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“The Legacy of the Arab-Afghans: A Case Study.”

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Following the disappointing performance of advocates of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, many in the Middle East began to search for new ideologies that would explain past defeats and illuminate a path out of almost 500 years of internal decay and foreign domination. This search led to a new religious revivalist doctrine that sought a return to the days of the great Islamic caliphate. Emboldened by the sudden and tremendous victory of Shi'i Islamic students in Iran in 1979, these "fundamentalists" now required a new rallying cause to spark their proposed Sunni Islamic revolution. Their opportunity came in December 1979 when, on the premise of restoring civil order, Soviet military forces invaded the nation of Afghanistan. Afghanistan, a nation with a deeply conservative Muslim population, burst into rebellion as Islamic rebels fought a pitched guerilla war against the Soviets and their Marxist puppets. Consequently, Islamic clerics across the world declared it a religious obligation for all Muslims to aid the Afghani cause. Heeding this call to arms, thousands of Arab Muslims from across the Middle East traveled to Afghanistan to fight in a holy struggle against the infidel invaders. These volunteer soldiers collectively became known as the "Arab-Afghans." Arriving from abroad, they were indoctrinated in a militant Islamic canon that stressed the total annihilation of anyone or anything that stood in the way of the establishment of a new international Islamic empire. Although the U.S., Saudi, and Egyptian governments vigorously encouraged the growth of the Arab-Afghan corps, they did so with the understanding that the *mujahideen* struggle was limited to anti-Soviet agitation. The "Afghans", however, had other ideas. Just as they brought Islamic revolution to

Afghanistan, they hoped to return to their countries of origin to wage a new, global jihad. After their experience during the long war, the Arab-Afghans were convinced that “long ignored political and economic reforms can only be squeezed out of the regimes in power, not obtained by negotiation.”¹ Subsequently, in places such as Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Chechnya, Arab veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war began to wage struggles of varying intensities against their new perceived enemies: secular governments and their foreign patrons.

My thesis will attempt to explain why, despite the doctrine of universal Islamic revolution preached on the battlefields of Afghanistan, the new holy struggles initiated after the war were fought neither uniformly in method nor in extent. Though the particular religious and social doctrines of the Arab-Afghans were proposed at a uniquely fortunate period for the growth of the movement, the drama that unfolded in these Middle Eastern countries after Afghanistan proves that the ultimate indicators of Islamist success or failure depend heavily on factors external to the movement itself. As case studies of Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Chechnya show, economic discontent and social upheaval created by decolonization, government corruption, commodity price fluctuations, and (lack of) foreign aid (among other factors) were vitally important in allowing the Arab-Afghans to gain a foothold in a given country.

On one side of the spectrum is the North African state of Algeria, which has been deeply affected by the legacy of the Afghanistan. Though their homeland is only at the bare edge of the Muslim world, the Algerian “Afghan” veterans are reputed to be some of the most dedicated and unmerciful of their cadre. An estimated 2,800 Algerian Islamists

¹ Bruce, James. “Arab Veterans of the Afghan War.” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*. April 1, 1997; Vol. 7; No. 4; *Page 175*.

traveled during the 1980s to join the Afghan *mujahideen*². After the war and upon their return, many of these Algerians led ultra-militant movements to bring their homeland under strict Islamic rule. When the secular Algerian government overturned elections in 1992 that were expected to bring Islamists to power, a bloody civil war began that, to date, has cost more than 100,000 lives³. One of these movements, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), led almost entirely by Arab-Afghans, is among the most brutal and feared armed guerilla movements in the world. It has successfully managed to create a situation of near anarchy in large areas of Algeria, and has forced the Algerian government to resort to outlandish and shocking measures to restore civil order. Though the primary agenda of the GIA remains to erect a radical Islamic regime in Algeria, the alleged millennium terrorist plot in the United States involving GIA militant Ahmed Ressay, show that these fundamentalists have closely retained their Arab-Afghan roots.

Many thousands of miles away, legions of Arab-Afghans have also flocked to the central-Caucasus region of Chechnya. Chechnya is a perplexing case because most of the “Afghans” there are not native Chechens; rather, these foreign *mujahideen* have sought to repeat the Afghan experience and liberate Muslim lands from the “infidel” armies of their old Russian enemy. In the first Russo-Chechen war between 1993 and 1996, though hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, these daring soldiers won an embarrassingly complete victory against Russian forces. The Chechen *mujahideen* drove their enemies from the territory and even succeeded in establishing a quasi-stable political order. When fighting once again broke out in August 1999, Chechnya was again the site of pilgrimage for hundreds of Muslims seeking martyrdom in a holy struggle. Remarkably, many of

² *Ibid.*

the top leaders among the Chechen rebels are Arab-Afghans, such as the “Amir” of the foreign mujahideen in Chechnya, Ibn ul-Khattab. Indeed, many, especially in the Muslim world, see the *jihad* in Chechnya as the new Afghanistan. Despite leviathan efforts by the Russian government, after months of renewed fighting, Russian troops have been unable to inflict a resounding defeat upon their guerilla opponent. Even with some limited recent victories claimed by Moscow, the war in Chechnya remains as great of a “bleeding wound” for the Russians as the former conflict in Afghanistan.

However, in other places that have been the locations of Arab-Afghan activity, the Islamic revolution has not been nearly as encompassing or successful. After the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, Egypt seemed to be on the verge of an Islamist revolt. Over 2,000 Egyptians traveled to Afghanistan to take part in the *jihad* against the Soviets. In circumstances very similar to those in Algeria, many of those Egyptian Arab-Afghans returned after the war to form militant revivalist movements seeking the demise of the secular, pro-Western government there. The Egyptian Islamist cause even had added appeal and sense of urgency in that the Egyptian government had undertaken unilateral peace negotiations with Israel. In the eyes of many Egyptian radicals, this was an unmistakable sign of the illegitimacy of the ruling regime. Moreover, Egypt had a well-established underground Islamist political movement already in place, the Muslim Brotherhood. However, despite all these apparent inherent advantages, Arab-Afghan-led fundamentalist groups such as *al-Gama’at al Islamiyya* and *al-Jihad* have been unable to present a serious challenge to the authority of the Egyptian government. Frustration at these inexplicable failures has led *al-Gama’at al Islamiyya* to

³ Robison, Gordon. “Algeria ready to crack down on militants.” [CNN Online](http://cnn.com/2000/WORLD/africa/01/13/algeria.01/). January 13, 2000.
<http://cnn.com/2000/WORLD/africa/01/13/algeria.01/>

declare an end its campaign of violence, and as of April 2000, has led to the ouster of the “Afghans” from their positions of leadership within both organizations.

Even more striking has been the failure of the Arab-Afghans to achieve any change in the homeland of some of the most famous of their cadre, Saudi Arabia. A combination of sinking economic prospects due to the falling price of oil and the religious ramifications of *kafir* (infidel) troops being stationed in the most holy region of Islamdom created conditions that were ideally conducive for fundamentalist revolt. The relatively peaceful Islamist movement that commenced in 1991 even had the initial support of powerful religious and political figures in the kingdom, including grand mufti Shaykh Bin Baz.⁴ However, especially after the emergence of organized Islamist opposition groups in 1993, the Saudi regime took a hard line against them, especially in dealing with Arab veterans of the Afghan war. A series of bombings against domestic and foreign targets in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996 led to many questions about the stability of the al-Saud regime and how seriously it was threatened by Islamist dissidents. However, despite these fears, Bin Laden and other Saudi Arab-Afghan radicals have been unable to consolidate any domestic power whatsoever in Saudi Arabia, and have been to a large degree completely locked out of contemporary Saudi politics.

Why do such great disparities remain in the activities and success of the various Arab-Afghan organizations? Why has a state such as Algeria which does not have a strong tradition of fundamentalist Islamic values been more susceptible to an Islamist revolt than Saudi Arabia, which was literally founded upon them? To what degree are individual, domestic socioeconomic factors important in mobilizing support for militant

⁴ Fandy, Mamoun. Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent. St. Martin's Press; New York, NY. ©1999. Pg. 119.

revivalist movements in the Islamic world? Which government tactics have been most effective in reducing the extremist threat posed by these radicals and channeling discontent into peaceful, non-threatening activities? To answer these questions, I will examine a variety of sources, including (as often as possible) the propaganda of and interviews with Arab-Afghans and their supporters and the testimonials of both local and foreign journalists who have witnessed their long-running campaign. Particularly, I will measure the claims and the professed identity of the Arab *mujahideen* alongside socioeconomic and political trends occurring in their respective homelands during roughly the same era as the *jihad* in Afghanistan. Such a comparison helps to illuminate the real motivations of the individual *jihadist* volunteers.

Analysis of these facts suggests that, despite the idealistic propaganda of the Arab-Afghans, the Islamic world remains firmly divided along ethnic, national, and sectarian lines. In Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the presence of relatively legitimate governments seems to have resulted in far less public support for revivalist movements than in Algeria and Chechnya. Furthermore, especially in Algeria, socioeconomic and political conditions arising from authoritarian rule and a petroleum-centered economy have convinced many desperate youth to seek unconventional solutions to their problems. Chechnya has a long history of relying on fundamentalist Islamic movements to protect it from Russian encroachment. Thus, national economic, historical, and political conditions clearly remain vital to the success or failure of Arab-Afghan movements.

However, one must be careful not to wholly discount the independent role of ideology. As one Yemeni government official commented, “you know, some of these Islamists, what they want is money. You can control them if you have money. But, yes,

some extremists, they don't want money. They just want to act on their beliefs.”⁵ The moral of the story is that the commitment of the militant Arab-Afghans is also traceable to the veracity of their beliefs. Factors inherent to religion alone, including tendencies towards dogmatism and the importance of traditional religious belief in Middle Eastern society, also have had a major impact on the success or failure of the Arab-Afghan movement. Clearly, there is no one stimulus responsible for the accomplishments of Abdullah Azzam and his heir apparent, Bin Laden. But, by understanding the confluence and synthesis of the variety of factors present, we gain a better understanding of the Arab-Afghans and how to prevent their violent disaffection and anger from spreading throughout the developing world.

⁵ Vick, Karl. “Cole Attack Rooted in Afghan War.” The Washington Post. December 3, 2000. Page A31.

Chapter 2: The Emergence of the Arab-Afghans

There is little debate that 1979 was indeed a banner year for Islamic fundamentalism. In Iran, a relatively small group of radical Shi'ite exiles led by Ayat Allah Khomeini managed to overthrow a Western-backed regime that was considered to be one of the most well-defended and stable governments in the region. Egypt reeled as an elite cadre of Islamists, angered with President Anwar Sadat's reconciliation with the Jewish state of Israel, assassinated him in front of thousands of shocked bystanders. Even Saudi Arabia, the very bastion of conservative of Islam, was under attack; Sunni militants in a surprise move seized control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in the hope of inspiring an Islamic rebellion against the corruption and tyranny of the al-Saud family. But, it was to be the last of these events that would hold the most significance for Sunni Muslim extremists: the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

At first glance, the invasion did not seem entirely that important. Afghanistan was not an American Cold War ally; in fact, the United States had consciously ignored opportunities during the 1960s and 70s to draw Afghanistan into the Western fold. With most attention focused on the importance of neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan was left to its own devices. By 1978, it was already fully under Soviet-inspired Marxist rule. However, internal power struggles and public discontent with the communist regime threatened to topple the political status quo that the Soviets had carefully constructed. Fearing the collapse of Marxism in Afghanistan, the Soviets invaded under the pretext of restoring order and replacing the government with one more beholden to the interests of Moscow. The sporadic rebellion in the tribal hinterlands against the PDPA regime in

early 1979 was not predicted to have much of a future. In the face of thousands of arriving Soviet troops, even one former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan estimated that “the Russians would wipe out the resistance in months.”⁶

Rather than achieving a quick victory, the Soviets found themselves surrounded by a relentless guerilla adversary. Countless numbers of Afghans joined the Islamic resistance, which was organized into several *mujahideen* (“holy warrior”) organizations with headquarters in Peshawar, Pakistan. Though these parties were structured along Islamic ideological lines, there is good reason to believe that many guerillas that fought in the war against the Soviets had other motivations besides religion. *Mujahideen* units in Afghanistan often switched party allegiances, and even entered into alliances with the infidel Soviets against their indigenous rivals. Nevertheless, the flurry of activity in Peshawar caught the imagination of the entire Islamic world. Notions of universal Muslim “brotherhood” were awakened after years of neglect and misuse. A number of Arab and Islamic states rallied to the cause, arranging for vast amounts of money and weapons to be channeled to the *mujahideen* parties in Pakistan. This fundraising and mobilization drive was not restricted to official channels either; many wealthy and pious private citizens of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states donated massive amounts of money and materiel to the cause.

But this charitable movement to help the suffering Afghan Muslims was not sufficient for everyone. One Muslim cleric in particular, Shaykh Abdallah Yusuf Azzam, had an extraordinary obsession with the issue of Afghanistan. Azzam, born in the Palestinian village of Ass-ba’ah Al-Hartiyeh in 1941, had become disillusioned with the

⁶ Eliot, Theodore L., Jr. Gorbachev’s Afghan Gambit. Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis; Cambridge, MA. ©1988. *Page 1*.

Arab struggle against Israel. Although at first he had enthusiastically joined the Palestinian guerilla forces in Jordan, the secular nationalist principles of those that called themselves *mujahideen* were bitterly regarded by Azzam as the height of hypocrisy. Feeling angry and alienated, he left Jordan to teach at the King Abdelaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.⁷ While there, Azzam became preoccupied with the idea of *jihad*, or “holy struggle.” A student and close friend later explained the realization that Azzam had while teaching in Jeddah:

“Sometimes you are looking for justice in this life or something more to give to the Moslems all over the world and when you see the world slipping [from] the Moslems everywhere, you wake up, the *jihad* wakes up inside of you. You see them in Bosnia, Sudan, Somalia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Albania, Egypt, Syria... You think about these things and if you don’t get together and if you don’t hold hands and believe in the same cause, then others will destroy you without you knowing. You have to do something... *jihad* is the only savior.”⁸

Azzam became convinced that the Islamic world was under siege by its enemies; at any moment, they would spring forth and devour the last remnants of the glorious Muslim *ummah* (community). The struggle to propagate Islam was no longer an evolutionary campaign; either Islam would triumph over its disbelieving enemies, or it would be swept into the dustbin of history. Azzam declared his new personal philosophy to be “*jihad* and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues.”⁹

For Azzam, the invasion of Afghanistan was the fulfillment of divine prophecy. A European people, imbued with the ideas of ultra-secularism and modernization, had swept into a Muslim land to conquer and pillage. The scattered Islamic resistance there

⁷ “Sheikh Abdullah Azzam.” Azzam Publications; London, UK.
<http://www.azzam.com/html/storiesabdullahazzam.htm>.

⁸ Emerson, Steven and Khalid Duran. “Interview with Abu Iman.” November 4, 1993.

faced a goliath superpower opponent with a fearsome supply of ammunition and men. With his message of armed religious confrontation, Azzam quickly traveled to Peshawar to offer his services to the *mujahideen*. His organizing abilities and personal charisma were legendary; his followers bragged that “Sheikh Abdullah is a person who even his enemy respects... because he says what he believes.” They often lauded his unparalleled ability to unify and energize disparate Muslim factions: “[Azzam] has no problems with anybody. He always says stop speaking and let’s do, let’s work, stop fighting, then serve the name of the organization. Serve what the organization comes to serve: the cause. He wanted to get everyone together.” Azzam was fully committed; either he would achieve his goals, or he would become a *shaheed* (martyr) and die trying.

Perhaps it was the infighting amongst the native Afghani *mujahideen* factions; perhaps it was the ferocity of the Soviet onslaught; regardless of the reason, Abdullah Azzam quickly developed his own independent mission in Peshawar. Azzam now sought not only to evict the Russian armies from Afghanistan, but moreover, to subsequently remove all “infidel” regimes and to reestablish the rule of Islam. He planned to use the *jihad* in Afghanistan to recruit and train Muslim guerilla fighters from across the Middle East. The first of these Arab fighters stayed in Azzam’s “guest house” in Peshawar, which by the mid-1980’s had become *Makhtab-e-Khidamat*, the “*Mujahideen* Services Office.” Prior to 1985, there were only about thirty-five steadfast volunteers in Peshawar. All operations were extremely secret: standing orders were left that “no Arab

⁹ “Sheikh Abdullah Azzam.” Azzam Publications; London, UK.
<http://www.azzam.com/html/storiesabdullahazzam.htm>.

brother was to be found in the office.”¹⁰ There was no regular system for bringing recruits into Afghanistan or training them in weapons or combat tactics.

The major turning point came in early 1985, when Azzam reached an agreement with Abd-i-Rab Rasoul Sayaf, the chairman of the indigenous fundamentalist guerilla coalition known as the “Islamic Unity of Afghan *Mujahideen*.” Sayaf agreed to allow the use of the Salman al-Farisi training camp (bordering the Kunar province of Afghanistan) to specifically train Arab recruits. By April of that year, twenty-five volunteers were enrolled in the first official Arab-Afghan guerilla training course. One of these first volunteers was an American Muslim, Wael Julaidan, who quickly became a top aide to both Abdullah Azzam and his new sponsor and confidant, Saudi construction magnate Usama bin Laden. Julaidan later explained Azzam’s vision behind the training camps:

“We wished that everyone coming after us should pass through the same method of preparation—by participating and sharing—as we had started with... after morning prayers we would get together for Qur’an recitation, while after the afternoon prayer, we would get together to read some *hadith* and benefit from them. After that, if there were any military operations, we would participate with them.”¹¹

Azzam’s plan was to not singularly indoctrinate the volunteers in military tactics; in teaching unity of religion and thought, he sought to create a brotherhood that would obliterate any ethnic or regional distinctions. Into Afghanistan would come a mixed group of Iraqis, Palestinians, Saudis, and Yemenis. But, when they left, they would only be Muslims. The class of would-be guerillas grew so quickly that Sayaf was soon forced to cordon off an entire section of the al-Sadda camp specifically for the training of Arab recruits.

¹⁰ Muhammad, Basil. *Al-Ansaru l’Arab fi Afghanistan*. The Committee for Islamic Benevolence Publications; ©1991. Page 112.

The performance of the Arab-Afghans in actual battle was something less than legendary. Many of the new recruits came from upper middle class families in the Arabian Gulf region; they knew much more about engineering and business than armed combat. These ragtag guerillas were often a liability to both themselves and any Afghan *mujahideen* unit willing to fight alongside them. The native Afghan “holy warriors” were typically very suspicious of their new Arab allies, regarding these foreigners as “Gucci” soldiers who were out of touch with the social and religious fabric of the Afghan people.¹² But the limited experience in warfare gained by the Arabs was incalculably important. Blood and sweat bound together these soldiers, who were convinced that death in battle would lead to *shuhada* (martyrdom) and eternal paradise. One Arab fighter, after witnessing the near annihilation of his unit by a Russian air attack, commented, “for me, this battle was really a big boost that motivated me to carry on. It gave us the assurance that no one is hit except if that was destined for him by God.”¹³ Paradoxically, every guerilla that the Soviets managed to kill simply encouraged a greater bloodlust; those that remained alive felt “cheated” and sought ever the more desperately to achieve martyrdom in the name of Islam.

In the early months of 1988, Azzam’s master plan finally came to fruition. The war in Afghanistan appeared to be coming to a close; a diverse, fractious group of Muslim guerillas had finally defeated the mighty Russian bear. On a fundraising trip to the United States, he proclaimed to his followers, “Oh brothers, after Afghanistan, nothing in the world is impossible for us anymore. There are no super powers or mini-

¹¹ Muhammad. *Page 112.*

¹² Kabbani, Shaykh Muhammad Hisham and Matten Siddiqui. “Usama Bin Laden: The Complete File.” *The Muslim Magazine*. October 1998. *Pages 20-23, 62-67.*

¹³ Muhammad. *Page 187.*

powers—what matters is the willpower that springs from our religious belief.”¹⁴ After the 1967 war with Israel, most of the humiliated Arab world had lost faith in their own military abilities, but Afghanistan had changed all of that. With thousands of Arab recruits arriving regularly to get training to fight the “enemies of Islam”, Azzam publicly announced the foundation of *Al-Qa’ida*, the “Solid Base.” In his treatise, he reasoned that every revolutionary ideology needs a rugged, elite cadre to protect it, inspire it, and lead it to ultimate victory. This Leninist-style vanguard “constitutes the solid base for the desired society.” According to Azzam, the war in Afghanistan was a divine “trial by fire” of the vanguard; it was a test of their true commitment to establish Islam at any cost. Only by continued armed struggle would the unified strength of the Muslims be brought to bear on their enemies. In concluding, Azzam issued what he referred to as “the final call”: “We shall continue the Jihad no matter how long the way is until the last breath and the last beating of the pulse or we see the Islamic state established.”¹⁵ One of Azzam’s top lieutenants, Tamim Al-Adnani declared to a rapt audience later that year, “the best thing is [to] continue Jihad. Nothing but Jihad... Even after liberation of Afghanistan, even after the Islamic government, [the *mujahideen*] will not stop. They will go up to the Muslim countries of Russia, Islamic republics. They will go down to Palestine, to [Jerusalem].” Moreover, Al-Adnani offered this chilling addendum: “[if] Anybody stops in their way, Oh my God! Smash them! Any ruler, [if] he will not let us go, we will go by force! Jihad!”¹⁶ The Arab-Afghans had certainly come full circle by 1990: a small group of motivated fundamentalists, upset by the state of the Muslim world, had been

¹⁴ Emerson, Steven. *Jihad in America*. SAE Productions (for PBS); Washington, DC. Originally aired November 21, 1994. Running time: 1 hour.

¹⁵ Azzam, Dr. Abdullah. “*Al-Qa’ida*.” *Al-Jihad*. No. 41; April 1988. *Page 46*.

¹⁶ Emerson.

transformed in five short years into a powerful transnational guerilla army backed by the wealth of Usama Bin Laden, the new “Prince” of the movement following the assassination of Dr. Azzam in 1989. Dr. Azzam's death heralded a new age for his movement; while alive, Azzam had pressed for a final, complete victory in Afghanistan before attempting to “export the revolution” elsewhere. The younger, hotheaded Bin Laden, however, had other ideas. His zealous enthusiasm to immediately spread *jihad* worldwide had often clashed with the more meticulous and evolutionary strategy of Azzam. Even before Azzam’s murder, some of Bin Laden’s followers approached him and told him, “You shouldn’t be staying with Abdullah Azzam. He doesn’t do anything about the regimes—Saudi, Egyptian, Algerian. He’s just talking about Afghanistan.”¹⁷ With Azzam out of the way and with Bin Laden's vigorous encouragement, the Arab-Afghans turned their attention to new targets: the Western-oriented, “un-Islamic” governments of the Middle East.

In many ways, these governments had always been the real enemies of the Arab-Afghan foot soldiers. Most of the recruits who sought training in Afghanistan were young men, disillusioned by the corruption and ineffectiveness of their own home governments. An embarrassing lack of modernization or democratization left Middle Eastern regimes devoid of legitimacy or support in this key demographic group, and these embittered youth dreamed of restoring their personal faith and honor. Perceived Western imperialism and the state of Israel served only to aggravate and intensify the burning hatred among the politically, socially, and economically dispossessed. Dr. Azzam’s militant doctrine was exactly what many of these young men were searching for. Simply

¹⁷ Engelberg, Stephen. “One Man and a Global Web of Violence.” The New York Times. January 14, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/14/world/14JIHA.html>.

put, when faced with the failure of a state and its governing ideology, people typically turn to radically unconventional solutions. Theorist Albert Hirschman once pointed out that citizens of a modern nation-state generally have two options for methods of political dissent: voice and exit. When all means of communication are blocked between the government and the people, voice becomes null and void and the only option left is self-exile.¹⁸ One must be careful not to equate politically or ideologically-motivated “exit” as simply total surrender or “giving up.” Rather, exit represents the most severe break from the social contract that can be mustered. It is a signal that one’s goal is no longer to reform, but to rebel. In a variation of the “boomerang effect,” these exile elements often seek through violent means to use their position of coercive insularity to capitalize on socioeconomic and political instability and overthrow their unresponsive home governments. Thus for many of those disgruntled exiles that left for Afghanistan, the real issue here seems not to be Islam, but rather a frustrating lack of modernization and democratization in the Middle East.

¹⁸ Hirschman, Albert O. Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA. ©1970.

Chapter 3: The Algerian Debacle

There is little question that the Arab-Afghan phenomenon has thoroughly changed the modern political landscape of Algeria. This fact is perplexing considering that Algeria has no real history of religious fundamentalism. Though Islam has been a rallying cry for local anti-colonial movements in the past, it has typically only served as a pretext to unify native Algerians against foreign enemies. Yet, despite this, Algerian “Afghans” and their clerical supporters have been among the most radical of the Middle Eastern Islamists, even sanctioning the massacre of innocent civilians in a questionable attempt to “purify” their homeland of secularism. The reason that this new generation of Algerians have chosen a new, violent path for themselves is not a simple one; indeed, it is the complex interaction of a number of factors that includes a lack of national democratization, a deliberate campaign of ideological brainwashing by the governing regime, and a total socioeconomic collapse that has led many Algerians to seek unconventional solutions, often by taking part in the Muslim holy crusade in Afghanistan.

Though the true extremism and zealotry of the Algerian Islamist movement clearly did not emerge until after the return of the Arab-Afghans, it is critically important to first understand the pre-1989 development of Algerian radical religious politics. While there had been violent confrontations between left wing and Islamist students at the Law School of Algiers as early as 1975, the first real sign of domestic Islamist discontent came in the mid 1980s. In 1982, an Algerian named Mustafa Bouyali formed a secret group known as the Algerian Islamic Movement (MIA). The MIA stole a number of

rifles and explosives from a military arms depot and fled to the hinterlands.¹⁹ Then, in the summer of 1985, radical Islamists belonging to a group called *Jund Allah* attacked the policy academy in Soumaa, breaking into the armory and stealing more weapons and ammunition. These militants proceeded to commit several bank robberies and attacked military convoys. Though their base was eventually discovered and overrun by government authorities, nearly all of the fundamentalist guerillas escaped and continued to engage in random attacks on government targets.²⁰ Less than a year later, under pressure from newly formed Islamist grassroots advocacy groups like *Ahl ad-Da'wah*, the Algerian national constitution was amended to recognize the nation's Islamic heritage and to advance the interests of Algerian Muslims. The government's response to the new pressures and demands placed on it by its people was predictably insufficient. By October 1988, violent street protests forced President Chadli Benjedid to rethink his commitment to the continued one-party rule of the National Liberation Front (FLN). He proposed sweeping governmental reforms, including an amendment to the constitution allowing a shift to multi-party democracy.

On its face, this seemed to be an extremely positive development for the people of Algeria. But, not everyone was convinced of Benjedid's good intentions. Many analysts theorize that his sudden policy switch was at least partially based out of a need to counterbalance the influence of hardliners within the FLN. Benjedid particularly stood behind the new conglomeration of prominent Islamist organizations that had coalesced to form the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which had the necessary grassroots

¹⁹ Messaoudi, Khalida and Elizabeth Schemla. *Unbowed*. University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, PA. ©1998. *Page 66*.

²⁰ Harris, Paul. "Algerian election pits Democracy against Terrorism." *Jane's Intelligence Review*. Vol. 9, No. 9. September 1, 1997. *Page 422*.

support to offset the influence of the military and the FLN. Critical observers of Bendjedid have alleged that he exclusively tolerated FIS only “because [he] thought that [he] could control them and use them against... the democratic, secular opponents.” Despite electoral laws against religious parties, in September 1989, FIS was officially legalized by Benjedid. The president refused to take any action against the party over the next two years, even after convincing evidence emerged that it had been behind widespread violence designed to intimidate its political and religious opponents. The problem with Benjedid’s new policy was that many Algerians were not necessarily seeking a switch to *sharia* rule; to be more precise, they sought a change to anything other than the FLN. The slogans of October 1988 were not the typical “Islam is the solution,” but rather, “We don’t need black pepper, we need a decent leader!”²¹

However, this important distinction quickly became lost in the chaotic events that took place between 1988 and 1992. During this period, a number of factors led to a disastrous explosion of political violence and the drastic polarization of the “mainstream” Algerian Islamist movement. Partly, this trend can be blamed on reactionary elements within the governing FLN and the state military. Though President Chadli Benjedid began to openly aid the Islamists in their struggle to gain entry into the political system, many hardline secularists and nationalists saw FIS and the erratic Benjedid as serious threats to their own entrenched power and to the overall stability of the Algerian state and economy. These avowed statist also found a sympathetic ear among several prominent Western European states, particularly in Paris. France, with its extensive historical, cultural, and political ties to Algeria, was alarmed by the prospect of an Khomeinist-style

²¹ Messaoudi. *Page 85.*

Islamic government taking power in their former colony. For the Europeans, there simply was no comparison between what was happening in North Africa and the 1979 Iranian revolution: whereas the West had been insulated from Iran by thousands of miles, Algeria would be an unpredictable fundamentalist state right at the doorstep of the European continent. The synthesis of both domestic and foreign resistance to democratic elections inclusive of FIS and the Islamists had a dangerously destabilizing effect. Proponents of Islamic *Shari`a* rule grew antagonized and frustrated by government reluctance to share power. Increasingly, these religious dissidents resorted to non-democratic tactics (i.e. intimidation and violence) to force concessions from their opponents. Moreover, the attempts by foreign states to influence the Algerian elections and prevent FIS from enacting its mandate only served to provoke a serious public backlash and the labeling of the FLN government as a Western stooge. These widespread perceptions further enforced the role of the Islamists as the populist alternative to years of government abuse and mismanagement.

But what has been somewhat overlooked as a key factor in the militarization of Algerian politics was the return of the Arab-Afghans. Prior to 1993, between 1,000 and 1,500 Algerian returnees from Afghanistan returned to their homes, and largely fell under the banner of FIS.²² Despite this sudden influx of radicals, the short existence and vague tenets of the party effectively prevented internal conflicts and factioning for a time. However, from 1988 on, militants identifying themselves with FIS became increasingly associated with acts of brutality symptomatic of the Afghan-exile extremism. This brutality was in stark contrast to the former, more populist image of FIS. With random killings quickly giving way to assassinations, bombings, and more organized forms of

terror, it is now clear that many of those responsible for the indiscriminate violence had received more than cursory forms of military education. Given the strict measures taken by the FLN to prevent an internal revolution, this group of well-trained individuals logically could only consist of disgruntled members of the security apparatus or exile-guerillas trained in a foreign country. The Algerian Arab-Afghans soon proved their expertise in the fields of both urban and suburban combat. The experience in Afghanistan was slightly different for the Algerians than any other guerilla nationality; though these North Africans naturally “mixed” with other *jihadists*, they tended to remain amongst themselves and were trained “separately” at the Khalid ibn Walid camp, away from other recruits.²³ Though this policy seems contrary to the ideas of Abdullah Azzam, it gave the Algerians a definite edge and an astonishing level of hierarchy and unity of purpose. These “Afghans” proved to be the spark that would throw their entire homeland into a bloody, merciless struggle toward unknown objectives.

When the Algerian government cancelled elections in 1992, FIS began its inevitable journey towards an organizational schism. As soon as elections were cancelled, the new military government took immediate steps to detain the entire FIS leadership. Though ostensibly an intelligent move by the state to quash the Islamist revolt, it proved to be yet another regrettable decision. With the political leadership in government hands, the Islamist factions became hijacked by the militants who were really responsible for the violence. Though many of the “Afghans” quickly dropped off into smaller, radical splinter groups, even FIS for a time was controlled by a number of them. Qamar-el-din Kharban, a former officer in the Algerian army and a senior Arab

²² Compass Media. “Arab veterans of Afghanistan war lead new Islamic Holy War.” October 28, 1994.

mujahideen commander in Afghanistan, was a cofounder of and key leader in FIS.²⁴ Kharban explained his position during a 1997 interview: “war has been forced on us, and we have to fight. That’s what I mean by being on the brink of civil war. The regime wants a civil war. This is the only way for them to stay in power.”²⁵ In September 1993, Rabah Kabir (the chief FIS spokesperson in Europe) and Kharban announced the formation of an “Islamic government in exile,” with Kabir as president and Kharban his deputy.²⁶ Throughout this time, Kharban, formerly responsible for training new Arab *mujahideen* recruits in Peshawar, maintained “close links” with Usama bin Laden and the Arab jihadist hierarchy that dated back to the very origins of the movement.²⁷ For the Algerian government, Kharban was the worst possible scenario: an intelligent, respected dissident with both intimate knowledge of the state security apparatus and actual combat experience in low intensity warfare. But Bin Laden’s connections to FIS go allegedly far beyond indirect links through former “Afghans.” According to U.S. authorities, the Saudi exile was personally responsible for covertly smuggling millions of dollars from wealthy Gulf patrons to the Algerian Islamist party through a variety of Sudanese banks.²⁸

However, the majority of Arab-Afghan veterans that returned to Algeria were not entirely pleased with the lack of progress FIS made in its campaign to take power. These ultraradicals thought the party was too moderate and political in its approach: they still believed wholeheartedly in Abdullah Azzam’s philosophy of *jihad* until victory or

²³ United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al. U.S. District Court Case S(7) 98 Cr. 1023; Southern District of New York. February 26, 2001. *Pages 1378-1379.*

²⁴ Compass Media.

²⁵ Dennis, Mark. “Algeria on the brink.” Newsweek. April 14, 1997. *Page 60.*

²⁶ Bruce. *Page 175.*

²⁷ Tazaghart, Atmane. “Meet Algeria’s ‘Salafi Group.’” *Al-Majalla*. June 17, 1999.

²⁸ Sale, Richard. “Collapse of BCCI shorts bin Laden.” United Press International. March 1, 2001.

martyrdom. Abdelaziz Belkhadem, a former Algerian parliamentary speaker, explained, “People who had been in Afghanistan said: ‘Listen, it’s not your method that will give you power. The right way is what we did in Afghanistan, where we broke the Soviet Union into pieces.’”²⁹ Simply put, these militants were not interested in electoral victories or even battlefield compromises; rather, they primarily sought the total annihilation of anyone who stood in their way. Shortly after the cancellation of the 1992 general elections, many “Afghans” defected from the Islamic Salvation Front and formed their own enigmatic splinter groups. With the FIS leadership in jail and the party caught between political and military objectives, these splinter groups grew to define the very essence of the Algerian civil war. The most infamous of these factions is *al-Jama’ a al-Islamiyya al-Musallaha*, or Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which first emerged in late 1991.

Consisting of no more than 1,500 hardcore activists, the GIA has still managed to attain a reputation for being one of the most violent contemporary political movements in the world. Over the past nine years, its tactics have developed from assassinations, bombings, and relatively surgical attacks on the state military to the wholesale massacre of rural villages for unspecified reasons. In its bizarre campaign of terror, the GIA has made targets of everyone, including over 200 teachers (guilty of “taming the youth”) and more than 100 other competing religious figures (including many prominent FIS leaders) whom it deemed to be heretics.³⁰ The group has even ventured to attack the “enemies of Islam” beyond the borders of Algeria: it was responsible for numerous bomb attacks on

²⁹ Dahlburg, John-Thor. “Algerian Veterans the Nucleus for Mayhem.” Los Angeles Times. August 5, 1996. Part A; *Page 11*.

³⁰ Phillips, James. “The Rising Threat of Revolutionary Islam in Algeria.” The Heritage Foundation. Backgrounder No. 1060. November 9, 1995.

Parisian metro stations in 1995, a foiled but sophisticated attempt in December 1994 to blow up an Air France jumbo jet and crash it into the streets of Paris, and (allegedly) a daring plot to commit terrorist acts in the U.S. on the eve of the millennium.³¹ Moreover, in the fall of 1993, the GIA deemed it necessary to racially purify Algeria and subsequently declared open season on all foreigners living there; in addition to forcing a mass European exodus, GIA militants assassinated over 90 innocent people.³²

Though certainly the lion share of the group's violent acts have been perpetrated against their own countrymen, this international aspect to their organizational philosophy can be almost directly attributed to the large number of "Afghans" in the GIA and the continued brotherhood it shares with the Arab *mujahideen*. With their wide representation in the GIA, the "Afghans" grew to define the essential image of the group. One of the GIA's first senior commanders was Aissa Messoudi (a.k.a. Tayeb al-Afghani), a well-known veteran of Afghanistan and a recognized symbol of fundamentalist activism in Algeria. Messoudi, a former member of FIS, led an infamous attack on a government army barracks that became known as "the butchery at Guemar."³³ The day of that attack—November 29, 1991—is regarded as the unofficial birthdate of the GIA. Messoudi's subsequent capture and execution by the Algerian military had a definite, even measurable effect in further antagonizing the radical Islamists and triggering a wider civil conflict. Another subsequent leader of the Armed Islamic Group was Sid Ahmed Mourad (a.k.a. Djaafar al-Afghani), also a prominent and respected Algerian Arab-Afghan. Mourad's fighters were responsible for the first directed killing of foreigners in

³¹ U.S. Department of State. Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999. April 2000. See "Terrorist Group Profiles: Armed Islamic Group (GIA)."

³² Phillips.

³³ Dahlburg. *Page 11*.

the civil conflict. He was also largely responsible for the decision of the GIA to intentionally target noncombatants, including intellectuals, women, and children.³⁴ Yet another senior GIA chief, Sherif Gousmi (a.k.a. Abu Abdallah Ahmed), is a graduate of the Arab-Afghan camps. Gousmi, before assuming control of the Algerian militant group, specialized in committing assassinations, including those of government officials and foreigners. Even one of the elite of the GIA Overseas Executive Council, Ahmed Bounaoua, is a graduate of the Afghan *mujahideen*.³⁵

On the part of the organization itself, the GIA has retained close contacts with Usama bin Laden and *Al-Qa'ida*. According to Omar Chikhi, GIA's former adviser on religious affairs, the links between the Saudi exile and the ultramilitant Islamic group date back to 1993, when Algerian Arab-Afghans "acted as go-betweens, sending envoys to meet GIA chiefs who did not have satellite phones at the time."³⁶ In a 1998 report delivered to an Interpol convention in Madrid, the director of the Algerian Judiciary Police charged that bin Laden was directly colluding with the GIA and was responsible for running "a genuine network supplying arms and military equipment to the Algerian guerillas."³⁷ In the mountains of Afghanistan, the GIA continues to train a new generation of militants at a variety of locations run and financed by *Al-Qa'ida*; this includes the Zhawar Kili Al-Batr base camp, one of the sites attacked by the U.S. in retaliation for the August 1998 East Africa embassy bombings.³⁸

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Bruce. *Page 175.*

³⁶ Tazaghart.

³⁷ Manresa, Andreu. "Algiers accuses the Saudi millionaire Bin-Ladin of paying the GIA terrorists." *El Pais (Madrid)*. October 8, 1998.

³⁸ Rather, Dan. "Special Report: Secretary of Defense William Cohen and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Henry Shelton discuss the U.S. military strikes on sites in Afghanistan and Sudan." *CBS News*. Aired August 20, 1998; 1:44PM EST.

Bin Laden is even allegedly responsible for convincing Hassan Hattab, a respected former GIA military commander, to form his own splinter group: *Jamaat Salafi fi Dawa wa'al Qital*, or the Salafist Group for Prayer and Combat (GSPC). Hattab was a dedicated admirer of the early feats of Mustafa Bouyali and the MIA, and a firm “advocate of jihad.”³⁹ However, Hattab had broken his ties with the GIA after the killing of the group’s *Amir*, Djamel Zitouni, in 1996. Apparently, Hattab disagreed with the questionable tactics of Zitouni’s successor, Antar Zouabri, who openly sanctioned large-scale massacres against innocent civilians.⁴⁰ According to testimony before an Algerian tribunal from Mohamed Berrached, a captured leader of the GSPC, Bin Laden contacted Hattab via satellite telephone in the summer of 1998. Bin Laden allegedly urged the Algerian militant to set up his own armed faction in order to present a “better image of the Jihad” against the secular government.⁴¹ Berrached, who claimed to have witnessed the telephone call personally, said that the Saudi exile was concerned that the GIA was collapsing internally and had irreversibly tarnished its own reputation both in Algeria and in the larger Arab world with needless violence. Whether or not Hattab was ever successful in obtaining “financial and logistical” aid promised by Bin Laden, his new group has been quite a success: according to experts, the GSPC “has become the main focus of anti-terrorism forces” in Algeria. Moreover, the group has managed to amass hundreds of defectors from both FIS and the GIA; in less than two years, Hattab’s forces were estimated to have grown from 700 to 3,000 active fighters.⁴² If this is indeed the

³⁹ Tazaghart.

⁴⁰ Tazaghart.

⁴¹ “Bin Laden held to be behind an armed Algerian Islamic movement.” Agence France Press (AFP). February 15, 1999; 11:39GMT.

⁴² Tazaghart.

case, then Bin Laden's new Algerian ally may lead the largest armed group to still be at war with the government.

Clearly, the Arab-Afghan returnees made their own distinct mark on the civil conflict in Algeria. Their membership in (and leadership of) all the major Islamist political factions has not only shaped the development of these groups, but has often defined the very essence of what they represent. But presented these facts, one can only question what particular factors have allowed the Algerian "Afghans" to be so successful in undermining civil order and the enemy regime. To understand the motivations and politics of these stubborn guerillas, one must appreciate the unique social, historical, religious, and economic legacy of their homeland. There is little debate that Algeria has had a rough ride through the 20th century. While under French control, Algerian Muslims operated as the majority underclass, subject to racially restrictive laws in their own country. A protracted struggle for independence from France led to a disastrous anti-colonial war characterized by terrorism and unyielding bloodshed. Ironfisted foreign rule was only removed after eight years of relentless violence threatened to even topple the French government in Paris. From this traumatic experience, Algeria has never truly recovered. After independence, a number of autocratic military rulers took power, strictly limiting all forms of political participation and slowly running the economy into a total tailspin. This government mismanagement was the first sign that a civil conflict loomed in the near future.

The downturn in the Algerian economy was certainly not a recent development. Indeed, for over the past thirty years, the national infrastructure has dangerously stagnated as a result of inefficient and corrupt socialist policies. State-run industries

slowly fell apart, and by the end of the Cold War, were forced to make large layoffs in order to remain solvent. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the only thing that prevented total economic shutdown was the large income stemming from the sale of Algerian oil wealth. Unfortunately, as other developing nations have learned, betting economic well-being on a single natural resource is a risky game. When the price of petroleum collapsed in 1986, the North African state was set on a course towards instability and chaos. By 1997, the Council on Foreign Relations went so far as to state that “a burgeoning population, massive unemployment, overcrowded cities, and a dilapidated infrastructure have combined... to create a socioeconomic catastrophe.”⁴³

Before very recently, Algeria has also had phenomenal rates of population growth, often topping 3% a year. What is now left in Algeria is a flood of disenfranchised youth with no real place in society. It is currently estimated that over 70% of contemporary Algerians are less than 30 years old.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, for this younger generation, the state is unable to provide jobs, housing, or any other amenity expected of a modern government. While national unemployment is officially at 28%, other estimates say it may be as high as 75% in the critical 16-24 age group.⁴⁵ Poor financial straits have forced millions of Algerians over the past fifty years towards the cities. By now, urban dwellers account for over 55% of the total population and the figure continues to steadily grow. However, this rapid urbanization was not accompanied

⁴³ Yacoubian, Mona. *Algeria's Struggle for Democracy*. The Council on Foreign Relations; New York, NY. ©1997. *Page 27*.

⁴⁴ Yacoubian. *Page 28*.

⁴⁵ Yacoubian. *Page 29*.

by a commensurate increase in housing and human services in the overcrowded cities. By 1996, the national housing deficit was estimated to be at least two million units.⁴⁶

Without housing or jobs, many young Algerians are now absolutely unable to afford marriage or other basic accoutrements of modern life. They are considered nothing more than a distasteful burden by their own government, and they have been utterly rejected by their society. They feel alienated from their own homeland and complain bitterly of being condemned to “an extended childhood.”⁴⁷ These angry, disaffected youths, who have become known as “hittistes” (“those who prop up the walls”), overwhelmingly “harbor a deep hatred of the government and [have] no hope for the future.” Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of the fundamentalists are quite young. According to one Westerner living in Algeria in 1995, “the average age of the mujahadeen is 19-20, up to 24. The leaders of the GIA are 27. Occasionally you get an old one who's 30 or 35.”⁴⁸ Entirely bereft of opportunity, these youths provide “a bottomless pool of recruits” for Islamist guerilla groups active in Algeria.⁴⁹ This younger generation found particular inspiration in the legacy of those Algerians who had fought amongst the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. They “lionized” the “Afghan” returnees, adopting their unusual, non-native forms of dress and conduct.⁵⁰ For many of these youths, combat life is often a courageous, stirring adventure and a welcome diversion from the social and financial troubles that they typically face at home. This phenomenon is well demonstrated by the biography of imprisoned GIA militant Ahmed Ressay. Fed

⁴⁶ Figure taken from background material to World Bank 1996 Low Income Housing Project.

⁴⁷ Verges, Miriem. “‘I am living in a foreign country here’: A Conversation with an Algerian Hittiste.” *Middle East Report*. Vol. 25, No. 1. January-February 1995. *Pages 14-17*.

⁴⁸ Benesh, Peter. “Algeria's violence strikes fear in Europe.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. May 8, 1995. *Page A1*.

⁴⁹ Yacoubian. *Pages 28-29*.

⁵⁰ Dahlburg. *Page 11*.

on stories of the 1962 independence war by his parents, the unemployed Ressaym grew bored of his comparatively meaningless existence and quickly became “fascinated by [television] shows about ‘unsolved’ conspiracies like the Kennedy assassination.”⁵¹ A struggle fought in the name of God, the Algerian *jihad* gave new purpose to Ressaym’s life and offered a real reason to push forward against difficult odds.

However, it is not just economic ruination that is responsible for the breakdown in civil order led by the “Afghans.” While the country has slowly crumbled underneath itself, the authoritarian regime in power (known as the “pouvoir”) has kept a tight lid on virtually all political opposition. Being unable to voice discontent in an open, public debate, many Algerians have naturally turned to other avenues of dissent. Prior to 1988, Algeria was a strictly one-party system controlled by the FLN. Though the nationalist party had been the driving force behind the Algerian independence movement in 1962, over the years, it had grown extremely corrupt and was guilty of gross mismanagement. However, instead of addressing the real problems, the regime slyly redirected popular resentment stemming from unemployment and corruption in more “positive,” international directions, such as towards the Palestinian issue, African decolonization, and the American-led anti-communist war in Southeast Asia. For many years, society found political sustenance only in sycophantic legends from the struggle for independence. Indeed, the FLN leadership was notorious for playing reckless propaganda games with Arabo-Islamic ideology in fairly obvious attempts to shore up the party’s own questionable legitimacy. As one dissident described, following the removal of the pro-Western Shah of Iran in 1979, “on the radio, on the television, and in the

⁵¹ Johnson, Scott. “Tale of the Wayward Son.” Newsweek. May 8, 2000. *Page 39*.

newspapers, we were bombarded with the official line: ‘Long live the Iranian revolution!,’ ‘Long live Khomeini!’”⁵² While the government only wanted to communicate the message of a developing-world, “revolutionary” victory over Western imperialism, this was not the only value impressed upon observers. In Algeria, Khomeini was glorified by the press, and despite being Shi’ite, he became an important symbol to many Algerians. With a tragic note of irony, the Iranian revolution had “opened the door to all sorts of possibilities for the Algerian Islamist movement.”⁵³ This being the case, it is quite understandable why so many Algerians took interest in the struggle of the Afghan *mujahideen*. When Kamel Ressay was asked to explain his errant brother’s involvement in fundamentalist violence, he simply replied, “we’re a revolutionary family.”⁵⁴

Ressay’s family is by no means a unique instance; the relentless, conspiratorial, but ultimately hollow propaganda of the Algerian regime dangerously polarized its own population into a culture of radicalism and violence.

In this sense, for many of the *mujahideen*, both the war in Afghanistan and the Islamist struggle back in Algeria were part of a grand religio-political crusade to form a new, more just social order. These guerillas even described themselves as “armed humanitarians,” defending the Muslim world against powerful, heretical enemies. Moreover, these young Algerians were attempting to be the torchbearers of the powerful legacy of the 1962 independence fighters. For them, the current Algerian civil conflict is their generation’s defining event. To date, they remain overwhelmingly resolute in their belief that they have been sanctioned by Allah to use any means necessary to win a

⁵² Messaoudi. *Page 63*.

⁵³ Messaoudi. *Page 66*.

⁵⁴ Johnson. *Page 39*.

righteous war. It is little wonder that they were so receptive to the *jihadist* philosophy of Abdullah Azzam and Bin Laden.

Chapter 4: The Elite versus the Elite in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly one of the key players in the history and development of the Arab-Afghan movement. Between 1980 and 1990 alone, over 15,000 Saudi citizens traveled to Afghanistan in search of *jihad* and holy martyrdom.⁵⁵ These “Afghans” have typically taken places of great importance within the loose *mujahideen* hierarchy; Bin Laden, the *Amir* of the “Afghans” himself, is of course a well-known exile from the Kingdom. Thousands of other Saudis have taken their “Afghan” education and have made their own mark on conflicts in places ranging from Bosnia to the Philippines. The fact that Bin Laden and Azzam’s fundamentalism is so popular in the region is not altogether surprising. The present Saudi Kingdom was, in fact, founded by an alliance between the al-Saud family and an extremist religious movement known as *al-Ikhwan* (“the Brotherhood”). The *Ikhwan* operated during the early part of the 20th century as a sort of irregular Islamic militia, wiping out the tribal enemies of al Saud in the name of religion. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many Arab secular nationalist states such as Egypt bitterly despised the Saudi monarchs for massively aiding a wide variety of Islamic opposition movements within their countries. Moreover, when it came to Afghanistan in the 1980s, both the Saudi government and wealthy philanthropists from the Kingdom were the chief underwriters of the *mujahideen*, including the Arab volunteers. The Saudi elite had no qualms about supporting the “Afghans” in their religious campaign. Al-Saud feared the effects of Soviet hegemony over the region and hoped that by supporting the Afghan resistance, they would create a strong, viable Sunni counterweight to the

⁵⁵ Lancaster, John. “Saudis Shocked That Bomb Suspects are Local.” The Washington Post. May 26, 1996. Section A; Page A24.

menacing Iranian Shiite threat. The Saudis never really considered that they would be funding a dangerous cadre of militant dissidents; after all, it was strange to imagine that religious militants would be in any way opposed to the rigidly-strict Wahhabi regime controlling the Kingdom. As far as the Saudis understood, “when the war was won... everyone would go home and forget about jihad.”⁵⁶ However, they failed to anticipate a series of events coinciding with the end of the Soviet-Afghan war that together galvanized Islamist discontent and presented a serious threat to the stability of the monarchy. Furthermore, far from celebrating the returning “Afghans” as heroes of Islam, the general Saudi public did not share their “euphoria” for absolutist fundamentalism. Very much the same way as Vietnam veterans in the U.S., the returning Arab-Afghans felt alienated from their own homeland and quickly turned into “social misfits who were looking for another war to fight.”⁵⁷ This time, their battle would be against the corrupt and unappreciative Saudi regime and its Western “paymasters.”

Though Saudi “Afghans” technically belong to a variety of prominent opposition groups, these organizations have tended to coalesce together and collaborate to the point that there is actually little difference between them. The three most prominent Saudi dissident groups; namely the Advice and Reformation Committee (ARC), the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), and the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA); are typically no more than fronts for Bin Laden and *Al-Qa’ida*, the darlings of the radical fundamentalists. The London-based ARC is Bin Laden’s official political dissident organization. Its self-defined mission is to “aim at applying the

⁵⁶ Masoud, Tarek. “Bin Ladin’s Ideological Roots.” The New Republic. December 28, 1998; *Page 18*.

⁵⁷ Fandy. *Page 183*.

teachings of God to all aspects of life.”⁵⁸ Specifically, it aims at restoring and purifying Islamic rule in Arabia back to strict Wahhabi teachings. The group was run until recently by Khalid al-Fawwaz, himself a veteran of the Arab-Afghan training camps. Though the ARC claims to be strictly a Saudi opposition group and an entirely separate organization from *Al-Qa’ida* and the “World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders,” recent evidence suggests that the ARC is no more than an innocuous-sounding front for Arab-Afghan activities in the Western world. According to federal prosecutors in New York, al-Fawwaz played an integral role in the operations of *Al-Qa’ida*, including the August 1998 East Africa embassy bombings. Al-Fawwaz (a.k.a. Abu Omar al-Sebai) was the former *emir* of the Abu Bakr Sadeek camp in Afghanistan, one of four key sites used to train Arab *jihadi* volunteers. At the Sadeek camp, recruits were reportedly schooled in “light weapons, explosives, some grenades, [and] pistolettes.”⁵⁹ Al-Fawwaz also spent quite a bit of time in Nairobi, Kenya, and is alleged to have directly conspired with those currently on trial to bomb two U.S. embassies in retaliation for American military involvement in Saudi Arabia and Somalia. Moreover, Scotland Yard investigators who searched al-Fawwaz’s office in London discovered copies of Bin Laden’s “declaration of jihad.”⁶⁰ It is now believed that the ARC chief was, in fact, responsible for faxing a claim of responsibility to Radio France International in Paris for the embassy bombings on behalf of “the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places.”

Though started as a moderate “human rights” organization seeking incremental change in the Saudi government, CDLR has also been effectively hijacked by Arab-Afghans and their political supporters. Shortly after the monarchical regime forced

⁵⁸ Communiqué signed by Usama bin Laden and published by the ARC office in London. July 11, 1994.

⁵⁹ United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al. February 21, 2001. *Page 1132.*

CDLR spokesman Dr. Muhammed al-Massari and his cadre to flee to London, their rhetoric became progressively more militantly anti-Saudi and anti-Western. In December 1994, a CDLR bulletin called the task of Arabian fiscal responsibility “impossible given the greed, stubbornness, irresponsibility and suicidal inclinations of the Al Sa’ud family.”⁶¹ Less than one month later, a CDLR bulletin devoted a large section to the discussion of “What after Al-Sa’ud?” The bulletin attacked those Saudis still dedicated to reform of the existing regime as ignorantly naïve and warned of a “tidal wave of public defiance and resistance which will deal the final, fatal blow to al-Sa’ud’s legitimacy.”⁶² Clearly, this was a striking change from pre-exile CDLR policy. A close look at CDLR literature during this period shows a clear progression in the intensity of anti-Saudi propaganda. By March, CDLR had accused Al Saud of being part of an “Unholy Alliance” with Israel and the United States. The Committee’s Communiqué 29 demanded “Is there a more heinous treason or betrayal than that when a ruler initiates an alliance with the Nation’s fiercest enemies?”⁶³ This was also a major deviation from what al-Massari himself had professed while in Arabia. In March 1993, after meeting with U.S. embassy officials in Riyadh, al-Massari believed that he could count on American support for his “human rights” endeavors. While displeased with U.S. support for the Saudi regime, al-Massari had been careful in his criticism of Washington. Evidently, this had all starkly changed by 1995.

This change, however, is not altogether shocking when one examines the clear links that al-Massari has established in London with Usama bin Laden and the

⁶⁰ United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al. March 26, 2001. *Page 3357.*

⁶¹ CDLR Bulletin No. 27. December 23, 1994.

⁶² CDLR Bulletin No. 31. January 20, 1995.

⁶³ CDLR Communiqué No. 29. March 29, 1995.

“Afghans.” In the U.S., the “Action Committee for the Rights of Middle East Minorities,” a Denver-based group headed by Dr. al-Massari, is directly connected through shared addresses to Khalid al-Fawwaz.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, London has been the site of other numerous links between CDLR and ARC. In November 1999, Muhammed Sohail, a British Muslim who was responsible for the construction of the CDLR website and the publication of CDLR material on the Internet, admitted to British reporters, “I work for two people, really... Mr. Massari and Osama Bin Laden.”⁶⁵ Sohail was also the Internet publicist for another CDLR-affiliated anti-Saudi group called “Muslims Against Saudi Tyranny” (MAST), which he described as “an alliance of concerned Muslims opposed to the saudi-whitehouse regime in Arabia.” In addition to a close MAST alliance with CDLR, Sohail added that the organization actively supports Usama bin Laden.⁶⁶ In another e-mail message, Sohail admitted that several MAST fundraising events had actually been organized “with kind assistance from Friends of Osama bin Laden.”⁶⁷

Even the comparatively moderate MIRA, led by Saad al-Fagih, has involved itself in joint activities with Bin Laden and the “Afghans.” According to Mohammed Sohail, al-Fagih, a co-founder of CDLR and current head of MIRA, split from al-Massari’s Committee precisely because the former “had a nationalist approach to 'saudi' Arabia, while Dr Al-Massari... has a globalist Ummah oriented approach.” Moreover, al-Fagih was “a reformist (let the saudi family and government reform and stay in power and

⁶⁴ Lexis-Nexis INCORP and EZFIND searches on “Action Committee for the Rights of Middle East Minorities” and “Khalid Fawwaz.”

⁶⁵ Hastings, Chris and Jessica Berry. “Muslim militia training in Britain.” *The Ottawa Citizen*. November 07, 1999. *Page A6*.

⁶⁶ Abu Osman, Sohail. “You MAST read this.” Usenet posting on soc.religion.islam. March 4, 1998.

⁶⁷ Sohail, Mohammed. “MAST fundraiser: anti-saudi brunch.” Usenet posting on soc.religion.islam. March 25, 1997.

become a bit more Islamic) while Dr Al-Massari is a revolutionary who wants the complete removal of the Al Saud family.”⁶⁸ However, this apparent contradiction between the evolutionary ideology of MIRA and the confrontational *jihadist* philosophy of Bin Laden did not stop al-Fagih from directly working with *Al-Qa’ida* operatives to purchase a satellite telephone for the notorious Saudi exile in 1996.⁶⁹ Moreover, his group freely and unapologetically associates itself with representatives of the “Afghans.” MIRA’s official publication *Al-Islah* even boasts of the extensive contacts that the organization has within *mujahideen* “circles.”⁷⁰

Beyond mere membership in dissident groups, Saudi “Afghans” are also responsible for most of the recent sporadic political violence in the Kingdom. Though the November 1995 bombing of the U.S. military mission in Riyadh has remained something of a mystery, al-Saud implicated four fundamentalist militants as the guilty parties. In their confessions, three of the four admitted to being veterans of Afghanistan, and having received training in weapons and explosives at several camps affiliated with Usama Bin Laden. Furthermore, all of them proudly testified that their act of terrorism had been directly inspired by the radical propaganda of Muhammed al-Massari and Bin Laden.⁷¹ While these testimonials have often been viewed somewhat skeptically by U.S. authorities, counterregime activists were not so quick to dismiss them. MIRA’s *al-Islah* reported at the time that “the groups that carried out the operations had vowed to sacrifice themselves in the way of God, and so they actually wanted to be arrested and their

⁶⁸ Abu Osman, Sohail. “Dr Al-Massari.” Usenet posting on soc.religion.islam. August 27, 1997.

⁶⁹ *United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al.* March 27, 2001. Page 3478.

⁷⁰ Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA). *Al-Islah*. August 1996.

⁷¹ “Four arrested in connection with the 1995 Riyadh bombing make statements.” British Broadcasting Corporation. From Riyadh, in Arabic. Broadcast 10:00 GMT, April 22, 1996.

confessions to be made known, and then to be killed, so long as certain objectives were achieved.”⁷²

However, one must again question why over 15,000 Saudis decided to sacrifice themselves in Abdullah Azzam’s *jihad* for Islam. This is especially perplexing given the public image of Saudi Arabia as a wealthy petrodollar state, where most citizens live a protected, elitist lifestyle. However, this supposed affluence has done nothing to stem the ferocity of the angry “Afghan” militants. Among many, there are three principle identifiable causes for the massive number of Saudi “Afghans” and their successful infiltration of the national political landscape: the lack of internal democratic development, the lingering aftereffects of the 1991 Gulf War, and a stagnant and mismanaged national economy.

Overall, the Saudis have dealt very poorly with managing opposition factions seeking change in the government. As previously explained, the regime was directly responsible for radicalizing the mainstream Islamist movement in 1991 with their kneejerk, draconian reaction to any and all political dissent. Rather than evaluating the opinions of moderate dissidents, al-Saud was content to simply conduct mass arrests of just about anyone who even dared to question the wisdom of its policies. Because the regime made such a mission out of quashing all opposition, they turned themselves into the adversaries of their own people. The Islamists now not only could drum up support on the basis of religious faith, but moreover, from straight anti-government populist fervor. All this coincided with an embarrassing series of corruption scandals involving the royal family. Many began to question why al-Saud was conducting itself by different

⁷² “Six said to have confessed to Khobar bombing deliberately to disprove any Iranian, Shiite link.” Mideast Mirror. August 14, 1996. *Pages 12-13*.

principles than it set upon its own people. For a long period of time, the Kingdom seemed an illegitimate relic, and its future appeared in real jeopardy. The fact that the government was spending more time protecting itself from its domestic enemies than its foreign ones was also quite embarrassing. In this atmosphere, it was not long before ordinary Saudi citizens began to question their country's reliance on external, non-Muslim forces to "protect" it from the antics of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Popular resentment among Saudis stemming from the Gulf War emerges from two principle factors: fierce resentment of the embarrassing inability of the Fahd regime to independently protect itself after years of ultraextravagant defense spending and paralleled renewed belief in religious principles forbidding the presence of infidels in the holy land of Islam. By all accounts, Saudi Arabia should have the best, most efficient military in the entire Gulf region. Between 1973 and 1983 alone, the Kingdom's defense expenditures increased from \$2.3 billion to over \$26 billion; in ten years, those budget outlays went from constituting 13 percent of GNP to 25 percent.⁷³ Interestingly, this money was spent on acquiring expensive Western-made weapons rather than on human recruitment. Two critical reasons prevented the Saudis from spending the money on simply building a massive army similar to that of Iraq or Iran. Firstly, the relatively small native population of Saudi Arabia (9 million by the late 1980s) prevented the regime from developing a military strategy based on overwhelming numbers. During the 1980s, the Saudi armed forces constituted only 82,000 men, a significant number of whom were hired mercenaries.⁷⁴ Secondly, and more importantly, the problem of the military has

⁷³ Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1985. Government Printing Office; Washington, DC. ©1986. *Pages 79, 121, and 134.*

⁷⁴ Cordesman, Anthony H. Western Strategic Interests in Saudi Arabia. Croom Helm; London, UK. ©1987. *Page 132.*

always been a rather irritating Catch-22 for the Saudis. Though it is absolutely necessary for protection against both domestic and foreign enemies, the army itself is “one of the principal suspects of internal subversion.”⁷⁵ Based on these quite legitimate fears, al-Saud has been forced to ride a narrow line between having a military strong enough to perform its duties but weak enough to be domestically non-threatening. Thus, instead of financing larger numbers of troops, the increased expenditures were mobilized to build the most sophisticated and technologically advanced military in the Gulf. The Saudis purchased elaborate weapons systems at an alarming pace from the U.S. and Western Europe. American military contractors were even imported to develop state-of-the-art airbases and naval ports in order to make the Saudi military infrastructure the most modern in the Middle East. Neither the sharp drop in oil revenues during the 1980s nor the subsequent recession in the Kingdom did anything to dampen high rates of defense spending. Thus, faced with the Iraqi threat, “Saudi citizens were expecting that the Kingdom’s force of men and sophisticated weapons would place it at the peak of the best military levels in the Middle East region.”⁷⁶

However, despite these financially extraordinary efforts, the Saudi military system was, in fact, virtually bankrupt by August 1990 as a result of interservice rivalries and the stringent limitations imposed on it to prevent a military coup. Saudi commanders “often lacked the necessary clout to make or follow through on decisions.” Top Saudi generals were humiliatingly forced to explain to arriving American military officials, “We want to help, but we’re not authorized to spend the money.”⁷⁷ While the Royal

⁷⁵ Wilson, Peter W. and Douglas F. Graham. *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm*. M.E. Sharpe; Armonk, NY. ©1994. *Page 140*.

⁷⁶ *Radio al-Liwa*. Amman, Jordan. February 12, 1991.

⁷⁷ Wilson. *Page 160*.

Saudi Air Force (RSAF), the major beneficiary of government military spending, was quite well trained and ready for combat, the army was in a pathetic condition. Lieutenant General Prince Khalid bin Sultan bin Abdelaziz, the head of Saudi and Arab forces during the Gulf War, was forced to plead to General Norman Schwarzkopf in August 1990, “You must help with my ground forces.” The Kingdom’s infantry and armored units were very poorly equipped, and were unable to properly use what materiel they did possess. Twenty-four Saudi tanks stood inoperable in the desert for months because their assigned personnel were not familiar with basic maintenance issues.⁷⁸ While it would have been understandable for the Saudis to be outmatched by the highly developed Iraqi war machine, it was altogether shocking how ill prepared the military was. The vast majority of Saudis were “astonished... when [the Kingdom] announced to the world that it could not defend [its] borders by [itself].”⁷⁹

The situation was exacerbated further by the events that occurred in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Rather than leaving as they had promised, U.S. troops were obligated to remain in Saudi Arabia to protect against the continuing compelling threats posed by both Iraq and Iran. The fact that foreign troops could not leave without placing the Kingdom at serious risk was a truly embarrassing moment for the Saudi government. Worse still, al-Saud refused to abandon its incompetent defense policies at a time when many citizens were openly questioning the wisdom of their dictatorial rulers,. Rather than following the advice of many analysts who suggested a more comprehensive overhaul of the Saudi military, the Kingdom simply went on another extravagant spending binge in 1990,

⁷⁸ Wilson. *Page 161*.

⁷⁹ Radio al-Liwa. Amman, Jordan. February 12, 1991.

purchasing more than \$30 billion in American weapons by 1994 alone.⁸⁰ But, the public no longer so easily tolerated such buying sprees. Saudi nationalists were outraged that, at a time when the nation's economy was in sinking straits, the government would waste more money on ineffectual military hardware. They joined growing ranks both in and outside the Arabian Peninsula who realized that the principle problem with the Saudi military was the low quality and morale of its soldiers, not its technology. Consequently, they argued that "the Kingdom's defense establishment might be in better straits... if less money had been spent on high-tech weapons and more on education and health."⁸¹ Even more irritating to ordinary Saudis were allegations that wealthy and corrupt members of the royal family were primarily interested in continued high rates of defense spending because of the enormous commissions they received for negotiating contracts with foreign weapons contractors, primarily from the United States.

However, there is little doubt that the strongest denunciations of the deployment of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia have come from Islamic fundamentalists, who have criticized it both in practical and religious terms. Those denunciations have caused the most damage to the prestige and power of al-Saud, primarily because they directly undermine the Kingdom's foremost pillar of legitimacy: Islam. The Islamist argument against the stationing of foreign troops on Saudi soil is two pronged, starting with the assertion that the very presence of Westerners on the holy land of Arabia is against the commands of the divine Prophet Muhammed. The basis for this allegation is derived from *hadith*, or stories from the life of the Prophet. According to certain *hadith*, on his deathbed, Muhammed expressed three final orders to his followers. Reportedly among

⁸⁰ Wilson. *Page 163*.

⁸¹ Wilson. *Page 166*.

those three was an urgent exhortation to “expel the pagans from the Arabian Peninsula.”⁸² At the time, it was not entirely clear whether Muhammed was referring to just polytheists or all non-believers, including “People of the Book.” However, Umar, the third Islamic Caliph, insisted that what the Prophet had actually said was “I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslims.”⁸³ Seizing on this notion, Umar waged a vigorous campaign to accomplish this goal during his reign in power. Many centuries later, the campaign of Umar resurfaced as a central idea to hardline Saudi fundamentalists. The growing extremism of the Islamist dissidents reached its rough peak in 1996, culminating with a declaration of war “against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places” by Bin Laden. Coming in the wake of several unsettling terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities in the Kingdom, Bin Laden’s words were taken very seriously.⁸⁴ In the February 1998 inauguration of the “World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders,” the Saudi exile explained that “the Arabian Peninsula has never -- since God made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas -- been stormed by any forces like the [U.S. troops] spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations.” He advised his followers to liberate the Muslim holy lands and “fight the pagans all together... until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevails justice and faith in God.”⁸⁵ Ironically, Bin Laden’s rhetoric resounded in many Sunni Islamic circles, despite that remaining American armed forces were confined to the east of the country, far from Mecca or Medina and, in fact, in traditionally Shi’ite areas.

⁸² Al-Bukhari, Sahih. “Hadith 4.288.” Narrated by Said bin Jubair.

⁸³ Muslim, Sahih. “Hadith 4366.” Narrated by Umar ibn al-Khattab.

⁸⁴ CDLR (Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights). “The Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War.” MSANews. October 12, 1996.

In his declaration, bin Laden also highlighted the second major contention of the Islamists: that the U.S. and its allies have and continue to use their bases in the Saudi Kingdom to oppress the Muslim people. Indeed, King Fahd's decision to participate in the war against Iraq and avail itself of foreign, *kafir* military forces was utterly reprehensible in the hearts and minds of the Islamic fundamentalists. Furthermore, it caused al-Saud to lose "the glamour of both oil wealth and Islam, as both these two instruments were perceived to have been employed for the benefit of foreigners."⁸⁶ At the conclusion of the conflict with Iraq in May 1991, a petition that became known as "the Letter of Shawwal" (otherwise known as the Letter of Demands) was delivered to King Fahd with over four hundred signatures, requesting the rectification of slumping economic conditions and greater political freedoms. However, the petition was ignored and those responsible for it were publicly humiliated. In July 1992, another likeminded attempt at reforming the Saudi government was made in the creation of the "Memorandum of Advice," a letter signed by 109 Saudi Islamists addressed to the King that included nationalist-style demands to create a powerful, indigenous military and defense industry. It also insisted on the curtailment of Western arms purchases and applying the money to improving domestic educational and health services.⁸⁷ When al-Saud initiated a serious crackdown against many of the ulema and Islamist scholars responsible for these embarrassing criticisms, much of the backlash was directed straight at the U.S. These Islamists saw the "new sword in the hands of the House of Saud" as

⁸⁵ Bin Laden, Shaykh Usama et al. "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement." February 23, 1998.

⁸⁶ Bresheeth, Haim and Nira Yuval-Davis. The Gulf War and the New World Order. Zed Books; London, UK. ©1991. Page 214.

⁸⁷ Aburish, Said K. The Rise, Corruption, and coming Fall of the House of Saud. Bloomsbury Publishing; London, UK. ©1994. Page 208.

directly “made in the USA.”⁸⁸ In his declaration of war, Bin Laden echoed these allegations and charged that arrests of dissident clerics were executed under orders from Washington.⁸⁹

More than just in silencing Saudi Islamists, there continues to be a pervasive belief both in the Kingdom and, moreover, across the entire Islamic world that the presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia is part of a grand scheme to oppress the Muslims and preserve American hegemony in the Middle East at all costs. This hegemonic need is not based on petroleum interests alone, but rather is a general imperialist policy reflected worldwide. Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, a well-known Saudi dissident cleric, explained in his 1991 book about the Gulf crisis, “I’m of the opinion that what took place [in the Gulf] was not a random event, but part of the larger Western design.”⁹⁰ Hawali alleged that the real reason for the deployment of American troops in the region was not to liberate Kuwait “but to subdue any regional power that opposes the West and to tie the region’s states into a new security arrangement.” By confronting Iraq in such a way, the Western alliance could achieve “the humiliation of Islam through the subjugation and destruction of the Islamic movement.”⁹¹

While these ideologies certainly play vital roles in determining the Saudi domestic political atmosphere, one might question whether they were alone the most important factors in mobilizing ordinary Saudis to join or support the Arab-Afghan *mujahideen*. This is especially so in light of similar deployments in several other Gulf states, such as Qatar, with comparatively little similar uproar. In fact, the underlying

⁸⁸ Aburish. *Page 77*.

⁸⁹ CDLR. “The Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War.”

⁹⁰ Fandy. *Page 67*.

⁹¹ Fandy. *Page 71*.

cause of the tide of dissent that swept across Saudi Arabia following the Gulf war was not principally political at all, but rather (as with Algeria), largely socioeconomic. This seems shocking to many casual observers because of the Kingdom's mighty oil wealth. That wealth and the gluttonous image of al-Saud in the West are deceptive; indeed, since the early 1980s, Saudi Arabia has suffered severe economic problems that have brought the very rentier basis of the state into question. Those difficulties, caused by falling petroleum prices and Saudi financial mismanagement, have primarily been responsible for creating the entire modern political dissident phenomenon, including the "Afghans."

Quite clearly, the Saudi economy was, and remains, heavily dependent on its main export: oil. That lone natural resource has enabled al-Saud to develop a highly intricate welfare state, buying the loyalty and complacency of its citizenry with all-embracing, cost-free civil services and product subsidies. During the 1970s, as a result of a series of oil crises and heavily inflated resource prices, the economy experienced a tremendous boom. Thus, the Saudis had little problem funding the massive costs of their extensive welfare system. However, this glorious era of prosperity and wealth was not to last forever. The price of crude oil plummeted from \$40 per barrel in 1980 to less than \$10 per barrel in 1986. Consequently, Saudi oil revenues fell sharply from roughly \$102 billion in 1981 to \$13.5 billion by 1986.⁹² This sudden loss of income was a serious financial dilemma for al-Saud. Rather than cut welfare services, the regime decided instead to continue spending at normal levels and simply incur enormous deficits. Saudi deficit spending between 1984 and 1994 totaled over SR 500 billion. In a half-hearted

⁹² Wilson. *Page 183.*

attempt to defray the growing deficit, the Saudis relied heavily on their overseas liquid assets, which dwindled from a hefty \$115 billion in 1981 to roughly \$6 billion in 1994.⁹³

However, deficit spending alone was not enough to deal with the progressively worsening economic slump. Facing tremendously deflated revenues, government domestic spending started to be cut by 1982. By 1985, the Saudi economy “was in an undeniable recession.” With its liquid assets running out and desperate to avoid impending financial collapse, the government began to slowly remove subsidies on many products. At first, the price changes, directed at mainly non-essential products, were not widely noticed. But, when it attempted to remove the considerable subsidies on gasoline, water, electricity, and bottled gas, the regime was met with public outcry. Many Saudis began to wonder how their government had managed to waste its oil wealth to the point of recession. Despite this popular discontent, the government still obstinately continued with traditional policies and refused to allow private-sector influence on economic decision making in the Kingdom.⁹⁴ This, of course, all coincided with al-Saud’s well-publicized mass arms purchases from the West. Experiencing the worst economic recession in decades, citizens had good reason to doubt the wisdom of their leaders.

Thus, the Gulf War regrettably coincided with a period of severe domestic socioeconomic instability in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime incurred tremendous costs as a result of the conflict, which was not widely popular in the Kingdom. The Saudis were estimated to have spent more than \$64 billion on the war effort, and another \$20 billion in cash grants or aid to allied Arab states. They also lost \$26 billion in unpaid loans to Iraq dating back from the first Gulf conflict with Iran during the 1980s. Thus,

⁹³ Wilson. *Pages 191-192.*

⁹⁴ Wilson. *Page 185.*

the price of Saudi participation in the war was a near doubling of the kingdom's already inflated deficit between 1990 and 1991 alone.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, King Fahd, in order to avoid being blamed for egregious financial mismanagement, decided to place the culpability for all the kingdom's economic woes on the Gulf War. Retrospectively, by linking the two issues, the King did himself a terrible disservice. In his 1992 budget address, he explained, "the difficult circumstances of the previous two years, which brought heavy financial burdens, forced the government to borrow large amounts of money from inside the country and abroad." In another interview, he went even further to say that "our debts before Iraq's problem were limited. But during the following nine months, the Kingdom undertook a great spending program... which was without any restriction."⁹⁶ These statements virtually ignored the fact that Saudi Arabia had been in economic decline long before Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Worse still, this phenomenon was reinforced by a similar trend occurring beyond the borders of the Saudi kingdom. Falling oil prices and a lack of internal development had spread economic doldrums across the region. With few short-term solutions at hand, economic dispossession quickly led to xenophobia and political extremism. Typical to the often-conspiratorial Middle East, Europe and the United States were blamed for this situation. Accordingly, beginning in roughly 1990, "to oppose the West was to oppose the current wretched socio-economic conditions of the majority of the population."⁹⁷ Hence, it is no great shock that Saudi political dissidents came to believe that the Gulf War and American foreign policy were directly responsible for their own economic and

⁹⁵ Wilson. *Page 189.*

⁹⁶ Wilson. *Page 195.*

⁹⁷ Bresheeth. *Page 216.*

political troubles. In such an environment, it is not surprising that people wanted to strike out at their perceived victimizer.

Unlike in Algeria, however, it has not been the downtrodden underclass who have led the Islamist struggle in Saudi Arabia. Quite to the contrary, a loose collection of radical Muslim clerics and individual personalities have advanced the fundamentalist cause. Saudi Arabia, in fact, represents somewhat a geopolitical paradox. By all indications, the Kingdom should be equally ripe (if not more so) as Algeria for a breakdown in civil order. Following the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, there was rampant speculation in the international media about the future of the Saudi royal family. Many predicted that King Fahd and his kin would soon be toppled by a mass, populist revolt led by the Arab-Afghans. Certainly, the Saudi “Afghans” were the wealthiest and most powerful of their brethren. Moreover, in contrast to the GIA’s Islamic revolution in Algeria, the Saudi Arab-Afghans claimed to be carrying out the exact opposite: a counterrevolution aimed at restoring (rather than establishing) the true tenets and ideals of the Wahhabi faith.

Nevertheless, despite these facts, the Saudis have not only survived the fundamentalist wrath, but moreover, may have surpassed it as a serious threat to future stability. The majority of the Islamist dissident groups have been discredited and fallen into disrepair. The ARC has virtually disappeared following the arrest of Khaled al-Fawwaz and several of his assistants. CDLR and MIRA have not only vanished from the media, but moreover, have lost much of their financial support. Tighter OPEC policies have also raised petroleum prices, enabling at least a partial recovery in the Saudi economy. However, ironically, it seems that the Saudi “Afghans” and their supporters

are themselves directly responsible for the marginalization of their cause. Most Saudis have constant and direct contact with Western culture and society. They are not religious radicals and value the limited freedoms that their government affords them. While they maintain their faith in Islam, the extreme propaganda of the Islamists has not held great appeal.

When the ARC, CDLR, and MIRA were chiefly concentrating on the evolutionary reform of the Saudi Kingdom to make it more responsive to popular needs, many Saudi citizens sympathized with their cause. This included even those that disagreed with the Islamic principles of the dissident groups. However, the uncompromising actions of the “Afghans” since their return to Saudi Arabia and the disturbing language of their local Islamist allies have not won the fundamentalist movement many adherents. Dr. al-Massari and Bin Laden, particularly, have fallen into disrepute among many Saudis for their violent, frightening rhetoric and behavior. Just because some Saudis disagree with the deployment of foreign troops on the Arabian peninsula does not mean that they are largely in favor of armed retaliation against Westerners in the region. Even most of those in the Kingdom who wish for concrete change in their government are quite unwilling to trade the old tyranny of al-Saud for the new tyranny of the Arab-Afghans. Thus, the prospect of an “Afghan” Islamic revolution occurring in Saudi Arabia, at least in the near term, is extremely unlikely.

Chapter 5: Egypt and the Survival of the “Pharoah” Regime

Egypt is often called the “heart” of the Arab world. It is the location of confluence for a variety of religious, political, and social trends from across the Middle East, from the North African *Maghrib* to the Euphrates valley. It has also been the birthplace of some of the most important and influential ideas in Islamic revivalist philosophy. Indeed, celebrated Islamists such as Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb, the very forefathers of modern Islamic fundamentalism, all introduced their most revolutionary principles while in Egypt. Despite years of domestic conflict, no amount of state-led repression has been able to effectively stamp out these strains of radical religious thought. However, by 1970, the clashes between the government and the Islamists started to take on an unsettling character; Muslim radicals were increasingly turning towards methods of violence to intimidate the government and other secular opponents. Thus, the war in Afghanistan was particularly unfortunate for Egypt. Faced with socioeconomic disaster and political oppression at home, thousands of Egyptian Islamists left to fight an Islamic holy war against the Soviets. More than ten years after the end of that war, the Egyptian Arab-Afghans continue to make an important, lasting mark on both the domestic politics of Egypt and those of the larger Islamic world.

To understand the motivations of the Egyptian “Afghans,” one must first be familiar with the prevailing local atmosphere at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By all indications, in 1979, Egypt was well on its way to an Islamic revolution. A failed economy, the disgrace of pan-Arab “Nasserism,” and humiliating

government negotiations with the hated Israeli enemy had quickly drained public support for the regime of Anwar Sadat. While President Sadat received much praise on the international scene from the U.S. and Europe, food riots at home were forcing the government to severely clamp down on public demonstrations and other forms of political dissent. The President had also chosen a historically unusual path to shore up his own legitimacy; in contrast to the hardline anti-fundamentalist policies of his famous predecessor, Sadat moved away from revolutionary socialist doctrine and relaxed restrictions on the development of political Islam in Egypt. This included taking a number of measures designed to gain the sympathy and support of the largest and longest standing Islamic political institution in the country: *al-Ikhwan*, commonly known as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Unfortunately for Sadat, the combination of diplomatic moderation with a greater domestic toleration for religio-political conservatism was not a successful operation. Rather than gaining their sympathy, the President was regarded by many of the Islamists as a weak-minded traitor and a tyrant who should be removed at all costs. By the time that Sadat realized his error and attempted to crack down on the influential societies of Islamists, it was already too late. In one of the most brutal assassinations ever caught on film, Muslim militants ritualistically gunned down Sadat and several top advisors in his reviewing stand during a military parade in 1981. As he sprayed bullets at Sadat, the lead assassin proclaimed, "I have killed Pharoah and I do not fear death."⁹⁸ Flushed with victory, radical clerics declared that the "Pharoah" had indeed fallen and the time had finally come for an Islamic revolution in Egypt. Luckily for the majority of Egyptians who did not share this conviction, the new regime of Hosni Mubarak was able to

maintain its control over the reigns of power. In this regard, it was of incalculable importance that many fundamentalists were momentarily distracted by events occurring elsewhere in the Muslim world, specifically Afghanistan. The government was more than happy to accommodate the desire of local Islamists to travel abroad in search of martyrdom; it was logically reasoned that the farther they were away from Egypt, the less of a problem they would be. The regime closely aided the American and Saudi effort to facilitate the development of the Arab *mujahideen* network in Peshawar; Egypt was an ideal source for weapons procurement, possessing large numbers of surplus (and often obsolete) Soviet-made guns, ammunition, mortar and artillery, and even some anti-aircraft weapons. Egypt allegedly even provided some volunteers with guerilla training at its own national military bases.⁹⁹

During the Afghan-Soviet war, over 2,000 Egyptians traveled to Peshawar to join the Muslim fighters.¹⁰⁰ Many more have come since 1990 to join the continuing crusade of Bin Laden and his supporters. The Egyptian members of *Al-Qa'ida* are unlike any other nationality, including even the Saudis. They constitute the “cream” of the group, holding nearly all significant positions of power below Bin Laden. The *Amir*'s two top military commanders, Muhammed Atef (a.k.a. Abu Hafs al-Masry) and the late Ali al-Rashidi (a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri), were both originally from Egypt. Abu Hafs, the *Amir*'s chosen successor, is, in fact, a former officer in the Egyptian army.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Bin Laden's current top spiritual and political advisor is Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, head of a central faction of the Egyptian militant group *al-Jihad*. It was Ali

⁹⁸ Abdo, Geneive. *No God but God*. Oxford University Press; New York, NY. ©2000. *Page 14*.

⁹⁹ Cooley, John K. *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism*. Pluto Press; Sterling, VA. ©1999. *Page 35*.

¹⁰⁰ Compass Media.

Mohammed, a former Egyptian military commander with ties to U.S. Special Forces, who educated the Arab-Afghan hierarchy as to the creation and maintenance of a terrorist “sleeper cell” structure in order to evade detection or capture. Quite clearly, the Egyptians have played an unique and integral role in the *mujahideen*. As one former Sudanese “Afghan” explained, Egyptian *jihadists* were “the first people start the al Qaeda, and also most of our training... the military stuff.” Many of them had actually been among the first Arabs to arrive in Peshawar seeking to help the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan. However, predictably, the overwhelming predominance of one nationality quickly led to disagreements and quarreling. Complaints even reached the ears of Bin Laden that the Egyptians had too much power within the organization: according to the same Sudanese “Afghan,” a group of *Al-Qa’ida* members set up a meeting in Peshawar with the Saudi exile, Abu Hafs, and Abu Ubaidah. At the conference, these disaffected *mujahideen* told the three that many were becoming frustrated that the camps, the guesthouses, and the governing advisory councils were all controlled by Egyptians, particularly those belonging to *al-Jihad*. They demanded to know, “why [have] Egyptian people got more [of a] chance than other people [to] run everything?”¹⁰² Bin Laden’s response was that anyone of any nationality could take positions of influence and control within *Al-Qa’ida*; it just happened that the most qualified and educated people to take those positions were Egyptians.

The loyalties of the venerable Egyptian “Afghan” veterans are loosely shared by the two most powerful armed fundamentalist movements from their homeland: *al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya* (“the Islamic Group,” or IG) and *al-Gama’at al-Jihad* (“the Jihad

¹⁰¹ Muhammad. Page 264.

¹⁰² United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al. February 6, 2001. Pages 322-323.

Group,” typically referred to as simply *al-Jihad*). Emerging from the same Muslim Brotherhood cloth, the groups are fairly closely affiliated with one another; the student activists of IG in the universities “either had contacts with or were leading figures in *al-Jihad* organization by the late 1970s or early 1980s.”¹⁰³ The influence of the Arab-Afghans has even further blurred the divisions between the two; moreover, it has helped to polarize the militants and push them towards progressively greater acts of bloodshed. Between 1992 and 1999 alone, sporadic acts of violence by these two groups had claimed over 1,250 lives, including government officials, Coptic Christians, foreign tourists, and anyone else opposed to their fundamentalist doctrine.¹⁰⁴ However, though the armed campaign of both movements has seen a marked escalation since the return of the “Afghans”, the two have been around for much longer. In fact, since 1977, *al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya* “has been the dominant political power in the universities and the means of protest against the regime.”¹⁰⁵ Like the Algerian religio-political movements, the goals of the Islamic Group have always remained vague, typically centering on the strict application of *Shari`a* law and an end to peaceful relations with Israel. The acts of violence committed by the group came under sharp scrutiny in November 1997, when IG militants gunned down 58 European tourists in Luxor. Far from being the first violent act of the group, the event had significance for other reasons: one, that it was a high profile attack on foreigners; two, that it involved Egypt’s economically-crucial tourism industry; and three, that it came only four months after the declaration of a unilateral cease-fire by six “historic” leaders of the IG movement, including several of those responsible for the

¹⁰³ Abdelnasser, Walid Mahmoud. *The Islamic Movement in Egypt*. Kegan Paul International; London, UK. ©1994. Page 60-61.

¹⁰⁴ Mekay, Emad. “Party time for Islamic militant group.” *Middle East Times*. May 23, 1999.

1981 assassination of Sadat.¹⁰⁶ This was a tragic reminder that *al-Gama'at*, like the Algerian Islamist parties, had somewhat splintered into more moderate and more extreme factions, largely as a result of the radicalized Arab-Afghans. Less than two years later, both Swiss and Egyptian authorities concluded that the Luxor attack had been financed and “ordered directly or indirectly” by Mustafa Hamza, a prominent IG commander and senior aide to Usama Bin Laden. Egyptian officials added at the time that following the attack, Hamza fled his temporary residence in the Sudan for the safety of Bin Laden’s camps in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ By December 1999, despite remaining in exile, Hamza had reportedly moved up the ranks and been elected as the new overall leader of *al-Gama'at*.¹⁰⁸ This seems to only add more weight to the conviction that it is the Arab-Afghans who are primarily responsible for the continuing campaign of violence by elements of the Islamic Group, despite the supposed July 1997 cease-fire.

The influence of the “Afghans” in IG is indeed tremendous. In February 1998, Abu-Yasir Rifa`i Ahmad Taha, the predecessor of Hamza as *Amir* of the Islamic Group, decided to officially bring the movement under the all-encompassing umbrella of Bin Laden’s “International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, IG’s preeminent spiritual “guide” is a well-known and respected *mujahideen* organizer from the Afghan war: the blind Muslim cleric Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman. Rahman, currently imprisoned in the U.S. for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, called for faithful Muslims to kill Anwar Sadat in a *fatwa*

¹⁰⁵ Moussalli, Ahmad S. Historical Dictionary of Islamic Fundamentalist Movements in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey. Scarecrow Press; Lanham, MD. ©1999. *Page 148*.

¹⁰⁶ Rouleau, Eric. “Egypt’s Islamists Caught in a Bind.” Le Monde Diplomatique. January 1998. <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1998/01/08egypt>.

¹⁰⁷ Hauser, Christine. “Bin Laden ‘behind Luxor strike.’” Middle East Times. May 23, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ “Jamaa Islamiya Back in Action.” Indigo Publications Intelligence Newsletter. December 16, 1999.

issued shortly prior to the actual assassination.¹¹⁰ The Shaykh is also a close friend and longtime advisor of Bin Laden's. In Brooklyn, Rahman ran the "Al-Kifah Refugee Center," the U.S. branch of *Makhtab-e-Khidamat*, the Peshawar-based Arab *mujahideen* "services office" founded by Abdullah Azzam and Bin Laden.¹¹¹ Moreover, he was among a key group of personalities who reportedly helped to convince the Saudi *Amir* to later abandon Azzam and "have a clear idea to use [the Arab *jihad* recruits] after Afghanistan for other wars."¹¹² Bin Laden did not take the arrest of Shaykh Rahman by U.S. authorities lightly. He has since promised "to work with all our power to free our brother, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, and all our prisoners in America, Egypt and Riyadh."¹¹³ Moreover, he called the act of liberating Shaykh Rahman, "a duty from God."

Interestingly, Rahman is yet another example of just how interconnected *al-Gama'at* and *al-Jihad* are. In addition to being the spiritual guide of IG, the blind cleric is also reputed to have had a central role in the formation of *al-Jihad*'s operational ideology and, later, "became very instrumental in the maintenance of the group."¹¹⁴ Like other local Islamist groups, the Egyptian *Jihad* movement also grew out of student religious and political activism in the 1970s, absorbing the membership of two earlier Egyptian fundamentalist parties, the Islamic Liberation Organization and *al-Takfir wal-*

¹⁰⁹ Bin Laden, Shaykh Usama et al. "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement." February 23, 1998.

¹¹⁰ Moussalli. *Page 149*.

¹¹¹ Pike, John. "al-Qa'ida (The Base)." *FAS Intelligence Reports*. August 21, 1998. <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ladin.htm>.

¹¹² Engelberg.

¹¹³ "Bin Laden vows to free Islamist sheikh jailed in US." *Agence France Presse*. September 22, 2000.

¹¹⁴ Moussalli. *Page 149*.

Hijra (“Repudiation and Exile”).¹¹⁵ From the beginning, *Al-Jihad* focused its efforts on the creation of a cult of violence in order to “purify” Egypt of sin and reestablish Islamic rule. By the late 1970s, leaders of the group had already constructed complex plans “for assassinating leaders, seizing government buildings and broadcasting centers, and taking control of Asyut as a base from which to advance on other cities.”¹¹⁶ Subsequently, *Al-Jihad* arranged the brutal killing of Sadat with other radical Islamists and the blessing of Shaykh Rahman. Despite a government crackdown following that assassination, the movement continued to rally for its cause, executing attacks against state officials and other “legitimate” targets of the “apostate regime.”

However, unlike *al-Gama’at*, *al-Jihad* has not (successfully) committed significant acts of violence in Egypt since 1993, and has remained relatively dormant with the notable exception of one particular faction led by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹¹⁷ Zawahiri, one of the first Egyptian Arab-Afghans, was allegedly in charge of *al-Jihad*’s last serious bid at overthrowing the Egyptian government: an abortive 1995 assassination attempt on President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.¹¹⁸ It seems to be more than a coincidence that this particular offshoot of *al-Jihad*, still singularly focused on the use of violence as a means of dissent, is also extremely closely affiliated with Usama Bin Laden and the “Afghans.” Zawahiri is suspected to have first met Bin Laden in Afghanistan as early as 1985. He is currently the Saudi *Amir*’s personal physician and is considered to be his most intimate advisor. According to testimony from former Arab-

¹¹⁵ Rubin, Barry. *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics*. St. Martin’s Press; New York, NY. ©1990. *Page 57*.

¹¹⁶ Rubin. *Page 58*.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999*. April 2000. See “Terrorist Group Profiles: Al-Jihad.”

¹¹⁸ Bodansky, Yossef. “The Mubarak Assassination Attempt Takes the Islamists’ War to Centre Stage.” *Defense & Foreign Affairs’ Strategic Policy*. July-August 1995. *Page 12*.

Afghans, Zawahiri was, in fact, among an elite group of four or five original co-founders of *Al-Qa'ida*.¹¹⁹ His faction has become so close to Bin Laden that it is no longer operationally or organizationally distinct from any other part of the “World Islamic Front.” As further evidence of this apparent merger, Abu Hafs al-Masry, former top aide to Zawahiri, is now officially Bin Laden’s most senior military commander. Both Zawahiri and Abu Hafs are believed to have taken a central role in the planning of the East Africa embassy bombings blamed on Bin Laden. Not surprisingly, Zawahiri’s faction of *al-Jihad* is made up almost exclusively of Egyptian *mujahideen* veterans still in exile in Afghanistan.

To understand the emergence and development of the radical fundamentalist movements associated with the Egyptian “Afghans,” one must first understand the composition of the membership of these groups, which is relatively homogeneous. Both *al-Gama'at* and *al-Jihad* were able to find the most support amongst either university students with an interest in Islam or recent unemployed graduates of higher education. Added to this was a small group of Egyptian military personnel and bureaucrats who had become extremely disillusioned with their employers. The vast majority of these activists were the economically and politically disenfranchised; an estimated 85% of *al-Jihad*’s membership “came from poor families and rural areas.”¹²⁰ As with Algeria, this disaffected group of youth sought to vent their anger and frustration through violence, both at home and on the battlefields of Afghanistan. There are several principle factors responsible for helping to birth the anti-statist *jihad* in Egypt: lack of political openness

¹¹⁹ United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al. February 6, 2001. *Pages 193-194.*

¹²⁰ “Violence Rises to the Top.” *Rose al-Yusuf*. September 8, 1986.

and the failure of state ideology; Sadat's unpopular peace accord with Israel; and pervasive Egyptian socioeconomic problems stemming from Nasser's socialist policies.

Nasser and Sadat were, at heart, authoritarian rulers who permitted very few to openly question the wisdom of their policies. They clouded domestic politics in a thick veneer of radical, populist ideology in a manner that paralleled the actions of the FLN regime in Algeria. Nasser and Sadat distracted public attention from domestic problems by focusing on non-related, pan-Arab causes beyond the borders of Egypt. At the same time, no serious domestic opposition movements were permitted, so there was no one to dispute the meaningless propaganda line espoused by the state. However, as the rulers of Algeria likewise discovered to their dismay, these hazardous policies only served to polarize the general population into believing any farcical conspiracy theories. While Nasser vigorously worked to be crowned "King of the Arabs," Sadat made himself out to be more of a pan-Islamist and permitted Muslim groups to become active again after a long period of repression during Nasser's rule. Like Chadli Benjedid in Algeria, Sadat hoped that the grassroots influence of religious groups would undermine any popular support for his leftist political opponents. However, as Benjedid came to realize himself, attempting to manipulate domestic politics in such a corrupt fashion is always a risky proposition. When the Egyptian economy began to fail by the mid-1970s, the general public was reawakened to the harsh realities of their own meager existence and grew infuriated with Sadat. With the socialist and communist parties fully discredited (just as Sadat always wanted), anyone seeking change in the regime "was forced to rally around

the only spokesmen who were allowed to speak and publish unmolested: the religious-oriented groups.”¹²¹

Sadat’s failed experiment of allying with the Islamists was not his only drastic policy switch that would come to haunt him. While the courageous Camp Sinai peace accord with Israel won Anwar Sadat many friends both in the Jewish state and in the Western world, domestically it was yet another decision that pointedly alienated the President from his own people. Both Nasser and Sadat had intentionally whipped the Egyptian population into a fury over the existence of the Jewish state. Just prior to the beginning of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Nasser explained to the world, “our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel.”¹²² He had misled more than a few of his supporters to believe that Egypt could actually win a war with Tel Aviv. When the public saw the actual destruction and chaos caused by the six-day long debacle, they could only share in the shame of the entire Arab world. For all their tough talk and cutting-edge Soviet weapons, the Arab armies were beaten even more handily than before; now, even holy Jerusalem (*Al-Quds*) was in the control of the enemy “crusader state.” Rather than immediately trying to wean Egypt off Nasser’s unsuccessful anti-Israeli propaganda war, Sadat temporarily latched on to the powerful legacy of his predecessor. Threatening to avenge the losses of 1967, he declared 1972 to be the “year of decision” in the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict.¹²³

But as soon as Sadat saw that the Egyptian military had performed adequately enough in the 1973 Yom Kippur/Ramadan War to proclaim a face-saving “victory,” he

¹²¹ Marsot, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid. “Protest Movements and Religious Undercurrents in Egypt: Past and Present.” Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University. March 1984. *Page* 8.

¹²² Davis, Leonard J. *Myths and Facts*. Near East Research, Inc. ©1988. *Page* 273.

quickly began to change his strategy. Between 1973 and the eventual Camp David Accords in September 1978, Sadat engaged in a delicate rapprochement with Israel and the United States. However, there was no concurrent effort made to explain the President's sudden change of heart to his own people. Though the pragmatic Sadat realized the wisdom of peaceful relations with Israel, years of conflict and bitterness reinforced by the pan-Arab propagandists could not be so easily erased from the minds of many Egyptians. Rather than adopting the conciliatory path established by Camp David, these Egyptians saw Sadat's new strategy as total treason; the only acceptable outcome of the embarrassing Arab-Israeli conflict would be the total elimination of the hated enemy. The fundamentalists were quick to seize the populist initiative on this issue; as Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman later explained in an interview, one of the primary goals of the Egyptian Islamist militant groups is "to fight against Communism, and... against [Sadat's] surrendering to the Jews."¹²⁴

However, concerns over foreign policy are only one small part of the motivation of the Egyptian Arab-Afghans. As in Algeria, shortages of jobs and housing were major factors in pushing people towards guerilla combat with their government. The contemporary Egyptian socioeconomic crisis is the long term result of failed policies begun under the administration of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Seeking to jumpstart modernization in his country, Nasser initiated a series of state-coordinated socialist reforms that were intended to instantly mobilize Egypt's economic power. These populist measures worked extremely well in the short term to develop an industrialized

¹²³ Smith, Charles D. *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. St. Martin's Press; Boston, MA. ©1996. Page 227.

¹²⁴ "Al-Jihad in Egypt: What is it? How does it think? What does it Want?" *Al-'Ahd*. January 17, 1987. Page 8.

infrastructure and to provide thousands of jobs to disenfranchised workers and peasants. This, of course, made Nasser very popular very quickly among a vast majority of Egyptians. Unfortunately, these statist policies were simply not sustainable; Egypt did not possess the economic resources to independently finance such grand schemes, such as the Aswan Dam electricity project. In order to keep the national deficit semi-balanced without cutting jobs or government expenses, Nasser was forced to progressively borrow more and more money from other countries. Egypt's trade deficit as a percentage of its GNP skyrocketed from 0.5% in 1960 to an astounding 26% by 1978.¹²⁵ These loans were the beginning of a dangerous trend for Egypt; that being, financial dependency upon foreigners to remain economically viable.

By 1970, the Egyptian economy was already starting to show tremendous strain; Anwar Sadat knew that his regime's ultimate survival rested squarely on his ability to reverse the shortsighted policies of Nasser. Sadat quickly acted to move his country away from the socialist direction towards which it had previously been oriented. First, in 1972, Sadat ordered hundreds of Soviet military advisors to leave Egypt, forcefully indicating to both the East and the West that he was determined to forge a new economic and political path for his country. He next began to vigorously court American foreign aid, both in the form of direct monetary donations and private investment. In order to attract this aid, Sadat was pressed to open Egyptian state-run industries to competition and institute the *Infitah*, or "open door policy," encouraging private capitalism and enterprise. Unfortunately, this new economic era did not turn out exactly as planned. Instead of foreign investment being turned towards productive areas of the economy, it

¹²⁵ Waterbury, John. The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: the Political Economy of Two Regimes. Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ. ©1983. Page 30.

was squandered on “items such as luxury apartment houses and consumer goods.”¹²⁶ A sudden switch to private capitalism drastically increased inflation and the disparity between the wealthy and poor in Egypt; furthermore, the nascent industries created by Nasser were choked by a flood of cheap, imported goods from Europe and the West. Though the privatization measures had originally been designed to save the Egyptian economy, the immediate effects were quite the reverse: a sudden increase in unemployment, the collapse of the national industrial infrastructure, and a growing dependency on foreign aid from the United States.

Like Algeria, Egypt’s economic problems were also exacerbated by explosive rates of population growth. The country’s main inhabitable region is the Nile river valley, which constitutes only a tiny fraction of the total territory of Egypt. By 1977, the Egyptian population, expanding at a rate of 3% per year, was estimated to have reached 40 million people, with a population density of more than 664 persons per kilometer.¹²⁷ This high density had the self-reinforcing effect of drastically increasing rates of urbanization, and thus even further cutting into the meager amount of cultivated land. Moreover, as urbanization continued, the availability of housing except for the very wealthy became virtually zero. Soon, Egypt was a country unable to feed, provide jobs for, or even shelter its own burgeoning population.

With all the apparent relevant similarities between Egypt and Algeria, it is difficult to understand why the Egyptian “Afghans” have been unable to mobilize similar popular support, or even the full cooperation of their non-“Afghan” Islamist allies. Western intelligence officials believe that not only has Ayman al-Zawahiri failed to

¹²⁶ Marsot. *Page 7*.

¹²⁷ Saeed, Javaid. Islam and Modernization. Praeger Publishers; Westport, CT. ©1994. *Page 152*.

secure the collaboration of much of the *al-Jihad* membership in his international Islamic crusade with Bin Laden, but that moreover, it has resulted in his “excommunication” from the group. Citing his singular obsession with the Saudi exile, ruling elements of *al-Jihad* in Egypt reportedly removed Zawahiri from any position of authority within their organization.¹²⁸ Apparently, several members of *al-Jihad*’s ruling shura council were upset that Zawahiri had arbitrarily made the decision to join the anti-American world struggle without first consulting them. There were also concerns that Bin Laden’s goals were not entirely in line with those of the original mainstream organization in Egypt. Meanwhile, a number of former militants from both *al-Gama’at* and *al-Jihad* have joined the growing chorus of voices within the Egyptian Islamist community calling for an unconditional end to the use of violence as a means of political dissent.

Indeed, the frustration of many Muslim guerillas in failing to mobilize a significant amount of public support is poignant. Even Omar Abdel Rahman complained in an interview, “Although we are embarked on the course of fighting for the cause of God, and that involves suffering and being true to God, we have found no one who will listen or pay attention to us.”¹²⁹ Though Rahman blamed this lack of support on a media conspiracy, clearly the real explanation goes far beyond such simplicity. In the waning days of 1994, the Egyptian *al-Ahram* daily conducted a rare opinion poll indicating that over 86% of the respondents believed that “Islamic groups that resort to violence do not work to the benefit of the country.”¹³⁰ It should be noted that this was even well before the public backlash against the radical Islamists following the 1997 Luxor attack.

¹²⁸ *Al Watan Al Arabi*. February 11, 2000

¹²⁹ “Al-Jihad in Egypt: What is it? How does it think? What does it Want?” *Al-Ahd*. January 17, 1987. Page 8.

¹³⁰ Abdo. Page 14.

Obviously, despite the many serious domestic problems in Egypt, the vast majority of the populace still believed that change could be accomplished without taking up arms against the government.

Ironically, a predominant reason for these peaceful convictions is likely the public presence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Though Nasser railed against *al-Ikhwan* and attempted to crush the relatively moderate Islamist movement by imprisoning and assassinating its leaders and membership, by the 1990s, it had nonetheless become an integral part of Egyptian local politics. Mubarak's continued toleration of the party even after the shocking assassination of Sadat was a wise move. Firstly, it gave religious dissidents a means to express their ideas and frustrations politically within the system, rather than forcing them to adopt guerilla warfare as the only means of change. Secondly, by giving the Muslim Brotherhood a role in trade unions and local assemblies, the government was able to discredit their vague political and economic notions. Religious slogans such as "the Quran will provide" or "Islam is the solution" might sound attractive to desperate people; however, in any normal setting, most would quickly realize that the fundamentalists, relying on God to increase rates of employment, had even less of a remedy to grievous socioeconomic problems than the regime itself. Furthermore, *al-Ikhwan*'s relatively firm stance against the use of political violence was even more of a roadblock to the dreams of the armed Islamic militants. Now, people even had a religious reason to avoid direct confrontation with their government.

Indeed, Egypt has progressed quite a bit since 1979. While back then, an Islamic revolution seemed ready to occur at any minute, now that possibility seems remote at best. Given the importance of Egyptians to the Arab-Afghan movement and their

undying commitment to the fundamentalist cause, Egypt seems to be quite a good case to study of how to face serious internal political, economic, and social problems, while simultaneously preventing extremism from disrupting civil order. This is even more remarkable considering that, unlike Algeria or Saudi Arabia, Egypt does not possess major deposits of petroleum to finance its recovery. Indeed, perhaps one of the enduring lessons of Egypt is that wealth alone is not the end-all-be-all solution to stem the powerful fundamentalist tide.

Chapter 6: Chechnya - The New Afghanistan

The tiny North Caucasus province of Chechnya is another focus of contemporary Arab-Afghan activism. Chechnya is an unusual case compared to Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Unlike the latter three, the province has not had full, autonomous rule since the demise of the Crimean Tatar empire at the end of the 18th century. Also unlike the three previous cases, Chechnya is not ethnically comprised of Arabs, but rather, a Turkic-Muslim people. It is not at the “heart” of the Islamic world, but on the bare, northern outskirts of it. However, this tiny, obscure territory does possess one attribute that has endeared it to the hearts of thousands of Arab-Afghan veterans: a long, unbroken history of Muslim-led guerilla resistance to European occupation. This resistance has continued unabated despite cruel and repeated retribution at the hands of the Russian army. Indeed, while Chechnya may be wholly unlike Algeria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia, it bears a striking resemblance to another place of much significance to the Arab *mujahideen*: Afghanistan.

The first public sign that the Arab-Afghans would have a significant part to play in the Russo-Chechen conflict came in June 1994. The late Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev pronounced to the world that he would open the province’s borders to any Muslim seeking refuge, and furthermore, he called for the “reunification” of the entire Muslim world.¹³¹ Such a prospect was very tantalizing for many Arab-Afghans, who were more than eager to take on their old Russian adversary. One moderate Chechen leader warned the public in late 1994 that the Arab *mujahideen* “will come here if Russia goes to war, there is no doubt of that. We do not need them, they will give us a lot of

trouble—but we won't be able to stop them.”¹³² Very few if any “Afghans” were actually native Chechens; most had never even heard of the place. But just as in Afghanistan, these *mujahideen* saw an opportunity to once again resume their preferred role as frontline “armed humanitarians,” defending the Muslim world against infidel aggression. As Ibn-ul-Khattab, the *Amir* of the foreign *mujahideen* in Chechnya explained, “When I saw groups of Chechens wearing headbands [There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger] written on them, and shouting [Allahu-Akbar], I decided that there was a Jihad going on in Chechnya and I must go there.”¹³³ By mid-October 1996, at least 200 militants were dispatched to Chechnya from *jihadist* camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet another 100 fighters arrived shortly afterwards from Arab-Afghan affiliated camps in the Sudan and Yemen. The total number of foreign *mujahideen* reportedly may have reached as high as 700 by the end of 1996. At the time, Chechen Prime Minister Aslan Maskhadov noted the presence of “mujahedin from many Islamic states [who] fought by our side.” He added that the foreign guerillas “were a great help and support to us.”¹³⁴

Amir Ibn-ul-Khattab is an excellent example of the profound influence that the “Afghans” have had on the conflict in Chechnya. Originally from a wealthy family from the Gulf region, he has much the same background as Bin Laden himself. In 1987, after having heard heroic accounts of Arab volunteers fighting the Soviets, Khattab left his home in search of *jihad* in Afghanistan. Between 1988 and 1993, he fought in “all the

¹³¹ Shah-Kazemi, Reza. “Crisis in Chechnya.” *Islamic World Report*. Vol. 1; No. 1. London, UK. ©1995. *Page 43*.

¹³² Karny, Yo'av. “Undying Enmity.” *The Washington Post*. October 10, 1999. *Page B1*.

¹³³ “Profile: Ibn-ul-Khattab, Commander of the Foreign Mujahideen in the Caucasus.” *Azzam Publications*. <http://63.249.218.164/html/chechnyaprofkhattab.htm>

¹³⁴ Bodansky, Yossef. “Chechnya Fighting to Resume?” *Defense & Foreign Affairs' Strategic Policy*. November-December 1996. *Page 1*.

major operations,” including the *mujahideen* assaults on Jalalabad, Khost, and Kabul. When the communist Afghan regime was eventually deposed, Khattab and “a small group of friends” traveled across the mountains to Tajikistan, where they fought Russian military forces for another two years before finally returning to Afghanistan. On satellite television, Khattab saw the unfolding civil conflict in Chechnya, and yet another opportunity to fight the Russian army. He explained later that, “We know the Russians and we know their tactics. We know their weak points; and that is why it is easier for us to fight them than to fight other armies.”¹³⁵

In the spring of 1995, Ibn-ul-Khattab and eight other Arab-Afghans arrived in Chechnya to aid the native resistance. Among this group of well-known senior Arab *mujahideen* commanders were Yaqub al-Ghamidi, Abu Waled al-Ghamidi, Abu Jafar al-Yemeni, Hakim al-Madani, and Abu Bakr Aqeedah.¹³⁶ Khattab and his “friends” quickly established a “foreign holy warrior” battalion in Chechnya to both offer military training to willing locals and to conduct guerilla attacks on Russian forces. That battalion was primarily responsible for no less than five major armed assaults (Khartashoi in 1995; Shatoi in 1996; Yashmardy in 1996; and twice in Dagestan in 1997 and 1999). By estimates from Moscow, the April 1996 ambush at Shatoi alone left 223 Russian soldiers dead (including 26 “senior officers”) and 50 military vehicles destroyed. The Arab battalion was also involved in the now-famous guerilla operation that retook Grozny from Russian control in August 1996, and a daring attack on a military base some 100 kilometers inside Russia in December 1997.¹³⁷ Additionally, Khattab was responsible for

¹³⁵ “Profile: Ibn-ul-Khattab, Commander of the Foreign Mujahideen in the Caucasus.”

¹³⁶ “World Exclusive Interview with Field Commander Shamil Basayev.” *Azzam Publications*. February 21, 2000. <http://www.qoqaz.net>.

¹³⁷ “Profile: Ibn-ul-Khattab, Commander of the Foreign Mujahideen in the Caucasus.”

restarting the Chechen war when he led several thousand guerillas in an armed adventure to “liberate” neighboring Dagestan from Russian control in August 1999. Russian authorities also blame him for a series of bombings that rocked Moscow at about the same time.

Khattab’s links to the Arab-Afghan network are somewhat shrouded. With regards to Arab-Afghan terror attacks on Western targets, Khattab has commented, “There is no difference between the American Army and the Russian Army. They seized our territory, and Muslims have the right to seek such a solution.”¹³⁸ He admits to knowing Usama Bin Laden from the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, where the two fought alongside each other. Various news reports have said that he is, in fact, “a friend” of Bin Laden’s, and may have even personally met with the Saudi *Amir* as recently as July 8, 2000 in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.¹³⁹ According to First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, Colonel General Valery Manilov, Bin Laden has given more than \$5.5 million to Khattab in order to help finance the Chechen *jihād*.¹⁴⁰ Bin Laden’s Taleban allies have also offered their own contribution to the cause: recognition of the Chechen Republic and an official embassy in Kabul.

Since his arrival in Chechnya, Khattab has been in constant close cooperation with a famous Chechen military hero and overall commander of indigenous resistance forces: Shamil Basayev. Basayev himself is no stranger to religious conflict nor to the Arab-Afghans. As civil conflict threatened to emerge in the Caucasus during the late 1980s, he traveled to the tense regions of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, where he

¹³⁸ Gall, Carlotta. “Muslim Fighter Embraces Warrior Mystique.” *The New York Times*. October 17, 1999. Section 1; *Page 16*.

¹³⁹ “Second Wind for Moscow’s Enemies.” *Indigo Publications Intelligence Newsletter*. July 27, 2000. No. 387.

actively fought “the Crucifixers.” When the USSR finally crumbled in the summer of 1991, Basayev organized “several units” to receive training and indoctrination at the Arab *mujahideen* camps in Afghanistan. Those units, presumably along with Shamil himself, were subsequently dispatched to fight alongside Islamic militants in Tajikistan.¹⁴¹ However, Basayev really earned his reputation during the first Russo-Chechen war for literally bringing the Russian army “to its knees.” In June 1995, he led a daring raid on the southern Russian town of Budyonnovsk, where 100 Chechens successfully held out against almost 15,000 enemy troops. The battle gave the charismatic rebel commander the reputation of being a “Chechen Robin Hood.”¹⁴² Basayev also claims to have commanded the 11,000 guerillas who forcibly evicted the Russian military from Grozny in August 1996. Like Khattab, Basayev’s direct links to Bin Laden and the “Afghans” are a matter of some debate. But according to Yossef Bodansky, the director of the U.S. Congress Task Force on Terrorism, Basayev is more than just an admirer of the wealthy Saudi exile. Bodansky says that Basayev has “a long relationship” with Bin Laden that goes back at least to the beginning of the Russo-Chechen war in 1994.¹⁴³

However, the links between Chechnya and the “Afghans” go far beyond Khattab and Basayev. According to the English-language website of *Sawt-ul-Qoqaz*, the foreign *mujahideen* media outlet for Chechnya, many guerilla volunteers from across the Middle East have achieved “martyrdom” over almost ten years of conflict in the province. The site features a selection of more than ten individual biographies of some of these

¹⁴⁰ “Press Conference with Valery Manilov, First Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff.” Official Kremlin International News Broadcast. August 31, 2000.

¹⁴¹ “World Exclusive Interview with Field Commander Shamil Basayev.”

¹⁴² Shah-Kazemi. *Page 36.*

“martyrs,” including Kuwaitis, Saudis, Turks, Syrians, Yemenis, and even Muslim converts from the West.¹⁴⁴ Conversely, Russian sources spoke of two Egyptians from Alexandria detained by agents of Russia’s Federal Counter-Intelligence Service while in Chechnya. These two brothers, Ibrahim and Hamdi Mansur, had patrolled the city of Grozny during the first Chechen war, attempting to ambush Russian units with a pair of grenade-launchers. Allegedly, the Mansurs admitted that they had undergone their extensive guerilla training in Arab-Afghan camps in the Sudan, near the capital of Khartoum.¹⁴⁵ According to Western intelligence sources and testimony from former “Afghans,” these camps were directly managed and financed by Bin Laden and the *Al-Qa’ida* organization, with the assistance of the Sudanese government.

Clearly, the Arab-Afghans have met with notable success in commandeering the Chechen resistance movement. The foreign *mujahideen* maintain that their triumph in the Caucasus is mere testimony to the long history of Chechen Muslim resistance to Russian encroachment. To some degree, this claim is true. The strong national identity of Chechens is a unique, “potent symbiosis” of ethnic identity and religious affiliation. Their tightly knit culture possesses a distinctly “martial” character from years of stubborn resistance to invasions from powerful neighbors, including the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Tatars, Arabs, and Turks. This spirit of freedom and defiance fits well with the tenets of Islam, which stress self-sacrifice for the greater good. Indeed, as one Islamist publication explained, “Islam gave the Chechens a spiritual ideal for which to fight and die if necessary, while the martial quality of their ethnic character strengthened

¹⁴³ Dixon, Robyn. “Now Bin Laden is face of evil for Russia too.” *Los Angeles Times*. September 26, 1999. Part A; *Page 1*.

the human resources of the religion in the North Caucasus.”¹⁴⁶ It is little surprise to find a predominance of religious figures associated with anti-Russian Chechen liberation movements. In 1785, when Russian forces stood ready to seize the entire Caucasus from the crumbling empire of the Crimean Tatars, an illiterate Sufi shepherd named Shaykh Mansur Ushurma declared a *jihad* on the approaching European forces. Ushurma was able to successfully unify many of the North Caucasus tribes together under an agenda of a return to ascetic Islam, strict application of *Shari`a* law, and relentless holy struggle against the “infidels.” The Russians attempted to quickly end this rebellion by dispatching a large force to raze Ushurma’s home village of Aldy to the ground. Though they did successfully manage to destroy Aldy, the Russian troops were decimated on their march home by a series of classic guerilla ambushes launched by Chechen rebels loyal to Ushurma. Out of the infantry regiment, full battalion, and cavalry unit sent by Moscow, barely one hundred soldiers survived the carnage. Ushurma’s *jihad* lasted for another six years before Russian forces were finally able to bring the region under their control.¹⁴⁷

Once again, in 1825, Chechnya and its surrounding environs broke out in open revolt when a series of Muslim clerics declared a renewed *jihad* against the Russians. One of these clerics, Imam Shamil, is a legendary hero in Chechnya; his fortitude and idealism has inspired anti-Russian sentiment there ever since. Russian military commanders were awed by the fearless guerillas who drew their tireless inspiration from Shamil. One soldier commented on his own personal frustration: “I’ve seen a man beaten to pulp with the butt end of our muskets and having been pierced with a bayonet, and

¹⁴⁴ See “Jihad in Chechnya: Profiles” (<http://63.249.218.164/html/profiles.htm>) and “Jihad Stories” (<http://www.azzam.com/html/storieshome.htm>). Taken from *Sawt-ul-Qoqaz*, and translated into English with permission by Azzam Publications.

¹⁴⁵ Nikolaev. *Page 62*.

riddled like a colander, still waving his [saber] around his shameless head... they don't seem to know when they ought to die."¹⁴⁸ Imam Shamil's campaign of constant, bloody warfare lasted for over thirty years before the Russians were finally able to crush the resistance movement. Barely fifteen years later, a group of Islamic clerics organized yet another major revolt against Russian rule. Even the brutal reign of the Bolsheviks was not enough to deter the aspirations of the Muslim rebels; there were regular, subsequent insurrections in 1918, 1924, 1928, 1936, 1940, and 1942.¹⁴⁹ Given the long history of religiously-inspired conflict in Chechnya, the Soviets were eager to erase all traces of Islam from the region. But despite their relentless efforts to secularize the province, it nevertheless remained, according to one expert, "a real bastion of Muslim faith" and could even be considered "the most religious territory of all Soviet Islam."¹⁵⁰

However, there is one major problem with the claim of the Arab-Afghans that they are simply carrying on the long-established legacy of *jihad* in Chechnya: the predominant Sufi Islam in the province is not at all the same as the strict Wahhabi faith promoted by the foreign *mujahideen*. The traditional Chechen form of Sufism is "laid-back, steeped in mysticism and rooted in local customs."¹⁵¹ Indeed, followers of Wahhabism and similar fundamentalist sects have been known to historically persecute Sufi believers in the Middle East as "heretics" and "infidels." One Western reporter who visited Chechnya in 1994 commented:

¹⁴⁶ Shah-Kazemi. *Page 3*.

¹⁴⁷ Shah-Kazemi. *Page 7*.

¹⁴⁸ Blanch, L. *The Sabres of Paradise*. Carroll & Graf; New York, NY. ©1960. *Page 90*.

¹⁴⁹ Shah-Kazemi. *Pages 15-16*.

¹⁵⁰ Bennigsen, Alexandre. *Muslims of the Soviet Empire*. Indiana University Press; Bloomington, IN. ©1986. *Pages 18 and 159*.

¹⁵¹ Karny. *Page B1*.

“None of the fighters I saw there... wore a beard... at least one empty bottle of cheap Russian vodka lay on the ground... their expressions lacked the grim intensity of holy Muslim warriors elsewhere; no one I met at that time spoke of an Islamic state as an ultimate goal, least of all the senior religious clerics.”¹⁵²

But, within five years, the influx of Arab-Afghan missionary fighters had changed all of that. Most indigenous Chechen rebels now wear full-length, religious beards; many have even forsaken the rituals of their Sufi heritage for the strict fundamentalist regulations of Wahhabism. Indeed, the “Afghans” have had more success in converting local guerillas to their ideology than perhaps anywhere else in the world outside Afghanistan.

The real reason that the foreign *mujahideen* have met with so much success has more to do with Russia than with Islam. The Russian government maintains to this day that Chechnya is an indisputed, historical piece of its own territory. This claim, however, is ultimately quite dubious. Though Russia may have exercised *de facto* control over the province for the last two hundred years, it has never been accepted as the legitimate ruling authority. Chechnya—ethnically, religiously, and politically—is fundamentally separate from its large, northern neighbor. Russia’s repeated attempts to force the tiny province into submission have entirely backfired, inflaming ethnic and religious tension and inspiring a bitter spirit of blood vengeance among the Chechens. Moscow has done itself an even greater disservice by unduly emphasizing the religious nature of the conflict. Rather than investing money into building economic and political infrastructure, Russia has devoted much of its attention in Chechnya towards ridding the territory of the Islamic faith. Indeed, while the Soviets were quick to deploy more than 7,000 “anti-religious experts” in the province in one decade alone (1957-1967), the Chechen

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

economy remained one of the most backward of the USSR.¹⁵³ It is not surprising that this singular Russian obsession with erasing the Chechens' religious identity has only made them even more stubbornly resistant to assimilation. Thus, it is largely the result of Russian anti-Islamic agitation that, in Chechnya, "religious allegiance was inextricably bound up with nationalist affirmation."¹⁵⁴

Russia is also to blame for making its relationship with Chechnya an unremittingly hostile one. Moscow has never once attempted to deal with the indigenous Chechen leadership except on a battlefield. Its reputation in the Caucasus is typically that of a thuggish tyrant that constantly regards its neighbors as potential future territorial acquisitions. No matter how many times that Russian military action has disastrously inflamed the Chechen-Ingush region, leaders in Moscow have never learned their lesson. Even Boris Yeltsin, the orchestrator of the first Russo-Chechen war, tragically predicted in August 1994 that if Russia again resorted to armed intervention in Chechnya, "the Caucasus will rise up. There will be so much terror and blood that afterwards no-one will forgive us."¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, this is the same exact scenario that the Russians faced in Afghanistan; observers have since commented that with their brutal approach to their Asian neighbors, "the Russians have developed something of an expertise in radicalizing Muslim societies."¹⁵⁶

Simply put, Moscow has given the Chechens no choice but to ally with anyone who will stand together with them against outside aggression. The Russian army has conducted itself in a horrible fashion; it has engaged in a repeated strategy of

¹⁵³ Shah-Kazemi. *Page 18*.

¹⁵⁴ Shah-Kazemi. *Page 49*.

¹⁵⁵ Walker, E. W. "Crisis in Chechnya." *Analysis of Current Events*. Association for Studying Nationalities; New York, NY. Vol. 6; No. 6. February 1995.

unabashedly attempting to annihilate the Chechens. Grozny, a city once distinctly European in character, is in total ruins after ten years of constant warfare. The infamous “scorched earth” tactics of the Russian army have completely destroyed most of Chechnya, leaving local guerillas little choice but to fight alongside the “Afghan” militants. As a frustrated Dzhokar Dudayev explained in a BBC interview in late 1995, “I’ve got 300,000 men, aged 17 to 50, homeless, jobless, embittered and with nothing to do. All they can do is fight.”¹⁵⁷ Even some pro-Islamist sources have forsaken discussion of the need to establish Islamic rule or *Shari`a*, and have discussed the Russo-Chechen conflict in terms of pure self-defense. As one Islamic publication put it, “Russia’s actions in Chechnya have shown the people [of the area] that they need to consider a wide-based unity and defend their homeland from aggression.” The publication further predicted that this realization would ultimately result in the creation of a regional “*mujahidin* movement.”¹⁵⁸ Every day that the Russian military continues its failed campaign in Chechnya, that *mujahideen* movement grows progressively stronger; some developments now indicate that it may have even spread to other former Soviet republics seeking greater independence from Moscow, including Dagestan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Almost seven years after the war in Chechnya began, it has taken on nearly all of the distinct attributes of Russia’s earlier blunder in Afghanistan: a prolonged conflict pitting a poorly-motivated conventional army against a fearsome, loosely organized group of guerillas, and characterized by the use of terror and indiscriminate violence against noncombatants. The flourishing power of the “Afghans” in Chechnya is directly

¹⁵⁶ Karny. *Page B1*.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the result of a small, tightly-knit Muslim society being subjected to the endless horrors of war, bombarded with populist propaganda, and desperate for hope in a land of misery and despair. Ironically, this same situation led to the development of the powerful fundamentalist Taleban movement in Afghanistan that now controls over 95% of that country. If Moscow wishes to preclude the possibility of the emergence of a fanatically anti-Russian “Chechen Taleban,” it would be well advised to withdraw its forces from the province. As long as they are there, Chechens have little choice but to rely on the “Afghans” for support in their long-running battle for survival against foreign encroachment.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

If Abdullah Azzam were to see the accomplishments of the legions of Muslim guerillas who still idolize him, he likely would not be altogether pleased. Afghanistan, the country that he felt should be liberated first, remains mired in civil war and chaos. Unlike Azzam's master plan to create an army of unified *mujahideen*, vast disparities remain between varying groups of Arab-Afghans. These holy warriors have been simply unable to uniformly bring their ideology to power in almost any country outside Afghanistan. From the comparative analysis of the four cases of Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Chechnya, certain factors stand out as those most apparently crucial to the success or failure of the Arab-Afghans to mobilize support and achieve their objectives.

In all these countries, clearly one of the most important reasons that Arab-Afghans found supporters and recruits among the general population was due to a lack of domestic political openness and democratic government in their respective homelands. In Algeria, a weak, crumbling regime attempted to defend itself using extraordinary, statist measures. Not surprisingly, that effort backfired entirely; had the FLN and the military negotiated with FIS and the Islamists about sharing official power, the Arab-Afghans probably would not have been able to achieve any concrete accomplishments. One can hope that Saudi Arabia has learned from its harrowing experience not to indirectly encourage the association of religious dissidents with anti-government populist fervor. Indeed, if many of the "Afghans" had had an opportunity to vent their frustrations in an open political environment, they would not have had to resort to violence to make their feelings known. Certainly, domestic public support for militant Saudi dissident movements would have been marginal, if any. The lesson here is that anti-democratic

repression is almost invariably more of a threat to a governing regime than allowing free democratic opposition.

Another distinct factor that has aided the “Afghans” has been the tactic of radical popular indoctrination by Arab governments. Understandably, many of these regimes have felt a need to buttress their own doubtful legitimacy by appealing to greater principles of Arab and Islamic nationalism. However, their reliance upon fanatical anti-Western propaganda was a clear error; it is a destabilizing and ultimately fruitless phenomenon that prevents these governments from having honest and straightforward international relationships. Moreover, conspiracy theories are obviously not a fair substitute to democratic political activism. Instead of properly educating their citizens, these regimes have left the vast majority of their citizenry utterly ignorant of the world around them. This has only served to facilitate their ideological re-indoctrination by the fundamentalists; if people have no official source of truth, they will likely turn to any authority that they believe can still be trusted; in the Middle East, this authority is primarily limited to religious clerics.

Coinciding with political repression, economic problems and social issues have also been paramount factors affecting the growth and success of the “Afghans.” In all of the countries in this study, a lack of modernization and economic development has come concurrently with trends of abnormal population growth and social unrest. Two of these states in particular, Algeria and Saudi Arabia, have chosen the hazardous course of an economy based almost entirely on petroleum and hydrocarbons. In this regard, they have effectively wagered their hopes of future prosperity on the maintenance of high oil prices. Instead of attempting to reeducate their working classes, both these states have allowed

their societies to dangerously languish in petrodollar pipedreams. Meanwhile, none of these governments has done nearly enough to ensure a social security net to prevent the disenfranchisement of large sections of the population. Because these countries are all essentially Muslim in character, economic disenfranchisement is perhaps even more of a social problem than elsewhere in the world. In the Middle East, prenuptial association between males and females is generally heavily frowned upon. Marriage is typically only possible if males are able to afford to move out of their parent's homes and into their own dwellings. The lack of employment and housing has made this task next to impossible for thousands of angry young men across the region. It is hardly a surprise that these young people feel like they are treated as orphaned children. Bereft of hope, they naturally seek to establish themselves through atypical means. A religious war is a classic opportunity for them to graduate from the lives of the undertrodden to the realm of the strong and powerful.

Though the degree of foreign meddling in Middle Eastern politics has been exaggerated by the fundamentalists, it is nevertheless another real factor that contributes to the success of the "Afghans." The problem with American and European regional diplomacy thus far is that it has either been too tangential and fleeting or else it has reached the point of cultural, economic, and even political imperialism. Foreign governments active in these four places must seek to establish a fair balance of enthusiastic involvement and, simultaneously, a solid buffer of transparency. It can certainly be argued that prior to the wave of anti-American violence in Saudi Arabia during 1995 and 1996, U.S. troops had taken too high a profile in the Kingdom. Due to their notoriety, these forces also became associated with certain liberal movements for

change (such as the feminist movement), which were not always quietly accepted by the traditional societies of the Middle East. Likewise, France should have learned its hard lesson from the 1962 war of independence and treated the Algerian government and people with respect and cooperation. The fact that the French still possess an aloof and racist attitude towards North Africa has not helped the situation; it has obviously done nothing to erase the deep hatred that many Algerians still harbor towards their former colonial masters. Russia's treatment of Chechnya can hardly be rationally discussed; not only is it questionable in the extreme, but moreover, its continued "cleanup operation" in the Caucasus is on the verge of being blatant imperialism. Moscow continues to claim that it has no choice because the Chechens are a savage and unmerciful enemy.

However, the Russians are quick to forget that their brutal military action in the province has given most Chechens the distinct impression that this conflict is ultimately a battle for survival against a relentless oppressor. Interestingly, Shamil Basayev openly compares himself not to a figure in Islamic history, but rather to William Wallace, the 13th century Scottish freedom fighter made famous by the movie Braveheart.¹⁵⁹ Thus, persisting imperialist attitudes and actions by foreign powers only give undeserved, but understandable credibility to the wild conspiracy theories of the fundamentalists.

By analyzing these main factors, certain strategies emerge of how to mitigate the effects of the Arab-Afghans and other like-minded transnational armed opposition movements. While the Saudis and the Russians can continue to claim that their policy of unmercifully stomping out fundamentalist dissidents is an effective one, this is obviously simply not the case. The model that should be studied is that of Egypt: by permitting the

¹⁵⁹ Karny. *Page B1*.

growth of a moderate religious opposition movement, Hosni Mubarak's government was able to pigeonhole many of the radical Islamists. Once the general public saw that Islam was, in fact, not the end-all-be-all solution, the fundamentalists were forced to moderate their views in order to maintain dwindling public support. Had the Algerian regime attempted similar measures rather than simply canceling elections outright, many of the 100,000 casualties of the ongoing civil war would have likely been spared.

There is also, of course, the question of how to mitigate the debilitating political effects of regional socioeconomic issues. One important counterweight to these problems (shared nearly uniformly by all the cases in this study) has been Western foreign aid. It is hardly a coincidence that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both countries who have apparently survived the "Afghan" phenomenon, are both also large recipients of financial aid and private investment from the United States and Europe. Egypt is, in fact, the second largest recipient of official American foreign aid, behind only Israel.¹⁶⁰ While this money is obviously not enough to remedy a gross lack of modernization and development, it has managed to stave off absolute economic collapse. Algeria and Chechnya, on the other hand, have been forced to make due with comparatively meager contributions from independent charitable organizations and humanitarian groups. Unfortunately, a number of religious charities set up by wealthy pro-fundamentalist philanthropists from Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf have offset even these small contributions by donating competing large sums to Islamic rebel groups, including the Arab-Afghans. Moreover, the apocalyptic news reports emerging from Algeria and Chechnya have done nothing to encourage outside investment; neither has the repeated

¹⁶⁰ Burns, William J. Economic Aid and American Policy Toward Egypt: 1955-1981. SUNY Press; Albany, NY. ©1985. *Page 21*.

fundamentalist tactic in both regions of specifically targeting foreigners, even innocent businessmen and aid workers. However, without external financial help, there is little chance that these struggling nations will ever be able to independently rectify their debilitating economic and social problems. This fact should be particularly taken into account by hesitant Western policymakers who are concerned with waves of radical religious currents in the Muslim world.

Finally, in recognition of the connection between perceived foreign imperialism and support for local fundamentalism, there is a desperate need on the part of Western policymakers to move beyond the traditional “Kissingerian” diplomacy of decolonization and the bipolarity of the Cold War, and move toward a new set of international relations that treats all countries and all peoples with greater equality and respect. Indeed, if one is to be fair, it was ironically this same narrowminded approach that led the U.S. to massively support the creation of the “Arab-Afghans” to fight the Soviets in the first place. While American policymakers simply assumed that we could buy the allegiance of the Islamic militants with cash and weapons, they deeply resented our haughty manner. Bin Laden and his cadre (not nearly as stupid or corrupt as Western leaders fancied) recognized that we were blatantly using them as a proxy weapon, and it was certainly not appreciated. Perhaps in the future, Western governments can be wiser and more farsighted in their foreign diplomacy; while this is obviously not the absolute solution to the problem of the “Afghans,” it cannot be but a step in the right direction.