

THE ONCE AND FUTURE BALKAN *MUJAHIDEEN*

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It is hard to miss the King Fahd Bin Abdelaziz al-Saud Mosque in Sarajevo. Built with an estimated \$10 million in donations from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the mosque is a sprawling, ornate structure that stands out among the architecture of Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital.

In the mosque's parking lot, however, one can find an even more interesting sight. There, local Muslim vendors hawk various Islamic books, videos, and articles of clothing. Among the items available for purchase are numerous episodes from the notorious "Russian Hell in Chechnya" video series, conveniently translated into Bosnian. The videotapes—emblazoned with the image of Shamil Basayev (the Chechen warlord responsible for organizing the massacre of schoolchildren in Beslan, Russia in September 2004)—depict various combat operations conducted by *mujahideen* (Islamic holy warriors) against the Russian military in the south Caucasus, complete with graphic footage of car bombings and the detonation of improvised explosive devices.

These videos, and other assorted *jihadi* paraphernalia, are a pointed reminder of the precarious geopolitical position occupied by the Balkans—torn between the secular Western society of modern Europe and the call of Islam echoing from the Arabian Gulf. It is a battleground that, nearly a decade after al-Qaeda's incursion into the region, remains deeply scarred by the formative post-Cold War military experience of a key cadre of Islamic radicals: the *jihad* that raged in Bosnia during the early and mid-1990s.



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The Bosnian cauldron

The growth of radical Islamic thought in the Balkans can be traced to the same factors that have plagued other recent havens for international terrorism: a smoldering civil conflict pitting neighbors of various ethnicities against each other, a devastated economy, weak governmental institutions, and a flourishing organized crime sector.

During the 1990s, al-Qaeda and the Arab-Afghan movement were able to thrive in places like Bosnia by feeding on the suffering and misery of those left out of the post-Cold War peace dividend, using populist dogma clothed in vague and fanciful notions of religious and Islamic history to recruit war-scarred, shell-shocked volunteers devoid of personal identity and self-worth. Bosnia, like many of the other nations victimized by roving bands of Arab-Afghan Islamic militants, was embroiled for several years in a catastrophic war that has permanently altered the political, cultural, and religious face of its people. The failure of the U.S. and Europe to intervene before 1995 to stop that genocidal conflict was a foreign policy misstep that opened the door to anti-Western Islamic fanatics.

By contrast, it took Osama Bin Laden and his cohorts precious little time to seize the opportunity in Bosnia. While much of the aid from the Muslim world to the Bosnian government was given in the form of money and weapons in violation of an international arms embargo, there was also a volunteer battalion of foreign *mujahideen* active in the Balkans. These ideological mercenaries—originating from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and other locales—were led almost exclusively by Sunni Muslim extremists.

At the forefront of this movement were the veterans of the anti-Soviet *jihād* in Afghanistan, which had served as a training ground for holy war, as well as the birthplace of al-Qaeda. For these legions, the Bosnian war occurred at a propitious time; In January 1993, the Pakistani government, eager to put the Afghan *jihād* in the past, had ordered the closure of Arab *mujahideen* offices in the country and threatened official deportation to any illegal foreign fighters who attempted to remain in Pakistan.¹ Other sources of funding and training were similarly drying up.

These displaced men faced a serious problem, because returning to their countries of origin meant certain arrest, torture, and likely death. At the time, a Saudi spokesman for the Arab-Afghans in Jeddah explained in the media, “the Algerians cannot go to Algeria, the Syrians cannot go to Syria or the Iraqis to Iraq. Some will opt to go to Bosnia, the others will have to go into Afghanistan permanently.”² His assessments were predictably accurate; a number of prominent Arab guerillas left Southwest Asia destined for a new life of asylum and “holy war” amid the brutal civil conflict in the Balkans.

Al-Qaeda’s inroads into the Balkans began in earnest following the *mujahideen* conquest of Kabul in April 1992. That fall, Osama Bin Laden personally ordered a former key Sudanese member of al-Qaeda, Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl, to travel to Zagreb, Croatia for consultations with key Arab-Afghan leaders that had begun operating as al-Qaeda emissaries in the region. These included Shaykh Abu Abdel Aziz “Barbaros,” Enaam Arnaout, and Abu Zubair al-Madani (a Saudi cousin of Osama Bin Laden). Not coincidentally, the meeting was held at the local offices of Arnaout’s Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) in Zagreb³—an organization that, after September 11th, would be identi-

fied by the U.S. Department of Justice as a financial and logistical front for terrorists. Discussions centered largely around al-Qaeda's growing interest in acquiring Bosnian businesses and forging relationships with local banking networks to hide terrorist financing activity, as well as the establishment of training camps in Bosnia, the need to forge relations with relief agencies in Bosnia, and the purchase of weapons for the *mujahideen* in the Balkans.⁴

These plans, however, were merely housekeeping. Osama Bin Laden had grander designs for the region. According to al-Qaeda operatives, Bin Laden's master plan for Bosnia "was to establish a base for operations in Europe against al-Qaeda's true enemy, the United States."

But, in order for Bin Laden's strategy to succeed, other intelligent and experienced Arab Afghan commanders were needed on the ground. Accordingly, Enaam Arnaout personally arranged for nine elite instructors from the Al-Sadda terrorist training camp in Afghanistan to be immediately imported into central Bosnia.⁵ More militants were subsequently recruited by the Egyptian Shaykh Anwar Shaaban, who emerged as the political leader and chief spokesman for the foreign *jihadis* based in Bosnia.⁶ Shaaban would serve for over three years as the spiritual and political Shaykh of the foreign *mujahideen* in the Balkans, shuttling back and forth to his headquarters in Milan, Italy, and feeding a steady stream of seasoned al-Qaeda veterans and new recruits to Bosnia.

By May 1992, under the leadership of Shaaban and another Arab-Afghan commander, Shaykh "Barbaros," the *mujahideen* had established *jihad* camps in two principal locations: in Zenica, at the sprawling Vatrostalno Factory complex, and (twenty miles away) in Mehurici, six miles outside

of Travnik.⁷ There were also smaller pockets of foreign *mujahideen* based on Mt. Igman, south of Sarajevo, near Travnik and in Turbe, Radina, and elsewhere in the Lasava Valley in central Bosnia.⁸ The commanders built these camps along the Afghan model: intense, aggressive recruitment and training in both military tactics and the violent, confrontational form of Islamic fundamentalism borrowed from the al-Qaeda training camps in the Hindu Kush. Propaganda videos of the military training in the Bosnian camps reflect strong similarities to those of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁹

Meanwhile, Islamic "humanitarian aid" organizations—Sunni and Shiite alike—played key roles as a cover for arms smuggling and the importation of foreign *mujahideen*. By clothing their militant activity in charitable ideals, Islamist leaders discovered that they were able to slip below the radar of many international intelligence agencies—but not all of them. A declassified 1996 U.S. government report (reportedly issued by the CIA) would charge that "approximately one third of these Islamic NGOs support terrorist groups or employ individuals who are suspected of having terrorist connections."¹⁰ Moreover, according to the CIA assessment, "nearly one third of the Islamic NGOs in the Balkans have facilitated the activities of Islamic groups that engage in terrorism, including the Egyptian Al-Gama'at Al-Islamiyya, Palestinian Hamas, and Lebanese Hizballah." The report added that "some of the terrorist groups, such as Al-Gama'at, have access to credentials for the UN High Commission for Refugees and other UN staffs in the former Yugoslavia."¹¹

Reversal of fortune

Yet, within months of arriving in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the foreign *mujahideen* were already facing a major lead-

ership crisis. Early months of frontline combat had badly wounded or killed dozens of older, senior commanders from Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Meanwhile, Saudi Shaykh “Barbaros” was forced to temporarily leave the Balkans to participate in a much-needed fundraising and recruitment drive across the Islamic world on behalf of the Bosnian *mujahideen* battalion.

These demands led to the rapid ascension through the ranks of other, younger Arabs who adhered to an even more purist and fanatical Islamic ideology known as “Salafism.” Among the more notable foreign Salafist commanders who came to dominate the Bosnian *mujahideen* battalion after 1993 was Abu el-Ma’ali (a.k.a. Abdelkader Mokhtari, “The Gendarme”), a senior commander from the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), who had arrived in Bosnia soon after the war.¹² In the early 1990s, returning Algerian Arab-Afghan veterans were largely responsible for founding the GIA, an organization that championed a particularly ruthless philosophy of murdering anyone who stood in the way of a fundamentalist regime, including competing Muslim clerics, politicians, foreigners, journalists, teachers, women, children, and other “enemies of Allah.” The GIA was so brutal and feared by even those in the Arab world that Bin Laden himself allegedly urged its leadership to rename and reform themselves in order to present a “better image of the Jihad.”¹³ And Abu el-Ma’ali was no exception. As a senior commander of the battalion, he was in control of a crucial strategic reservoir of weapons, ammunition, and willing recruits that was loosely shared by several prominent Middle Eastern and North African terrorist groups—principally, al-Qaeda, Al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), and the Algerian GIA.

Through telephone records, financial front groups, and seized evidence across Europe and North America, Abu el-Ma’ali has been connected to numerous international terrorist sleeper cells, including the 1995 Paris Metro bombers; a second group of parallel bomb plotters in 1996 in Milan, Italy; the Roubaix Group in France; and the Montreal cell responsible for a failed suitcase bomb plot at Los Angeles International Airport on the eve of the Millennium. French counterterrorism magistrates Jean-Louis Bruguiere and Jean-Francois Ricard subsequently concluded that—under the influence of Abu el-Ma’ali and his cohorts—foreign *mujahideen* recruits in Bosnia were “plunged into violence.”¹⁴

The stability of the Sunni *mujahideen* leadership in Bosnia suffered another series of dramatic blows in September and December 1995. Following the end of “Operation Badr”—the last major battle of the Bosnian war involving foreign *mujahideen*—in what was a major blow to battalion morale, senior Egyptian military commander Moataz Billah was unexpectedly killed by a mortar bomb. Within only a few hours of Billah’s death, another critically important leader of the Bosnian *mujahideen*—the Egyptian Al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya spokesman Abu Talal al-Qasimy—was captured by Croatian forces while en route to Zenica (and was eventually rendered to the Egyptian government). Then, only three months later, two other senior Saudi *mujahideen* commanders were killed in a mysterious firefight with Croatian HVO troops near Zepce.

By January 1996, the foreign *mujahideen* battalion in Bosnia had been decimated. Many of the key Arab-Afghan commanders who had guided the battalion through the early 1990s were either dead, in hiding, or held in official custody by various sovereign governments.

The top-level purge of the *mujahideen* ranks was compounded by another blow: the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords. The peace deal was a shock to the *mujahideen*, who complained that their expected military victory over the Serbs in Bosnia had been “stolen” by the United States and its European allies.

But Dayton also highlighted a new direction for Balkan Islamists. As their primary role of aiding the Bosnian army faded away, Abu el-Ma’ali and his Salafist cohorts were free to pursue their own independent extremist agenda, including elaborate revenge operations and organized terrorist attacks. The restlessness and fanaticism of the *mujahideen* estranged some of their former allies, including growing numbers of Bosnian army and government officials and non-Salafi Muslims—Shiite and Sunni alike.

Sinister legacy

Perhaps not surprisingly, an overwhelming number of these Bosnian veterans have gone on to conspire or to commit acts of international terrorism. The list is long and bloody, and includes Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdar (both of whom were September 11th suicide hijackers); Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (the acknowledged mastermind of the September 11th terrorist attacks); Abdelaziz al-Muqrin (al-Qaeda’s former top operative in Saudi Arabia); Abu Anas al-Shami (a former top aide to Jordanian master terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi), and many others. By their own accounts, the war in Bosnia during the 1990s was a crucial stepping-stone to even greater achievements in the world of religious terrorism and extremism for these radicals.

Bosnia itself remains an active focal point for noteworthy Salafist extremists—almost all *ex-mujahideen*

commanders—hailing from Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere. Just this spring, the notorious Moroccan Karim Said Atmani, a well-known figure among the Bosnian *mujahideen*, quietly returned to asylum in central Bosnia after his sudden release from a French prison, where he was serving a five-year sentence stemming from his role in an unusually prolific terrorist theft and document fraud ring.


Atmani’s triumphant return to Sarajevo is symptomatic of a larger dilemma in the Balkans. Though much effort has been expended over the past decade to heal the wounds of the Bosnian war and cleanse the region of extremists and war criminals, much work is left to be done. As the attention of the world is drawn elsewhere, to places like Afghanistan and Iraq, and the presence of international arbiters in Bosnia-Herzegovina begins to fade, there are growing opportunities for the same foreign extremists who previously profited from the Bosnian civil war (and were forced into exile) to re-insert themselves in the fabric of local society. An influential network of former *mujahideen* commanders still exists in central Bosnia, sustained through the use of fraudulent commercial and charitable enterprises. Though many of these Islamic militants have assumed non-descript private lives as Bosnian citizens, they continue to manipulate gaping holes in Bosnian border control and anti-corruption measures from behind the scenes in order to support extremism and terrorism—even beyond the confines of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Even though the Bosnian government has dramatically improved its response on issues of terrorism and international security since the comparatively bleak reign of Alija Izetbegovic, basic underlying problems with fraud, graft, and bureaucratic account-

ability (common in many areas of Eastern Europe) remain. In the troubled Balkans, these problems can reach the highest levels. On June 14th, the former Deputy Director of the Bosnia-Herzegovina branch of Interpol, Asim Fazlic, was acquitted of charges “that he abused his authority and powers, gave away official secrets, accepted bribes and participated in illegal mediation” in regards to ongoing murder and terrorism cases in central Bosnia.¹⁵ Despite his acquittal, there is good reason to believe that Fazlic was attempting to conceal the illegal financial operations of foreign nationals on Bosnian territory—among others, an Iraqi currently on trial in Sarajevo for allegedly abducting five civilians in October 1993 and eventually beheading one of them.

This network of foreign *mujahideen* veterans is further buttressed by the continuing sponsorship—both directly and indirectly—of predominantly Saudi-funded religious charities and investment projects. Some local Bosnians have been persuaded to adopt the strict Salafi religious dogma in order to receive much-needed financial stipends. Without a competing flow of money and humanitarian aid from Western democracies, chief among them the United States, Saudi-funded extremist groups like the Saudi High Committee in Bosnia, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), and the Al-Haramain Masjid al-Aqsa have what amounts to an unrestricted license to indoctrinate and brainwash needy local Bosnian Muslims.

This is a central lesson of the Bosnian war itself, and one that the international community must heed and ensure is not repeated. The fact that relatively few Bosnians have volunteered to join the Salafist extremists thus far is, more than anything else, a testament to their often-stubborn determination to hold fast to their local culture and secular Euro-

pean heritage. But without sustained international attention, Bosnia—and the Balkans at large—remains vulnerable to external manipulation by extremist ideologies and radical organizations. 

1. Kathy Evans, “Pakistan Clamps Down on Afghan Mojahedin and Orders Expulsion of Arab Jihad Supporters,” *Guardian* (London), January 7, 1993, 7.
2. *Ibid.*
3. “Bill of Particulars,” *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnaout* (United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, February 3, 2003), 5.
4. *Ibid.*; See also “Government’s Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-Conspirator Statements,” *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnaout* (United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, January 31, 2003), 24-25.
5. “Government’s Response to Defendant’s Position Paper as to Sentencing Factors,” *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnaout*, (United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois Eastern Division, June 12, 2003), 38.
6. Video, “The Martyrs of Bosnia: Part I” (London: Azzam Publications, 2000).
7. George Eykyn, “‘Mujahidin’ Rush to Join Islamic Fundamentalists in War,” *Times* (London), September 23, 1992.
8. “The Martyrs of Bosnia: Part I.”
9. *Ibid.*
10. “Affidavit of Special Agent David Kane,” *United States of America v. Soliman S. Biheiri* (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, August 14, 2003), 2.
11. *Ibid.*
12. “The Martyrs of Bosnia: Part I.”
13. “Bin Laden Held to be Behind an Armed Algerian Islamic Movement,” *Agence France Presse*, February 15, 1999.
14. Craig Pyes, Josh Meyer et al., “Bosnia Seen as Hospitable Base and Sanctuary for Terrorists,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2001, A1.
15. See, for example, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Main news summary for February 6, 2004, <http://www.nato.int/sfor/media/2004/ms040206t.htm>.