



ARAB VETERANS OF AFGHANISTAN WAR LEAD NEW ISLAMIC HOLY WAR

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BODY: LONDON, Oct. 28 ([COMPASS](#)) - Across North Africa, down through Sudan, eastward into Jordan and south to the Arabian peninsula, and even beyond into Asia, there is a new cutting edge to the Islamic revolution that is underway: hundreds of battle-hardened Muslim zealots, trained, armed and funded by the Americans, British and some of the very Arab states they now threaten. They are veterans of the long war fought by the Muslim Mujahedin of Afghanistan against the Soviet Army and Moscow's communist puppet regime in Kabul from 1979 to 1991. These zealots from Egypt, Algeria, Jordan and a dozen other Arab states helped fight the Soviets to a standstill in a "jihad," or holy war, against communism and accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, turning on their benefactors, they are waging a new jihad against secular Arab governments, whose fall -- which is possible -- will dramatically change the political map of the Middle East and have significant consequences for Europe and beyond. It is likely that there would have been Islamic eruptions whether there had been veterans of the Afghanistan war or not. But what is undeniable is that these combat-experienced zealots gave the fundamentalists a powerful strike arm that they would not otherwise have had. Their military skills and religious fanaticism make them a formidable foe whose activities may yet extend more forcefully into the West if governments seek to aid the pro-Western Arab states that are now under attack.

The main thrust of this Islamic revolution is currently in Algeria. The bloody civil war that erupted in January 1992 when the army denied power to the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) by suspending the country's first democratic elections which the fundamentalists had expected to win, is spearheaded by the so-called "Afghans." There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 of them in Algeria who form the core of the hard-line fundamentalists fighting to topple the military-backed government and establish an Islamic state. The government quickly rounded up most of the FIS leadership at the start of the violence, along with much of its cadre. That left the way open for the "Afghans," who took no part in the elections, to move in and launch an armed struggle to bring down the government by force. An estimated 400 people are being killed every week as the struggle intensifies. The death toll in Algiers sometimes reaches 50 a day. All told, as many as 10,000 people have perished, many at the hands of the "Afghans."

The FIS sought constitutional change, but it has an armed wing, the Islamic Salvation Army, or AIS. The FIS appears to be increasingly split, with hard-liners seeking to join forces with the radical Armed Islamic Group, known as the GIA, which has been primarily responsible for the killing of scores of Westerners over the last year or so. The GIA is dominated by the "Afghans." One of its leaders, ex-FIS member Sid Ahmed Mourad, alias Jaafar al-Afghani, who fought the Red Army in Afghanistan, was killed by security forces in March 1994 after succeeding Abdelhaq Layada, who was arrested in Morocco in June 1993 and extradited to Algeria where he remains in detention. Another GIA leader is Ahmed Bounaoua, an Afghan veteran. He was expelled from France in August 1992 and is a member of the movement's Overseas Executive Council. Kamar Kharban, a former Algerian army officer who became a Mujahedin commander in Afghanistan, is a

key FIS leader.

The GIA is emerging as the main Islamic force, undermining prospects of a political compromise between the FIS and the government. Other splinter groups, most of them hard-line, anti-Western radicals, are emerging, such as the Organization of Free Islamic Youth, blamed for the murder of Islamic moderates who advocated dialogue between the FIS and the government, and the Movement of the Islamic State. The western and eastern regions of Algeria are largely the domain of the AIS, while the GIA and its Afghans are strongest around Algiers. Where the AIS largely confines its attacks to military and government targets, the GIA has been concentrating its death squads on foreigners and Algerian intellectuals in and around the capital. As the violence and counter-violence swell, the GIA is gaining strength. It is widely viewed as the champion of young, undereducated and mostly unemployed Algerians who are increasingly turning to militant Islam as the only hope for salvation from governments that have long ignored their worsening plight.

One of the GIA's early leaders was Tayeb al-Afghani, nom de guerre of an Afghan War veteran and former smuggler who commanded an Arab group in Afghanistan. He became a symbol of the Afghans and Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria when he was captured after an attack on a police station at al-Gummar in southeastern Algeria near the Tunisian border in November 1992. That triggered a wider war, pitting the fundamentalists against the Algerian army.

Arming the Afghan rebels was one of the biggest operations the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran through the 1980's. Much of this was overseen by the large CIA stations in Cairo and Islamabad. Most of the covert weapons shipments and other paramilitary support was channelled through Egypt and Pakistan. As part of this massive covert operation, the brainchild of the late CIA Director William J. Casey, the agency provided \$3.5 billion in funding. Saudi Arabia provided hundreds of millions of dollars through a secret bank account held jointly with the CIA in Switzerland. Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, or SIS, played a crucial role in this, the largest covert paramilitary operation since World War II. CIA and SIS teams directed the war against the Kabul regime from bases in Pakistan, whose intelligence service has long had close relations with the British. Mujahedin groups, including Arab volunteers, were trained by ex-soldiers of Britain's Special Air Service (SAS) working for private security companies run by former SAS officers and frequently used by SIS for deniable operations.

One company that was heavily involved in the Afghan operations was KMS, which trained Mujahedin teams in Saudi Arabia and Oman, where the CIA and SIS had secret bases. The "Afghans" comprised an estimated 10,000 men, not all of whom saw combat. They included some 2,000 Egyptians, 2,800 Algerians, 400 Tunisians, 370 Iraqis, 300 Yemenis, 200 Libyans, hundreds of Jordanians and other Arabs. In Afghanistan, the Arab volunteers were attracted to the most radical Mujahedin factions, especially Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami, which was heavily supported by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence, the CIA and the SIS.

Egypt, too, is locked in a war with Islamic fundamentalists who include several hundred "Afghan" guerrillas. The main group is led by Mohammed Shawky al-Istambouli -- brother of the fundamentalist army lieutenant, Khalid al-Istambouli, who led the group that assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in October 1981 -- and Ayman Zawahir. It split from the mainstream faction known as the "Dawa and Sharia" (The Call and Islamic Law) which had been the mother group for all the Arabs "Afghans" during the war against the Soviets. This group had received direct support from U.S., British, French and Israeli intelligence agencies. Al-Istambouli made his way to Peshawar, the Mujahedin's base in eastern Pakistan, in 1983 and his close links to Tehran made him an ideal conduit for Iranian funds for the Egyptian fundamentalist radicals in Afghanistan. Al-Istambouli was sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court in December 1992 for plotting to overthrow Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's government and assassinate Egyptian leaders. He has a base in Jalalabad, capital of Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan and Hekmatyar's power base. Gaamat al-Islamiya still has about 200 men there today. In 1990, al-

Istambouli was host in Pakistan to Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, who is now on trial in the United States for alleged involvement in the World Trade Center bombing in New York on Feb. 26, 1993, and plotting other attacks. Both Abdel-Rahman's sons fought in Afghanistan. Mahmoud Abouhalima, an Egyptian Afghan veteran, allegedly planned the Trade Center attack and trained others to carry it out. Another "Afghan," Ahmad Ajaj, entered the United States on a fake Pakistani passport carrying bomb-making manuals and other material for the bombers. A third man, Sudanese Siddig Ibrahim Siddiq Ali, was with Abouhalima in Afghanistan in 1988-90. An Egyptian scholar who knew them there said they were "very good commanders who fought in various provinces." Another key fugitive is Ibrahim el-Mekkwawi, a prominent fundamentalist who fled Egypt after the Sadat assassination. Authorities in Cairo claim he is directing the Islamic campaign in Egypt from Pakistan. A former army colonel, he travels between Peshawar and Afghanistan where he maintains training camps and other bases. One of his lieutenants is Mahmoud el-Sabbawy, who lost his right leg fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

In a recent interview in Pakistan, el-Mekkwawi said that "it would be easy to overthrow the government" in Cairo. "But what comes next is more complicated" because the fundamentalists still do not have enough support among the Egyptian officers corps to control Egypt after a coup. One of his men, a Palestinian who would only give his nom de guerre of Abu Boaz, said it may take another decade for the fundamentalists to topple Arab governments. But he remains optimistic, because "the young generation in the Islamic world is coming out of its stupor."

Authorities in Cairo claim that wealthy Gulf Arabs provide funding for militant Islamic zealots spearheaded by the "Afghans" in Egypt and other Arab states, while Iran guides and directs their activities. Saudi Arabia and its allies deny that. These are mainly Sunni Muslims, whereas Iran is predominantly Shiite Muslim. There is no direct evidence that Tehran is involved in these campaigns, but the fundamentalist regime held a major conference of Islamic groups in Iran in February 1993, allocated funds and discussed strategy. Soon after that, Algeria and Egypt were hit by waves of assassinations and kidnappings reminiscent of the operations conducted by Tehran-backed Lebanese Shiites between 1983 and the 1990 end of the civil war there. Cairo security authorities claim there is a link between the Gulf bankrollers and Iran's intelligence services.

Among the financiers is Ussama bin Laden and his brother Khaled, whose family made a vast fortune in Saudi Arabia in the construction industry over the last few decades. Bin Laden founded the Islamic Salvation Foundation in Saudi Arabia through which he financed initially the Afghani Mujahedin, later extending that to radical Islamic groups around the Arab world. The Saudis denied that bin Laden and others were involved. Nonetheless, in early 1994 the Saudis revoked bin Laden's nationality -- an extremely rare occurrence -- and his family, originally from the south Yemeni province of Hadramawt and one of the richest in Saudi Arabia, publicly disowned him.

Bin Laden is now based in Sudan, under the protection of the Islamic government there and its spiritual leader, Hassan al-Tourabi. He has recently opened an office in London and, despite the Saudi government's actions, still has access to large amounts of money held in foreign banks.

In recent months, Pakistan has been hunting down Arab "Afghans" at the request of Cairo and Algiers. It signed an extradition agreement with Egypt in March 1994 to return wanted "Afghans" among the 1,800 believed still in that Asian country. Pakistan's efforts stemmed largely from its desire to avoid being branded by the U.S. State Department as a country that sponsors terrorism, which automatically disqualifies it for U.S. economic aid. It has sought to close down organization supposedly helping refugees but which are suspected fronts for Islamic radicals. But senior Pakistani officials argue that the long trail of arms and ideologically motivated Islamic activists cannot be eliminated easily. It is a daunting task, and there has been considerable opposition inside Pakistan itself, including among high-ranking military officers like former Lt. Gen. Javed Nasir, who headed the ISI during the Afghanistan war and coordinated with the CIA, and SIS, the Saudis and others in building up the Mujahedin force as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism.

In August, the religious right threatened protests if Arab "Afghans" were thrown out. In May 1994, Pakistani authorities began deporting wanted Egyptians. The first was 26-year-old Ali Eid, wanted on suspicion of belonging to an outlawed Islamic group, the Vanguard of Conquest, a revival of the Jihad movement responsible for the Sadat assassination. The government claimed Eid left Egypt in 1990 for military training in Peshawar. The Egyptians have hanged scores of convicted militants, including members of the Vanguard blamed for the attempted assassinations of Interior Minister Hassasal-Alfy in August 1993 and Prime Minister Atef Sedki in November 1993. Interior Minister Hassan el- Alfy claimed that the extremists who ambushed Sedki's limousine in suburban Cairo with a remote-controlled bomb were "highly trained in Afghanistan in the use of explosive materials."

During the Afghanistan war, the Egyptian Gaamet al- Islamiya detachment was particularly respected for its military skills and reckless courage. With a strength of around 300 men at its peak, this contingent, which included Abdel-Rahman's two sons, fought mainly in Nangarhar province in eastern Pakistan, controlled largely by Hezb-i-Islami and where large numbers of the foreign volunteers were deployed. The "Afghans" expelled from Pakistan, under pressure from Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and the United States, are often fugitives in their homelands. So many go to Iran, from where they are able to get to Sudan or northern Iraq, where Kurdish Islamic groups accommodate them until they are filtered out to other countries in the Arab world. Many go to Yemen, where the Islamic Reform Party (Islah) provides shelter. The fundamentalist party, guided by Sheikh Abdul Mejid Az- Zindani, encourages them to settle in Yemen, where there has been an upsurge in Islamic action in recent months. Much of it has been directed at the Yemen Socialist Party, which is now largely discredited because of the secessionist efforts of its former leaders during the May-July 1994 civil war.

Many "Afghans" fought on the side of the Islamic-backed Sanaa government during that conflict. Until Pakistan started getting tough with the foreign "Afghans," Az-Zindani frequently visited Peshawar. So did Rashid el-Gannouchi, exiled leader of Tunisia's outlawed Nahda fundamentalist party. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in Tunisia for plotting to overthrow and assassinate President Zineal-Abedine ben Ali. Based in London, he travels on a Sudanese diplomatic passport and frequently visits Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Another important "Afghan" is Mohammed Nazzal, a computer expert who studied in Pakistan and now is a leader of Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalist faction. Nazzal is based in Amman, Jordan. In Jordan, the "Afghans" are largely clandestine and have links with Hamas and Islamic Jihad-Palestine. They formed the Jayish Mohammed, or Mohammed's Army, in 1991 and planned to launch a campaign of terrorist bombings and assassinations aimed at toppling the Hashemite throne. Several were imprisoned after a series of bombings and others are on trial for subversion now.

Sudan, a cradle of fundamentalism, now has an Islamic alliance with Iran and, according to western and Arab intelligence sources, harbors large numbers of Muslim extremists from all around the Middle East, including hundreds of "Afghans" who have not yet been able to return to their home countries. In Eritrea, probably the only country in the Horn of Africa not embroiled in conflict, President Isayas Afewerki alleged earlier this year that armed Islamic militants based in Sudan were infiltrating seeking to destabilize his fledgling state. After 20 were reportedly killed in a border gunbattle, he claimed that many were Arab "Afghans" from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Pakistan.

Yemen was a key source of manpower for the "Afghans." From 1984 until the end of the decade, Az-Zindani sent between 5,000 and 7,000 Arabs, including Yemenis, to Pakistan and Afghanistan via Saudi Arabia for military training and religious teaching under his guidance. When the Yemenis returned home after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, they made no secret of their new sense of mission to eradicate from the former South Yemen all remnants of the onetime Marxist

regime. The Sanaa government has started cracking down on local "Afghans," even though they supported President Ali Saleh during the 1994 civil war against southern secessionists. The hard-line "Afghans" attacked shrines of the mystical Sufi sect, which Yemen's Zafi Muslims consider heretical. A group of members of the Yemen Islamic Jihad organization, including several "Afghans," were imprisoned in Aden in early 1994 for bombing two hotels there in December 1992. The group has been funded in the past by bin Laden.

Arab "Afghans" have been moving further afield as well. Some are in Bosnia, helping fellow Muslims fight the Christian Serbs. Between 200 and 300 of these veterans of the Afghan war, including non-Arab Muslims, are based in Zenica in Bosnia, where they are widely feared. Hundreds of "Afghans" have made their way to Bosnia. The number of non-Bosnian Muslims in the military is estimated at between 500 and 1,000 from a dozen countries in the Middle East. From all accounts, they have fought with some distinction. Some 300 "Afghans," organized into a unit known as "the Guerrillas," operates with the Bosnian 3rd Corps in Zenica. Algerian FIS leader Kamar Kharban, a veteran of the Afghanistan war, has visited Bosnia several times over the last two years.

The "Afghans" and other Muslim volunteers have also been a source of friction with the Bosnians, who are largely secular Muslims. The outsiders' religious zeal and arrogant commitment to their holy war has angered their hosts. But many of the volunteers represent wealthy organizations or countries whose support the beleaguered Bosnians count on. "Afghans" are believed to have been behind the murder of British aid worker Paul Goodall on Jan. 27, 1994, near Zenica. Three Muslim volunteers, all Arabs carrying fake Pakistani passports, were shot dead by Bosnian military police at a roadblock near Sarajevo. Three others were arrested by police for questioning in the murder. The Al-Kifah, or Struggle, Refugee Center in New York, which used to recruit and raise funds for Mujahedeen headed for Afghanistan, last year announced it was switching its operations to Bosnia. It was established in the mid-1980s by Egyptian Mustafa Rahman as a joint venture with Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, spiritual leader of Gamaat al-Islamiya.

Some Arab "Afghans" have even been reported in the Muslim provinces of western China and Indian security authorities say they have killed or captured a score of Arab and other foreign veterans of the Afghanistan war fighting with Muslim guerrillas in disputed Kashmir. They say they have learned the names of another 50 Arab guerrillas from the captured men.

Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan, has been the spark for two of the three wars these countries have fought since 1947. U.S. authorities believe there may be as many as 200 Arab "Afghans" in the New York-New Jersey area alone, all viewed as potential terrorists in the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing.

The wave of Islamic extremism sweeping North Africa is increasingly deep-rooted, fueled not only by the attempts to suppress it by the governments concerned but by the growing belief among the Muslim populations of the region that long-ignored political and economic reforms can only be squeezed out of the regimes in power, not obtained by negotiation. The fundamentalist creed also believes that the secular governments of the Arab world must first be overthrown before the greater enemy, the West, can be tackled. As the situation in Algeria disintegrates, all the signs point to a prolonged war of attrition in which the country could be split. It is considered inconceivable that the Islamic guerrillas can be crushed, while they are not militarily strong enough to defeat the army. If the turmoil spreads from Algeria and Egypt to Tunisia and Morocco, and there are already signs of Islamic fervor in these states, it could eventually produce a hostile Islamic bloc on the southern shore of the Mediterranean that would have serious implications for western and southern Europe. The upheaval in Algeria, of particular concern to France, could have repercussions in Italy, Spain and Portugal, all of which rely on Algerian gas. Throughout the European Union, which has been focusing on eastern Europe of late, the dangers of massive Muslim emigration from North Africa as it loses the pro-western orientation of the secular governments there and the proliferation of

regional conflicts to immigrant communities are of increasing concern. Events in Algeria have inspired a young radical movement in many of Europe's slums and working-class suburbs where North African Muslims abound.

An Islamic victory in North Africa would also have potentially critical consequences for Israel, which increasingly perceives militant Islam to be its main adversary. Beyond Israel too lie the Arab monarchies of Jordan and the Gulf, as well as Syria. This latter has so far had little trouble from its fundamentalists, who were brutally crushed by President Hafez al-Assad's socialist regime in the early 1980s. The Arab-Israeli peace process -- vehemently opposed by Iran and its surrogates in the Arab world like Hizbullah of Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Palestine -- will undoubtedly spawn fresh expectations that, in the absence of conflict, standards of living will improve and that in their train will come the democratic reforms that dictators like Assad have long opposed because their regimes would be imperiled. When those reforms do not appear, Islamic fundamentalism, which has now eclipsed the discredited and obsolete notion of secular, pan-Arab nationalism, will be where the Arab Muslims will turn.