

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

by Brian Glyn Williams

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 134.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴ Bergen. *Osama Bin Laden*, p. 87.

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

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

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

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

Foreign Fighters in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Role of Foreign Fighters in Operation Enduring Freedom

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

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

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷¹ "Petraeus: 'Double Digits' of al-Qaeda Fighters in Afghanistan," *Washington Independent*, June 17, 2010.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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