafism and Deobandism. As the number of *madrassas* (seminaries) in Pakistan increased from 700 to 7,000 from the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the War on Terror, these schools quickly became incubators for terrorism. Pakistan had in fact created a vast jihadi movement that was increasingly interested in overturning the secular country of the founding father Jinnah and turning it into a strict Islamic theocracy. But it was in the neighboring country of Afghanistan not Pakistan where the extremists would fulfill their dream of establishing a strict shariah-based Islamic emirate.

Foreign Fighters in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan

The Taliban or “Students” emerged in the town of Sangesar, in the Kandahar district of southern Afghanistan in 1994. While some of their leaders, including Mullah Omar, were ex-mujahideen, the vast majority of them were young Pashtun students who had become disillusioned with the criminality

¹⁵ Many of these foreign fighters later made their way to Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo and Mindanao to wage jihad.

¹⁶ For more on the tensions between foreign jihadis in search of bases and local moderate Muslims, see, Brian Glyn Williams. “The Failure of Al Qaeda Basing Projects From Iraq to Afghanistan,” in Michael Innes, ed., *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007).

and violence of the mujahideen warlords. When the Communists were overthrown in 1992, the mujahideen commanders of the Pashtun south became known as *topakayan* (gunmen) or *jang salaran* (warlords) and began to prey on the common people. While mujahideen warlords from other ethnic groups such as the Hazaras or Tajiks brought peace to their realms, the Pashtun mujahideen of southern Afghanistan raped local women, forcefully “taxed” travelers at roadblocks, and ruled with tremendous brutality.

In 1994, a group of Talib vigilantes decided to move against the commanders of the roadblocks infesting Kandahar. After a few initial successes, the Taliban movement began to snowball. The Taliban brought strict order to a land defined by chaos and were initially welcomed by the common people. In 1995, they moved beyond the Pashtun belt into the lands of the western Tajiks and in 1996, they seized the Afghan capital from Massoud.¹⁷

At this time, the Taliban conquered the lands in eastern Afghanistan and began to encounter bases and training compounds run by the ISI and various independent foreign fighter groups. These camps included Farouq, Muawai, Khaldan, Khalid Ibn Walid, Darunta, Sadeek, Badr, Al Jihad, Jihadi Wal, Sadeek, Ansar, and Tarnak Farms.¹⁸ The Taliban did not initially trust the groups of various armed foreigners they found living in their newly acquired lands and moved to disarm them. For their part, the foreign jihadists similarly distrusted the new Taliban masters of the land. One Algerian jihadist captured this sentiment when he wrote:

I hated the Taliban. When I was in Belgium, I had read about them and seen them on TV. They were vicious, completely uncivilized. I was disgusted by the public executions and decapitations, and the way they held the country in fear. And I also hated the Taliban because they were enemies of Massoud. He was still my hero, a noble mujahid who had earned the respect even of his enemies.

I never spoke about any of this of course. None of us did. The Taliban had taken over huge swaths of Afghanistan, and we needed Afghanistan the land of jihad. We needed to stay and train.¹⁹

This distrust gradually began to dissipate after Osama bin Laden arrived in the Jalalabad region in eastern Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996. Bin Laden soon established a close rapport with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar who made him *amir* (commander) of all the various foreign jihadi training camps in Afghanistan. Bin Laden did this by pointing out the importance of spreading shariah law and jihad beyond the borders of the Islamic Amirate of Afghanistan and in essence expanding the Taliban’s worldview. In return for offering al Qaeda and other Pakistani, Arab, Uighur, Uzbek etc. jihadists sanctuary to train

¹⁷ For more on the rise of the Taliban see the eyewitness account of Taliban leader, Abdul Salam Zaef. *My Life with the Taliban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Williams, “The Failure of al Qaeda Basing Projects.”

¹⁹ Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 192.

for jihad in places ranging from Algeria to inner China, bin Laden promised to create an international support brigade to assist the Taliban in their wars against Massoud, Dostum, Khalili and other Northern Alliance warlords.

This international fighting unit was to be known as the 055 Brigade after an old Afghan Army unit and was based in Rishikor and Lake Qargha in the Kabul vicinity. The 055 Ansars (“Supporters” as in the original supporters of the Prophet Muhammad who had similarly armed his followers while living in exile in Medina) quickly became the cutting edge of the Taliban sword. When the Taliban took Massoud’s fallback capital of Taloqan in 2000 the foreign fighters proved to be the spear tip of the invasion. Tajik fighters whom I interviewed in 2007 spoke of seeing “*Araban*” or *Ikhwani* (Brotherhood) fighters storming across land-mine fields giving their lives to clear a path for their Taliban allies. As in the 1980s, the foreign element appeared to be more fanatical than the indigenous Afghans, who were more inclined to live to fight another day.

Massoud also proved to the world that many of these fanatics were Pakistanis when he allowed reporters to interview dozens of Pakistani prisoners of war captured and held in his headquarters in Jangalak, Panjsher Valley. Several of these Pakistani captives unabashedly proclaimed their desire to fight for a pure Islamic Caliphate in neighboring Afghanistan. While much of this support from Pakistan was *ad hoc* and consisted of thousands of Pakistani madrassa students (mainly Pashtuns) who came to fight for the Taliban in the summer, the Pakistani government also covertly supported the Taliban with fighters. According to a recently declassified State Department document:

Members of the (Pakistani) Frontier Corps have candidly described their involvements in Afghanistan. Apparently company size elements from the Frontier Corps are used almost exclusively across the border. Because the composition of Frontier Corps, NWFP is totally Pashtun and Frontier Corps Balochistan is predominantly Pashtun, these individuals easily blend in with the Afghan Pashtun population. These Frontier Corps elements are utilized in command and control; training; and when necessary—combat.²⁰

By 1998, the Taliban were also making use of Uzbek fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who found sanctuary for their fighters in the north Afghan cities of Mazar i Sharif, Khoda e Barq and Kunduz. These fighters carried out summer raids into Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with the aim of overthrowing the region’s secular governments. As many as 2,000 Uzbeks from the IMU and a small number of Uighurs (an ethnically related Turkic Muslim people from Xinjiang Province China) were based in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Under al Qaeda influence they, like the Taliban, adopted a more global worldview and began to call for jihad against Israel and the United States, not just the overthrow of President Islam Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan.

²⁰ “Classified. Department of State ARA/NEA Rears.” Found at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB227/17.pdf>.

While the foreign fighters who were mainly Arabs, Uzbeks and Pakistanis thus found a sanctuary and jihad proving ground for themselves in the Taliban controlled zones of Afghanistan, they had a less stable relationship with the Pakistani government. The Arabs' sanctuary in Peshawar and surrounding regions of the tribal zones in Pakistan, in particular, was threatened when Ayman al Zawahiri's Egyptian jihadis bombed the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad in November 1995. The Pakistanis were outraged and President Benazir Bhutto's government subsequently launched a "massive crackdown" on Arabs.²¹ As a result of a series of police raids on their *hujras* (guest houses) scores of Arabs fled Pakistan with many making their way to the Islamic Amirate of Afghanistan at this time.²² For all their support of the Taliban, which they felt gave them strategic depth as an ally *vis a vis* India, the Pakistani government proved more fickle when it came to the Arabs and other foreigners. For example, Ramzi Yusuf, the bomber who tried destroying the World Trade Centers in 1993, was arrested in Pakistan with the aid of Pakistani authorities. This was to be a policy they would continue after 9/11.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban were also having problems with their Arab guests. In 1996 and 1998, bin Laden issued *fatwas* calling on Muslims to kill Americans, even civilians. Mullah Omar responded by ordering bin Laden not to issue any more threats against the West. Many in the Taliban movement felt that the Arab terrorists represented a threat to their regime. But bin Laden did not repay his host's hospitality in kind and in August 1998 al Qaeda terrorists attacked the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. President Bill Clinton responded by launching cruise missile strike known as Operation Infinite Reach.

In this strike, 75 cruise missiles were launched at various jihadi training camps in Afghanistan. The missiles struck the Al Badr camp (also known as Zahwar Kili) built by bin Laden in the 1980s, Farouq (a camp used by Al Qaeda and other jihadi groups) as well as Muawai, a camp used by the Pakistani jihadi group Harkat ul Mujahideen. According to Ahmed Rashid, twenty local Afghans, seven Pakistanis, three Yemenis, two Egyptians, one Saudi and one Turk were killed in the strikes.²³ Far from killing bin Laden, however, the strikes only infuriated Mullah Omar who vowed to protect his own people and Arab guests from the Americans. The strikes also made bin Laden a star in jihadi circles throughout the Middle East.

On the eve of 9/11, the Taliban host and the al Qaeda parasite, thus, appeared to be attached at the hip despite their differences. As the Taliban's military campaign against the Northern Alliance stalled and the Taliban were compelled to engage in forced recruitment drives in the Pashtun south to

²¹ Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad*, p. 225.

²² Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), pp. 217-218.

²³ Ahmed Rashid, *The Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 134.

replenish their ranks, al Qaeda's 055 Brigade became increasingly important. While most in the West who had heard of al Qaeda focused on its terrorist wing, it was the military wing of al Qaeda headed by the number three in the organization, Muhammad Atef, that had the largest following. According to *Jane's World Armies*, by 2001 bin Laden was able to field a predominantly Arab fighting force of approximately 2,000-3,000 fighters. About 600 of these fighters were based on the Shomali Plain front north of Kabul fighting against Massoud's Northern Alliance Tajiks.²⁴ Others were based in Kunduz in the north for campaigns on the Takhar front against a combined Uzbek-Tajik Northern Alliance.

In addition to these 2,000-3,000 Arab fighters, there was also an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighting force led by Tahir Yuldushev and Juma Namangani that was said to have had as many as 2,000 fighters.²⁵ By 2001, IMU leader Juma Namangani had been made head of the al Qaeda fighting force and had merged his troops with bin Laden's. Local Afghan Uzbeks whom I interviewed in 2003, 2005 and 2007 spoke with deep resentment about these foreign Uzbek militants who joined al Qaeda. I was told by my informants that the Uzbek exiles from Uzbekistan had grown their beards long, started learning Arabic, were fanatical, and were "no longer Uzbeks in any sense."

But the largest component of foreign fighters in Afghanistan was not Arabs or Uzbeks, but Pakistanis. According to *Jane's World Armies*, on the eve of 9/11 there were as many as 7,000 Pakistanis fighting in the ranks of the Taliban.²⁶ This massive number, when combined with as many as 5,000 Uzbek and Arab fighters, accounted for a significant portion (approximately a fourth) of the Taliban's army that was estimated to be 45,000 men strong. And the foreigners, especially the Uzbeks and Arabs, were said to be skilled fighters. According to *Jane's*, "Generally, Arab units are deployed in an infantry role armed with nothing heavier than rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), PK machine guns and mortars. They are, however, widely recognized as currently the most aggressive and committed fighters in Taliban ranks."²⁷

The Role of Foreign Fighters in Operation Enduring Freedom

According to my interview with bin Laden's driver, Salim Hamdan, when the Arab fighters found out about the so-called "Holy Tuesday" attacks on New York and Washington on 9/11 there was great excitement in the

²⁴ "Foreign pro-Taliban fighters inside Afghanistan Pre-hostilities," *Jane's World Armies*, Aug. 8, 2001.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

various al Qaeda training camps and fronts in Afghanistan.²⁸ Many Arabs were eager to come to grips with the American “infidel” and were photographed by journalists in crisp new camouflage uniforms in Kabul and other cities preparing for war.²⁹ For his part, bin Laden felt confident from previous experience that America would respond with a limited barrage of cruise missile strikes and ordered his followers to disperse from their camps in the Pashtun east to make themselves harder to target. Most 055 *Ansars* in the camps were sent to various fronts to bolster the Taliban in case the Northern Alliance went on the offensive in Takhar, Shomali, or in a small mountain enclave controlled by Dostum in the Dar y Suf Valley.

As for the Taliban, they initially reacted to the stunning news from America by panicking and denying their Arab guests’ guilt. When U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell called on them to “either help us rip them up” or suffer “the full wrath of the United States and other countries,” the Taliban appeared at a loss for what to do.³⁰ While some Taliban moderates were in favor of publicly trying bin Laden’s Arab terrorists, Mullah Omar and the extremist wing of the Taliban vehemently overrode them. Far from turning Bin Laden over, Mullah Omar proclaimed, “Osama Bin Laden will be the last person to leave Afghanistan” and warned his people not to be “cowards.”³¹ The Taliban it seemed were determined to share al Qaeda’s fate.

When confronted with the news of the Taliban’s intransigence, the Bush administration had no recourse but to move against the clear and present danger emanating from Afghanistan. As the Taliban drew a line in the sand, Richard Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State, summed up America’s position as follows, “we told the Taliban in no uncertain terms that if this happened, its their ass. No difference between the Taliban and Al Qaeda now. They both go down.”³² America was now at war with both the Taliban and the largest formation of foreign jihadi fighters in the world.

U.S. hostilities commenced in October 2001 and it quickly became obvious that Centcom’s plan was to use small bands of Green Beret A-Teams and CIA Special Activity Division operatives to act as “force magnifiers” for the Northern Alliance opposition. As the American Special Ops teams called in precision bomb strikes on enemy formations and Dostum began to lead an offensive down the Dar y Suf Valley, the Taliban, however, received unexpected help from Pakistan. While Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf broke off

²⁸ Author’s interview with Bin Laden’s driver Salim Hamdan and his attorney Charlie Swift, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Dec. 2008.

²⁹ *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 24, 2001.

³⁰ Rupert Cornwell, “Taliban Are Given an Ultimatum. Hand Over Bin Laden.” *Independent*, Sept. 17, 2001.

³¹ Ed Vulliamy, “The March to the Brink of Battle,” *Observer*, Sept. 23, 2001. And Luke Harding and Rory McCarthy, “War-Weary Afghans Flee in Fear,” *Observer*, Sept. 16, 2001.

³² Richard Clarke, *Against all Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 23.

ties with the Taliban under U.S. pressure, on the grassroots level most Pakistanis still supported Mullah Omar's Islamic regime. One of these Pakistanis, a Pashtun firebrand cleric from the Swat Valley northwest of Islamabad named Sufi Muhammad, declared jihad on the Americans. In mid-October 2001 he led thousands of Pakistani tribal volunteers surging across the frontier to defend the embattled Taliban regime.

The untrained Pakistanis were then sent for the most part to the north of Afghanistan where the Northern Alliance was most active. But neither this Pakistani cannon fodder nor the local Taliban or Arab and Uzbek fighters proved to be a match for US JDAMS (satellite guided bombs) and Dostum's Uzbek cavalry charges. As Dostum burst out of the Dar y Suf Valley with U.S. bombs clearing the way for his horsemen, his fighters captured or killed hundreds of foreign fighters. Video Dostum showed me of this combat, which I have made available on line, displays images of bearded Arab prisoners who are clearly shell shocked after their capture by Dostum's horsemen.³³

As the Taliban and 055 Brigade retreated before Dostum's offensive they abandoned the great northern city of Mazar i Sharif. In their haste to escape Dostum's vengeful Uzbeks, the local Afghan Taliban also abandoned hundreds of Pakistani jihad volunteers who had just been rushed in to defend the city. These Pakistani fighters then took over a girl's school in Mazar i Sharif and vowed to fight to the finish. When Dostum sent in local mullahs to negotiate their surrender, the Pakistani jihadis killed them in cold blood, thus sealing their fate. Green Beret members of ODA 595 then called in a JDAM strike on the school. Several thousand-pound precision bombs were dropped through the school roof and as many as 800 Pakistani fighters were killed during the subsequent bombardment.³⁴

From Mazar i Sharif, the Taliban and their foreign allies fled east towards the town of Kunduz. En route they were heavily bombed and strafed by US F-18s and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan military leader Juma Namangani was killed. Having made it to Kunduz, the Taliban and their foreign allies then dug in and prepared to fight to the finish in a town that had a sizeable Pashtun population. But the United States called in AC-130 Specter Gunships and B-52s and bombed and strafed them mercilessly.³⁵ As hundreds died in the withering bombardment, the local Taliban began to defect to Dostum's Uzbek faction. At this time, the foreign fighters killed some 300-400 Afghan Taliban who attempted to give themselves up to the Northern Alliance and announced "We are going to be martyrs. We are not going from Kunduz."³⁶ One local Northern Alliance commander claimed "The Arabs

³³ Video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/dostum2008#p/u/5/qtdHkRBxQ-o>.

³⁴ "Taliban's Allies Lost in Strange City," *Washington Post*, Nov. 11, 2001.

³⁵ Author's interview with Master Sear gent Bart Decker, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, Hurlburt Airfield, Florida. Dec. 2008.

³⁶ "Doomed Arab units prepare for final battle against the odds," *Guardian*, Nov. 20, 2001.

and Pakistanis have decided that the Afghans are not pure enough for them, and so they are killing them.”³⁷ There were also reports of the foreign fighters massacring local Afghan civilians.

The Northern Alliance factions had a deep-seated hatred for the arrogant foreign fighters and had been photographed summarily executing them on one occasion. One Northern Alliance Tajik, who was interviewed by a Western reporter at Kunduz, captured the sentiment of many non-Pashtun Afghans when he said “When we get into Kunduz, I am going to make kebabs out of the Arabs. These foreigners have killed thousands of civilians. We will avenge this.”³⁸

In the end, the 3,000 foreign fighters estimated to be trapped in Kunduz were forced to surrender despite their reluctance to do so. But before they did, the Pakistani air force sent as many as a dozen transport planes to the city’s airport to evacuate hundreds of its citizens from the besieged enclave.³⁹ This was obviously a quid pro quo designed to gain the support of the Pakistanis who had at this time promised to arrest all Arabs fleeing into their country.

The vast majority of those foreigners captured at Kunduz surrendered to Dostum in the desert to the West of Kunduz at a place called Ergenek. There they had their hands tied behind their backs, were placed in transport trucks and transported to Dostum’s fortress at Qala i Jengi (the Fortress of War) to the west of Mazar i Sharif. But the foreign prisoners subsequently revolted and captured an arms depot after they were interrogated by two CIA agents. One Arab suicide bomber with grenades hidden on himself blew himself up killing an Uzbek general and CIA agent Michael Spann was captured and killed by the revolting prisoners. In response, Dostum shelled the prisoners with tanks and U.S. special forces called in airstrikes on the areas of the fortress where the prisoners had seized the weapons depot. When the bombardment was over only 86 of the initial 600 prisoners who had been sent to the fortress survived. Among them was John Walker Lindh the “American Taliban” who went by the Arabic *kunya* (*nom de guerre*) of Abdul Hamid.

Al Qaeda leader Abu Laith al-Libi (a Libyan) and Sami al-Saadi (“Abu al-Mundhir”, another Libyan) led a group of Arabs that fought the Northern Alliance in the Shomali Plain to the north of Kabul.⁴⁰ But bin Laden ordered most al Qaeda fighters to abandon Kabul and move to the east to his mountain base at Tora Bora on the border with Pakistan. Before all the Arabs

³⁷ “Foes Claim Taliban Are Killing Soldiers Who Seek to Defect,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2001.

³⁸ “Soldiers in city under siege vow to fight to bitter end,” *Independent*, Nov. 16, 2001.

³⁹ “The ‘airlift of evil’ Why did we let Pakistan pull ‘volunteers’ out of Kunduz?” *MSNBC.com* Nov. 29, 2001. “Pakistan air force seen evacuating foreign fighters from Kunduz,” *The Independent November 26, 2001*.

⁴⁰ Camile Tawil, “The Other Face of Al Qaeda,” *Al Hayat (reprinted in Quillam)*, Nov. 2010, pp. 17-18.

could retreat the Tajik faction of the Northern Alliance captured Kabul, a city dominated by Tajiks. Tajik mobs were said to have killed Arabs they found in the city and stuffed their mouths with Afghani bank notes as a sign of contempt. The haughty Arabs who had carried out human rights abuses against Northern Alliance civilians were now being hunted and one Arab source stated “Simply being out on the street was an invitation to be killed.”⁴¹

According to the account of an Arab who was in Afghanistan at the time, the “disappearance of the Taliban and the collapse of its resistance meant that the ‘Arab jihadists’ were the only group in Afghanistan who even considered resisting the invasion. Many of them did not have anywhere else to go.”⁴² As most of the north fell to the Northern Alliance, a group of Arabs led by the Egyptian military leader Sayf al Adil attempted to hold Kandahar Airport in the Pashtun south against the Americans who were determined to seize this strategic position. These Arabs who were armed with small infantry arms, such as RPGs and machine guns, were, however, no match for U.S. bombers. Scores of Arabs trying to hold fixed positions at the airport were killed in the subsequent U.S. bombardment.⁴³

As the so-called “Southern Alliance” led by Hamid Karzai and warlord Gul Agha Sherzai took the Taliban’s unofficial capital of Kandahar in the south, the Pashtun heartlands subsequently fell to the anti-Taliban Coalition. As they had done elsewhere, the foreign element in Kandahar City proved to be reluctant to surrender. A group of Arabs, for example, fled with some of their wounded comrades to the city’s main hospital and declared “We will become martyrs here” because surrender was “against Islamic law.” U.S. and Afghan forces subsequently stormed the hospital and killed the Arabs.⁴⁴ Interestingly, the graves of some 74 Arab *shabeeds* (martyrs) who were killed by the US-led Coalition subsequently became a place of pilgrimage in Kandahar for local Pashtuns seeking cures.⁴⁵ Most of the surviving Arabs in Kandahar, however, fled to the north east to a mountain valley near the Afghan border at a place called Shah i Kot. There they would bide their time.

They were not the only ones fleeing. In December, a large group of several hundred Arabs including bin Laden himself fled from Kabul to an old mujahideen base thirty miles south of Jalalabad on the Pakistani border at a place called Tora Bora (Black Dust). There they were later tracked by the CIA and U.S. special forces who began calling in bombing strikes (including one BLU 82 Daisy Cutter, the world’s largest non-nuclear bomb) and attacking them using hundreds of local Afghan Northern Alliance troops. The Arab fighters, however, fought back using mortars, assault rifles and machine guns

⁴¹ Peter Bergen, “The Battle for Tora Bora,” *New Republic*, Dec. 22, 2009.

⁴² Tawil, “The Other Face of Al Qaeda,” p. 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ “Afghans Kill 6 Who Held Out Inside Hospital,” *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 2002.

⁴⁵ “Many Residents Longingly Recall Life Under Strict Islamic Code,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2002.

to defend their simple bunkers. The 055 fighters proved to be too tenacious for the Afghan tribesmen who negotiated a truce with the Arabs that let them escape across the border into the Parchinar “Beak” area of the neighboring Federally Administered Tribal Agency of Kurram. There they were given *melmastia* (hospitality/sanctuary) by the Afridi and Orakzai Pashtun tribes of the Tirah Valley.

This meant that the only foreign fighters left in Afghanistan were either imprisoned in Dostum’s prison fortress of Sheberghan or dug into the mountain positions at Shah i Kot in southern Paktia province. By March 2002 the United States had decided to launch a heliborne assault on the Arabs, Uzbeks and Taliban dug in at Shah i Kot in what became known as Operation Anaconda. More than 2,000 Coalition troops were airlifted into the high mountain valley and immediately entered a kill zone. The entrenched Taliban and foreign fighters fought back with great determination and killed seven U.S. soldiers and wounded another 72. Two Chinook transport helicopters were also shot down using RPG 7s (Rocket Propelled Grenades). While the United States initially thought there were only 200 fighters at Shah i Kot it was later estimated that as many as 1,000 were dug in there.

In the end, however, the Taliban and foreign fighters began to take heavy casualties under intense aerial bombardments including the use of thermobaric bombs. By mid March the foreign fighters and Taliban made their escape and, like, bin Laden before them, slipped over the border into the tribal regions of Pakistan (mainly North Waziristan). While the United States triumphantly proclaimed that it killed as many as “500” enemy combatants, few enemy bodies were found in the mountains. It appeared as if most got away.

By this time, the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan had either been killed, captured or forced to flee to the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) in the Pashtun lands of Pakistan. It was now up to the Pakistani army which had never entered the autonomous FATA region before to finish up the job and for the Americans and their Coalition partners to prevent the Taliban and foreign fighters from reinfiltrating Afghanistan. Sadly, events would show that neither of these took place.

The Role of Foreign Fighters in the Afghan and Pakistani Insurgencies, 2002-2010

As the Arabs fled across the border into Pakistan from Tora Bora and Shah i Kot, they received differing welcomes. The local Pashtun people were, for example, said to have lit bonfires to guide bin Laden and his men when their shattered troops crossed into FATA’s Parchinar Beak. In the finest tradition of *melmastia*, the honored Arabs were given sanctuary. Those Arabs and Uzbeks who fled into North and South Waziristan further south were given hospitality by the legendary mujahideen/Taliban commander, who had

recently been promoted to head of the Taliban army, Jalaludin Haqqani, and several up-and-coming Pakistani Taliban leaders, such as Nek Muhammad, Abdullah Mehsud and Baitullah Mehsud. Haqqani who spoke Arabic, had fought alongside Arabs since the 1980s and knew them well, as did Nek Muhammad who had been stationed alongside Arabs and Uzbeks at Qargha Lake, Rishikor and on the Shomali Plain prior to 9/11. Safe in their off limits sanctuary where the Pakistani army had not been since the founding of Pakistan in 1947, these foreign fighters licked their wounds, regrouped and prepared to fight back.

But not all foreign fighters were so warmly received. At least 60 foreigners were arrested by the Pakistani Frontier Constabulary on the other side of the Tora Bora/Safid Koh Mountains inside Pakistan.⁴⁶ Some of these later attacked their guards and escaped but most were turned over to the Americans and transported to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf later stated “Many members of al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan and crossed the border into Pakistan. We have played cat and mouse with them. We have captured 689 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totaling millions of dollars.”⁴⁷ Several Arabs and 17 Uighurs at Guantanamo have claimed they were captured for bounties by Pakistanis.⁴⁸ Under U.S. pressure, in July 2002, Pakistani troops entered the FATA’s Tirah Valley for the first time to capture bin Laden, Zawaheri and other foreign fighters and terrorists said to be hiding there. From there, they proceeded into the Shawal Valley of North Waziristan and then South Waziristan. This incursion into the FATA was made possible after long negotiations with prickly local Pashtun tribes who had always enjoyed their autonomy.

But as the Pakistani troops clumsily shelled compounds and *hujras* (guest houses), where the foreigners were holed up, the local Waziri and Mehsud tribes rose up against them. By 2004, a situation resembling war had developed in South and North Waziristan. Under the leadership of Pakistani Taliban commander Nek Muhammad, the local Talibs and foreigners out fought the Pakistanis, who declared several face saving truces and then retreated. While the truces stipulated that Nek Muhammad and Baitullah Mehsud turn over foreigners in their ranks, this stipulation was honored in the breach. Far from turning over the foreigners, the Taliban used Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan hired guns to kill hundreds of pro-government Pashtun *maliks* (tribal elders) and carved out a *de facto* Taliban Amirate in the FATA.

By this time the Taliban had also reinfilitrated vast swathes of southern and eastern Afghanistan as well, due to the White House’s reluctance to divert troops from the invasion of Iraq and use them for nation building in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan became known as the “Forgotten War” in

⁴⁶ “Captive al-Qai’da fighters attack Pakistani guards,” *Independent*, Dec. 20, 2001.

⁴⁷ “How Guantanamo’s prisoners were sold,” *New Statesman*, Oct. 9, 2006.

⁴⁸ “Uighurs Sold to US Military for Bounty,” *Propublica*, Oct. 9, 2008.

America, as Iraq stole the spotlight, Khorasan as Afghanistan was known had certainly not been forgotten by al Qaeda. Foreigners began to play an important role in the Afghan insurgency at this time by teaching such Taliban leaders as southern front leader Mullah Dadullah and semi-independent leader Jalaludin Haqqani the tactics of the evolving Iraqi insurgency. For example, Arabs from Iraq taught the Taliban the previously taboo tactic of suicide bombing which soon became a weapon of choice for the Afghan insurgents.⁴⁹

The Arab fighters also shared the Iraqi tactic of improvising land mines and explosive devices with their Afghan Taliban comrades. During my time spent in the Pashtun tribal regions of Afghanistan in 2007, I was able to buy inspirational DVDs from Iraq dubbed into Pashtu with images of Iraqi ambushes of U.S. troops, suicide bombings, and sniper attacks. Despite their small numbers, the foreign fighters obviously played a key role in transforming the Taliban into a terrorist insurgency. In this respect, the Arabs and other foreigners played a more important role in training, funding and radicalizing the Taliban than they had among the mujahideen in the 1980s. Just as U.S. special forces acted as “force multipliers” in Operation Enduring Freedom, the well funded, highly trained, and dedicated Arabs acted as “force multipliers” for their Pashtun-Talib tribal allies. Al Qaeda members played a key role as ideologues, propaganda specialists, financiers, front line fighters, suicide bombers, and bomb makers. Media savvy Arab fighters working with al Qaeda’s Sahab (Clouds) production were also active in posting videos of themselves ambushing Coalition soldiers in Afghanistan and fighting with Pakistani troops.⁵⁰ In one famous video sequence, Arab fighters painted the name “Zarqawi,” the head of the foreign fighters in Iraq, on mortar shells then lobbed them at Coalition troops in eastern Afghanistan. In another surprisingly sophisticated Sahab Al Qaeda video, entitled “Winds of Paradise Part 2,” Arab fighters wearing Western style sneakers, ammo vests, and facemasks were filmed practicing with AK 47s, RPGs, mortars and recoilless rifles and attacking Afghan National Army SUVs.⁵¹ Sahab videos made by the “*Ansar al Mujahideen*,” as they call themselves, also featured foreign fighters shelling a U.S. forward operating base in Khost Province,⁵² ambushing “apostates” (i.e. Afghan government troops),⁵³ attacking convoys with IEDs etc.⁵⁴ Foreign Ansar fighter videos also included eerie *anasheed* (songs of praise) praising martyred fighters from Turkey, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan Kuwait, Saudi Arabia

⁴⁹ Brian Glyn Williams, “Middle East Policy, (Winter 2008). Available at www.brianglynwilliams.com.

⁵⁰ “Afghan Mujahideen engage us army RG31 vehicle with powerful bomb: Southern Khost province.” http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=1ed_1282044468.

⁵¹ This must see video is found at: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=184_1201720200.

⁵² “Waziristan Mujahideens” http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=24f_1179812144.

⁵³ “Afghan Mujahidin showing an IED Attack on Nato Supply Truck in Khost.” Found at: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=363_1259780535.

⁵⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uJYY9Yg_lg&feature=related.

and Egypt who had been martyred fighting against Coalition troops in Afghanistan or Pakistani troops.⁵⁵

One thing that becomes clear from the over fifty martyrdom videos I have viewed is the diversity of foreign fighters in the Pakistani-Afghan border areas. As expected, of course, most of martyrdom videos are for Arabs; what I did not expect was the number of Turkish *shabeeds* (martyrs) I discovered.⁵⁶ While secular Turkey is a member of NATO and Turks are currently serving as members of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, it would appear that dozens of Turks, mainly from eastern Turkey, are fighting jihad and dying in Afghanistan. A typical on-line account of the death of Turkish fighters entitled "Two Turkish Shaheeds in Afghanistan" reads:

Masha Allah. . . two of our brothers made *Hijrah* from Turkey to the land of 'Izzah and *Karaamah*, al-Khurasan to fight the enemies and defend the Muslim land. They were willing to leave the comfort of this world and live a life of adversity by bearing the heaviest *Ibaadab* in Islam, i.e. Jihad. But they knew there is the highest dignity and honor in it that they were after, i.e. the Pleasure of Allah and Jannah. Their dreams have now been fulfilled by Allah, they were killed in combat recently and are now *Shabeed*. . . . *Insha Allah*.⁵⁷

Another Turkish on-line site records an attack by Turkish jihadis stating that "Eight NATO invaders were sent to hell in mujahideen operations. In the operation many *kafirs* (infidels) soldiers were also wounded."⁵⁸ At least one Turk (a Turk from Germany) was filmed driving a VBIED suicide bomb into a U.S. base where he killed two Americans and two Afghans.⁵⁹ Another Turkish jihad site recorded the death of twelve Turkish fighters in an air strike in Waziristan.⁶⁰ I have also found online epitaphs for martyrs from Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.⁶¹ One can also find numerous martyrdom epi-

⁵⁵ "Shaheed du Khorosan: Mai 2010." Featuring Cyrillic epitaphs of "*shakbid ansors*." http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xf6yn_shaheed-du-khorosan-mai-2010_people See also "Shaheed Abu Dujanah Al Mekki Sings a Nasheed in Afghanistan." Daily Motion. Found at: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x69tmd_shaheed-abu-dujanah-al-mekki-sings_webcam.

⁵⁶ For on line photos of Turks fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan see: <http://cihaderi.net/haber/detay/16346/jundallah-studio-dan-yeni-video.html> (scroll down right of screen for photos).

⁵⁷ "Two Turkish Mujahids Shaheed In Afghanistan." <http://prisonerofjoy.blogspot.com/2008/12/two-turkish-mujahids-shaheed-in.html>.

⁵⁸ "Afganistan'da NATO 'ya Bağlı 8 İşgalci Cehenneme Gönderildi." <http://cihaderi.net/haber/detay/16388/afganistanda-nato-ya-bagli-8-ısgalci-cehenneme-gonderildi.html>.

⁵⁹ "Turkish Islamist Websites Glorify Turkish Jihadist Who Killed Two U.S. Soldiers, Two Civilians In Suicide Attack In Afghanistan," *MEMRI*. The video of the attack can be found here: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=63b_1208282417. This video takes a couple of minutes to load and start playing.

⁶⁰ Brian Glyn Williams, "Turks Join Jihad in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor* (Dec. 7, 2006). For more on the Turkish Al Qaeda recruiter for Turkish fighters in Afghanistan see, "Al Qaeda leader in Turkey captured," *Long War Journal*, Jan. 22, 2010.

⁶¹ <http://forum.filistinetiklik.com/index.php?topic=23268.0>.

taphs in Cyrillic of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) “Ansor Shakhids” on line.⁶² It would seem that Uzbek fighters have been dying defending their sanctuary in North and South Waziristan from the “hypocrites” (i.e. the Pakistani army). Pakistani media regularly lists Uzbeks in the roll call of those killed in combat operations.⁶³ The United States has also killed the head of the estimated 2,000 man strong IMU, Tohir Yuldushev, and the head of an IMU splinter group known as the Islamic Jihad Union (100 estimated fighters) Najmudin Jalolov in Predator drone strikes in 2009.

But perhaps the Uzbek jihadis’ greatest losses were sustained in March 2007 when they were attacked by their Ahmadzai Waziri Pashtun tribal hosts. Dozens of Uzbeks were killed in the Wana region of South Waziristan when local Taliban commander Maulawi Nazir led his men in attacking them as punishment for their earlier killing of a respected al Qaeda Arab named Sheikh Asadullah and of several Pashtun *maliks* (elders).⁶⁴ The Pakistani army joined in the fray and offered the attacking tribesmen artillery and sniper fire to help flush the Uzbeks out of their positions. The Uzbeks were then forced to the lands of their close friend, *Tebrik e Taliban e Pakistan* (Pakistani Taliban) leader Baitullah Mehsud. As many as 79 Uzbeks were killed in one of these clashes according to media reports.⁶⁵ Altogether as many as 250 Uzbeks may have been killed when the fighting was over.⁶⁶

Another group that is routinely listed in the roll call of those foreign fighters in Pakistan and Afghanistan are the Chechens.⁶⁷ For those, such as myself, who have long studied the ancient Chechen highlanders and their on going secessionist war in the distant Caucasus this is perhaps the most bizarre accusation. For unlike the Arabs, Turks and Uzbeks, the Sufi Chechens are a micro nation of just over a million people whose Rhode Island-sized homeland is occupied by Russian Federation troops. The estimated 200-300 die hard Chechen insurgents still fighting Russian “infidel occupiers” in the forested mountains of the south have their hands full waging a guerilla war against Russian Federal forces and their local Chechen proxy allies. The rebels have, in fact, relied upon foreign Turkish and Arab jihadis to come to their aid.⁶⁸

⁶² “Shaheed du Khorosan. Mai 2010.” *Daily Motion*. http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xef6yn_shaheed-du-khorosan-mai-2010_people.

⁶³ “Pakistani army kills Chechen fighters at Taliban, al-Qaeda base,” *Rian Novosti*, Feb. 3, 2010.

⁶⁴ “The Game is up for Uzbeks,” *Dawn*, Apr. 5, 2007.

⁶⁵ “Pakistani Tribes Take on Militants,” *Islam On Line*, Mar. 22, 2007.

⁶⁶ Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place* (New York: Viking, 2010).

⁶⁷ “Pakistani army kills Chechen fighters”; “Foreign fighter’ networks targeted in Nangarhar, Paktia,” *Long War Journal*, Aug. 23, 2010. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/08/foreign_fighter_netw.php#ixzz0yJ4PnY00.

⁶⁸ Brian Glyn Williams, “Allah’s Foot Soldiers An Assessment of the Role of Foreign Fighters and Al-Qa’ida in the Chechen Insurgency,” in *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also Brian Glyn Williams. “Turkish Volunteers in Chechnya,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Apr. 7, 2005.

There is little rationale for them to deploy desperately needed fighters across Eurasia to help the Pashtun Taliban tribesmen wage war against the U.S.-led Coalition and Pakistani troops. To date, no Chechen has ever been captured, interviewed, nor has there been any evidence of one being killed in this region.⁶⁹ Significantly, no Chechens were ever captured and sent to Guantanamo Bay by Coalition troops. In addition, in all my years of tracking on line martyrdom epitaphs I have never seen one of a Chechen in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Though U.S. troops I served alongside, while working for NATO in Afghanistan in 2009, had stories of fighting elusive Chechens no one actually knew what one looked like. “Evidence” of Chechens being in an area was usually provided in the form of stories of skilled enemy sniping or more commonly “radio intercepts.” But the commonsensical question is how many U.S. troops (or more improbably Afghans) speak Nokchi, the complex ancient language of the Chechen highlanders, to corroborate such claims?

Which brings us to the number of bona fide foreign fighters operating in the Af/Pak region. CIA director Leon Panetta has guesstimated that “at most” there are 50 to 100 al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan while National Security Adviser Jim Jones said the “maximum estimate” of al Qaeda was fewer than 100 members.⁷⁰ General David Petraeus similarly stated that the number of al Qaeda in Afghanistan was in the “double digits.”⁷¹ If one is referring in the strictest sense to *bayat* (oath) sworn members of al Qaeda this may indeed be correct. But if one is referring to foreign fighters in general, I believe this number to be an underestimate.

Even a cursory survey of *shabeed* epitaphs on line would seem to indicate that up to a dozen foreign fighters are martyred in some months. And these are the ones who are eulogized on line, a distinction not every slain fighter attains. NATO/ISAF reports and the Afghan and Western media routinely report the presence or deaths of foreign fighters in various provinces in Afghanistan.⁷² Veteran Afghan field reporter Kathy Gannon, for example, mentioned that there were 150 foreign fighters in Paktika province alone while

⁶⁹ Brian Glyn Williams, “Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth (part I),” *Chechnya Weekly*, Jamestown Foundation, Oct. 2, 2003; and “Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth (part II). Exploring the Links Between the Chechen Resistance and Afghanistan,” *Chechnya Weekly*, Jamestown Foundation, Nov. 6, 2003.

⁷⁰ “For Americans, al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan just an afterthought,” *Andbranews.net*, Aug. 23, 2010.

⁷¹ “Petraeus: ‘Double Digits’ of al-Qaeda Fighters in Afghanistan,” *Washington Independent*, June 17, 2010.

⁷² See for example “ISAF Joint Command Statement,” *Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System*. <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/54562/more-than-20-insurgents-killed-haqqani-clearing-operation>; and “Taliban Commander, 4 Arabs Killed in S Afghanistan,” *Xinbua*, Feb. 16, 2010.

an Al Jazeera report claimed that one third of the insurgents in Baghlan province were foreigners.⁷³

An Afghan report claimed that there were 40 foreign fighters in Kunduz and the Taliban forces that occupied Musa Qala as their headquarters in Helmand province were said to be headed by foreigners.⁷⁴ One Afghan provincial governor estimated that there were 700 foreign fighters operating in southern Afghanistan.⁷⁵ An Afghan general claimed that “4,000” foreign fighters had joined the fighting in Afghanistan (this seems an exaggeration in light of the fact that the Taliban are said to field between 20,000 and 25,000 fighters in Afghanistan).⁷⁶ Another Afghan general, Gen. Mohammed Afzal, the Afghan army’s commander in the east, stated in August 2010 “The enemy changed their tactics this year, and al-Qaeda has started to become even stronger this year.” In referring to Taliban infiltration from Pakistan Gen. Mohammed Zaman Mahmoodzai, head of Afghanistan’s border security force, stated “One out of three are Arabs.”⁷⁷

Using ISAF reports, the *Long War Journal* has traced the presence of foreign fighters in 16 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.⁷⁸ U.S. military and intelligence officials have found evidence of Lashkar al Zil (the Shadow Army, Al Qaeda’s paramilitary fighting force) activities in Kunar, Nuristan, Nangahar, Kabul, Logar, Wardak, Khost, Paktika, Paktia, Zabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar provinces.⁷⁹ A three month report by Asia Times in Afghanistan and Pakistan suggests al Qaeda “is present in almost every Afghan and Pakistani province along the fluid border areas between the two countries.”⁸⁰ Also the head of the insurgents in the Afghan province of Nuristan is an Egyptian commander named Abu Ikhlas al Masri who leads a group of Arab fighters.

What holds true for Afghanistan certainly holds true for Pakistan where there are even more foreigners in the FATA and NWFP. The Pakistani and Western media and Pakistani military regularly report active or slain foreign fighters in this area.⁸¹ A typical report reads “One Pakistani brigadier told The

⁷³ “Foreign fighters answering call from al Qaeda,” *Associated Press*, Jul. 18, 2008; and “Al Qaeda Fighters Swell Taliban Ranks,” *Al Jazeera*, Sept. 11, 2010. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/09/2010091183514798599.html>.

⁷⁴ “Foreign Taliban’ direct the insurgency in Musa Qala: Deputy district governor,” *Long War Journal*, Jul. 11, 2010. “Foreign Fighters Support Taliban in Afghanistan,” *RAWA*, Aug. 7, 2010.

⁷⁵ “700 foreign fighters in southern Afghanistan, provincial governor says,” *Star Tribune*, Feb. 11, 2010.

⁷⁶ “Official: Foreign Fighters Helping Taliban,” *CBS News*, Oct. 10, 2009.

⁷⁷ “Foreign militants boost insurgency in eastern Afghanistan,” *Associated Press*, Aug. 12, 2010.

⁷⁸ “Al Qaeda maintains an extensive network in Afghanistan.” *Long War Journal*, Jul. 29, 2010.

⁷⁹ “Al Qaeda’s Paramilitary Shadow Army,” *Long War Journal*, Feb. 9, 2009.

⁸⁰ “Al Qaeda Spreads its Tentacles.” *Asia Times*, May 30, 2009.

⁸¹ See for example, “Forces kill four foreigners in Wana hospital gunfight,” *Daily Times*, Mar. 12, 2010. Or “Pakistan says 1,000 militants killed near Afghan border,” *AFP*, Sept. 26, 2008.

Times last week that his men had encountered more than 1,500 Uzbek militants during operations last autumn in South Waziristan. Another brigade commander said that 10 percent of the 300 militants that his men had recently killed in Waziristan were foreign, including Arabs.”⁸² The vast majority of foreigners, mainly Uzbeks and Arabs, are concentrated in the agencies of North and South Waziristan with a sizeable presence engaged in cross border activities into Nuristan and Kunar from Bajaur Agency (prior to the Pakistani Army’s recent offensive in this agency and South Waziristan). Pakistani media and military reports frequently report the existence of foreign fighters in the FATA and as far afield as the Swat Valley, a scenic valley to the north-west of Islamabad in the North West Frontier Province (now known as Pakhtunkhwa Khyber) that the Taliban openly occupied from 2007-2009.⁸³ During my visit to Swat in June 2010, local Pashtuns warned me not to walk the streets of the town of Dir for fear that “al Qaeda” fighters who had recently been seen there might kill me and a colleague.

It is in South Waziristan and North Waziristan that one also frequently encounters reports in the media of “Arabs” or “foreigners” being killed by CIA Predator and Reaper drone strikes.⁸⁴ The Long War Journal counted 34 high level foreigners (exclusively Arabs and Uzbeks) killed in drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004.⁸⁵ These have included several al Qaeda field commanders and the head of the Lashkar al Zil Shadow Army. The Pakistani government has secretly condoned these strikes in part because they know the foreigners have been involved in tenaciously fighting Pakistani “apostate” troops (the foreigners are often described as being better fighters than the local Pashtuns), sending suicide bombers against Pakistani targets (including two attempts on Musharraf’s life), and playing a major role in convincing the Pakistani Taliban to declare a jihad on the Pakistani army in 2008.

As in Afghanistan, the foreigners play a role that surpasses their actual numbers by providing financiers, suicide bombers, full time dedicated fighters (not part time Taliban lashkar-militia-members), media experts, hired guns, bomb builders, preachers who have the prestige of being from the Arab world, etc. And while Arabs and other foreigners have become lightning rods for CIA drone strikes, many Pakistani Pashtuns consider it an honor to host them in their *hujras* (guest houses).

It should also be noted that the war in “Khorasan” and Pakistan has begun to have more allure to foreign jihadi volunteers in recent years since the Anbar tribes turned against al Qaeda in Iraq in 2007–08 during the Anbar

⁸² “Foreign Fighters a “Formidable Presence. Arabs Throw in Their Lot with Global Terrorists in War Against Infidel,” *Times Online*, Mar. 20, 2010.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, and “Swat Taliban Seeks Foreign Militants Help,” *Islam On Line*, May 20, 2009.

⁸⁴ For a typical report see “U.S. Missiles Kill 15 People Near Border in Pakistan,” *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 2009.

⁸⁵ “Senior al Qaeda and Taliban leaders killed in US airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004–2010,” *Long War Journal*, June 19, 2010.

Awakening.⁸⁶ I have seen on line invitations in Turkey for the “Lions of Islam” to come to Khorasan to fight the infidels, listened to on line sermons in Uzbek by IMU leader Tohir Yulduшев calling on Uzbeks to come fight in the mountains of the Af/Pak border, etc.

Many have heeded the call to come to this legendary theater of action where bin Laden and the first generation of foreign fighters made their names in the late 1980s. The fighters have come from as far as Germany (dozens of Germans of Arab and Turkish descent were said to have created a “German village” in Waziristan and several have been killed in fighting),⁸⁷ Russia (a Siberian was caught in Afghanistan with a suicide pack),⁸⁸ America (Adam Ghadan is a Jewish American convert to Islam who has become an al Qaeda spokesman) and Africa (several Somalis and Sudanese have been killed in Pakistan).⁸⁹

Many of these have joined the Lashkar al Zil (also known as the Jaish al Ussrah or Army of the Protective Shield) which has six brigades that have been involved in several attacks on U.S. and French troops in Nuristan, Laghman and other border regions in Afghanistan. Others have joined Ilyas Kashmiri’s 313 Brigade which is focused on carrying out terrorist and insurgent attacks on the Pakistanis “who have lost their faith.”

The foreign fighters have been buoyed by the sweep of the Taliban through the south and east in Afghanistan in recent years but have come under greater pressure in South Waziristan (in 2009 and 2010 this area was occupied by the Pakistani army) and Bajaur (2009). Their safest sanctuaries remain in North Waziristan, the domain of Jalaludin Haqqani who is linked to the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence and thus protected, and in Nuristan where there is little Afghan National Army or U.S. presence and an Egyptian jihadi commander (Abu Ikhlas al Masri) who has married a local woman in charge of the insurgency.

Clearly the foreign fighters in the Af/Pak region feel that this is an important region for waging jihad and continue to be drawn to this historically vital zone of jihad to wage holy war. Many believe that the Islamic Emirate founded by the Taliban was the world’s only true Islamic state and are willing to die to see it resurrected. Foreign fighters will continue to play an important role in this theater of action that far exceeds their actual numbers for some time to come. The blood of foreign martyrs has been shed in fighting the *kufur* in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan thus sanctifying this legendary land of jihad. As the fighters are prone to saying, while the “infidels” have the watches, Allah’s warriors have the time and will eventually prevail in their defense of this border region of the *Dar ul Islam*.



⁸⁶ Brian Glyn Williams, “Anbar’s Sunni Militias. Fighting by Proxy,” *Jane’s Islamic Affairs*, Sept. 25, 2007.

⁸⁷ “Pakistan discovers ‘village’ of white German al-Qaeda insurgents,” *Telegraph*, Sept. 25, 2009; and “Foreign militants active in Waziristan,” *CentralAsiaOnline.com*, May 5, 2010.

⁸⁸ “Foreign Fighters of Harsher Bent Bolster Taliban,” *Der Spiegel*, Oct. 30, 2007.

⁸⁹ “Forces kill four foreigners in Wana hospital gunfight,” *Daily Times*, Mar. 12, 2010.

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