

British Muslims Providing Foot Soldiers for the Global Jihad

By James Brandon

THE UNITED KINGDOM faces a number of terrorist threats. It is often portrayed as a target for jihadist groups worldwide; a “factory” for producing homegrown terrorists seeking to attack the country in which they were born and raised; and a haven for Middle Eastern Islamist ideologues and militants. Although these depictions are accurate, they have eclipsed the extent to which British Muslims are also playing an important role in jihadist violence globally by providing funding, foot soldiers and technical expertise to jihadist groups. In recent years, British jihadists have been recorded fighting not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in Chechnya, Israel and Somalia. British jihadists involved in these conflicts have been of all ages and backgrounds; some have been experienced fighters, while others traveled to war zones with no military training or obvious involvement in radical activities. This article will look at the involvement of British Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts such as Somalia.

Iraq

Since 2003, many prominent British Islamist leaders have supported jihadist attacks against foreign troops in Iraq. Their endorsements of the Iraqi resistance, joined by similar exhortations from more radical preachers and jihadist websites, have led to a stream of British Muslims traveling to Iraq to carry out attacks on coalition troops. By mid-2005 alone, the British security services estimated that around 70 British Muslims had gone to Iraq to fight for al-Qa`ida and other jihadist organizations.¹

These volunteers have come from all backgrounds. In November 2003, for example, Wail al-Dhaleai, a 22-year-old British Yemeni, died while carrying out a suicide attack on U.S. troops in Iraq.² Al-Dhaleai had arrived in

the United Kingdom only a few years earlier from Aden, Yemen, settling in Sheffield where he had quickly become involved with Salafist groups, marrying a white British convert to Islam who similarly followed an extreme brand of the religion. Al-Dhaleai went to Iraq indirectly, traveling from the United Kingdom to the United Arab Emirates and then heading to Syria from where he entered Iraq. His father, who lives in Yemen, was informed of his son’s death by a militant in Iraq who phoned him with the news. Al-Dhaleai, a recent immigrant to the United Kingdom, is not necessarily typical of UK-based jihadists who traveled to Iraq. For example, Mobeen Muneef, a 25-year-old Muslim of Pakistani origin who was raised in South London, is another young British jihadist who joined Iraqi insurgents before being captured by U.S. Marines in Ramadi in December 2004.³ Muneef was reported to have been involved with the British al-Muhajiroun group while in London and to have entered Iraq from Syria where he had been studying Arabic. In 2006, he was jailed for 15 years by an Iraqi court for possessing a fake Iraqi ID.⁴ Other UK-based jihadists active in Iraq have been experienced mujahidin. In February 2005, for example, Idris Bazis, a 41-year-old French-Algerian living in Manchester, died in a suicide attack on U.S. troops in Iraq.⁵ Bazis had previously fought in the Balkans and Afghanistan in the 1990s, settling in the United Kingdom only in 2004.

Not all British jihadists active in Iraq are Sunni. Some British Shi`a Muslims have also taken part in the violence. For example, in August 2004 a reporter from the *Guardian* interviewed two British men who had joined Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi in Najaf.⁶ Both men, then in their early 20s, had been born in Iraq but moved to the United Kingdom as children, before returning to Iraq specifically to join al-Sadr’s forces and fight U.S. troops. They said they had

3 Paul Lewis, “15 Years for Briton Convicted in Iraq,” *Guardian*, April 21, 2006.

4 Daniel McGrory, “Briton is Jailed for 15 Years in Iraq as a Warning to Foreign Insurgents,” *The Times*, April 20, 2006.

5 Daniel McGrory and Michael Evans, “The Deadly Trail of a Mystery Bomber,” *The Times*, June 23, 2005.

6 Rory McCarthy, “From London to Iraq - The Latest Recruits to the Mahdi Army,” *Guardian*, August 11, 2004.

received rudimentary conventional military training from Jaysh al-Mahdi before being deployed in Najaf. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

Many of the British jihadists known to have fought in Iraq are of Arab descent. This points to an important wider trend of British jihadists generally heading to parts of the world where they will be most likely to speak the language and to blend in with locals. For example, most British jihadists of Pakistani origin have gone to Afghanistan and Pakistan while those of Arab origin have tended to go to Iraq. Moreover, given the difficulties that even experienced foreign jihadists have had in operating in Iraq’s politically fragmented and internally divided society, it is unsurprising that some British jihadists seem to have decided that rather than traveling to Iraq to carry out attacks, it is easier to simply attack British soldiers in the United Kingdom itself. In December 2005, Abu Baker Mansha, a 21-year-old of Pakistani origin, was jailed for planning to attack a British soldier living in the United Kingdom who had been recently decorated for bravery in Iraq.⁷ Separately, in February 2008, five British Muslims from Birmingham (mostly of Pakistani origin) were convicted of planning to kidnap and behead a local British Muslim soldier in an attempt to dissuade other Muslims from joining the British army.⁸

Afghanistan

During the past year, there have been increased reports in the UK media of British Muslims fighting with the Taliban and al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. In August 2008, Brigadier Ed Butler, who recently commanded British forces in Afghanistan, told the *Daily Telegraph* that it was “likely” that British Muslims were fighting alongside the Taliban, saying, “there are British passport holders who live in the UK who are being found in places like Kandahar.”⁹ Earlier in the year, several newspapers had reported that Royal Air Force spy planes in Afghanistan had

7 “Man Convicted Under Terrorism Act,” BBC, December 22, 2005.

8 “Five Men Sentenced Over Terrorism Offences Connected to the Birmingham Beheading Plot,” Crown Prosecution Service, February 18, 2008.

9 Con Coughlin, “British Muslims ‘Fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan,’” *Daily Telegraph*, August 2, 2008.

1 David Leppard and Hala Jaber, “70 British Muslims Join Iraq fighters,” *The Times*, June 26, 2005.

2 Nick Pelham, “British Olympic Hope ‘Was Iraq Suicide Bomber,’” *Guardian*, November 16, 2003.

picked up Taliban radio conversations conducted in English regional accents. In April 2008, the British security services estimated that 4,000 British Muslims had visited training camps in Afghanistan.¹⁰

British militants have been involved in Afghanistan since at least the early 1990s when substantial numbers of British Muslims attended training camps in Taliban-ruled areas. Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, small groups of British Muslims affiliated with British extremist groups traveled to Afghanistan to join al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. At least five were reportedly killed soon afterwards.¹¹ Since then, however, there is surprisingly little hard evidence of British Muslims

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actively fighting in Afghanistan. It does not appear that jihadist websites have reported the deaths of any British jihadists in Afghanistan and neither Western armies nor the Afghan security forces have reported capturing or killing any British fighters there. This is despite widespread evidence of radical preachers in the United Kingdom encouraging Muslims to fight in Afghanistan as well as numerous cases of British Muslims being put on trial for heading to Afghanistan and Pakistan to receive military training. One possible reason for this apparent discrepancy is that, as in Iraq, jihadist groups have decided that British volunteers, however enthusiastic, are of limited use on the front lines. Instead, they seem to have recognized that such volunteers are more useful in either returning to the United Kingdom to conduct attacks there, or to raise funds and buy hi-

tech equipment for fighters already in Afghanistan. One recent example of this trend is Sohail Anjum Qureshi, a Muslim of Pakistani origin from East London, who was jailed in early 2008 for trying to board a flight to Pakistan with £9,000 in cash, sleeping bags, night-vision equipment and combat manuals downloaded from the internet, which police believe were destined for militant groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan.¹² Although Qureshi told friends in the United Kingdom that he was going abroad to carry out a “14-20 day operation” in which he hoped to “kill many,” it seems more likely that the foreign militants regarded him as little more than a useful source of cash, hi-tech equipment and Western knowledge.¹³ Similar decisions by experienced militants may also explain the recent reports of British Muslims being heard communicating on Taliban radio. It would make sense for Afghan fighters to delegate communication responsibilities to comparatively well-educated British jihadists—rather than entrusting them with front line combat duties where their lack of military training could endanger not only their own lives but also those of others.

Other Conflicts

As well as becoming involved with militants in Iraq and Afghanistan, British Muslims have also been involved in other jihadist conflicts around the world. The most famous incident occurred when two British Muslims attempted to carry out a suicide attack in a bar in Tel Aviv in May 2003. Only one man’s bomb detonated successfully, killing three people, while the other’s malfunctioned, forcing him to flee the scene.¹⁴ Other UK-based militants have also reportedly been active in Chechnya. For example, in 2004 Osman Larussi and Yacine Benalia, two Algerians based in London, took part in the Beslan school siege and were later killed.¹⁵ A third British-Algerian, Kamel Rabat Bouralha, who had also been involved in the siege, was later captured by Russian security forces. All three men attended Abu Hamza’s mosque in Finsbury Park,

a hub for British radicals in the early 1990s and early 2000s.

It also seems likely that some members of Britain’s nearly 80,000-strong Somali community have been involved with the Islamic Courts Union, Somalia’s largest jihadist group. In January 2007, for example, Ethiopia reported that seven British citizens were wounded in a U.S. airstrike in southern Somalia and were later captured near the Kenyan border.¹⁶ The previous month Ethiopia claimed to have captured three other British passport holders. The British government has not publicly confirmed these reports and the men’s present whereabouts are unknown. In the United Kingdom itself, prominent British Muslim groups have helped the Islamic Courts Union to raise funds and rally support for their cause. For example, in late 2006 the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the UK’s largest Muslim Brotherhood-linked group, hosted senior leaders of the Islamic Courts in London’s Finsbury Park Mosque (run by the MAB since the arrest of Abu Hamza), while the delegation also held a fundraising meeting at a nearby school.¹⁷

Conclusion

Muslims from other European countries have also carried out jihadist attacks abroad. At least two Belgian Muslims (including a woman convert) are believed to have died while carrying out attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq.¹⁸ Somalis living in Scandinavia have fought in Somalia with the Islamic Courts Union.¹⁹ In France, five Muslims were put on trial in March 2008 for sending French Muslims to fight in Iraq,²⁰ while numerous other French Muslims are believed to have taken part in attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan.²¹ In Germany, police arrested two German-

10 Ben Leapman, “4,000 in UK Trained at Terror Camps,” *Sunday Telegraph*, April 19, 2008.

11 Paul Harris, Martin Bright and Burhan Wazir, “Five Britons Killed in ‘Jihad Brigade,’” *Observer*, October 29, 2001.

12 “Man Jailed Over Terrorism Charges,” BBC, January 8, 2008.

13 “Terrorist and the Shop Girl,” BBC, January 8, 2008.

14 “Suicide Bomber ‘Was British,’” BBC, May 1, 2003.

15 Jason Burke, “London Mosque Link to Beslan,” *Guardian*, October 3, 2004.

16 Julian Borger and Xan Rice, “UK Tries to Identify British Fighters Injured in Somalia,” *Guardian*, January 11, 2007.

17 Jeevan Vasagar, “Somali Islamists Held UK Meeting to Raise Funds,” *Guardian*, January 13, 2007.

18 Anouar Boukhars, “Iraqi Terror Trial Exposes Belgium’s Muslim Dilemma,” *Terrorism Focus* 4:35 (2007).

19 “Swedes Reported Dead in Somalia,” *The Local*, January 30, 2007.

20 Angela Charlton, “French Extremists Dream of Jihad in Iraq,” Associated Press, March 31, 2008.

21 See, for example, “France Tries Militant Islamist Network,” Agence France-Presse, October 1, 2008.

Somalis in September 2008 as they were preparing to fly to Pakistan where they were believed to be planning to attend militant training camps.²² *Der Spiegel* has reported that the German security services believe that “over the past few years 50 extremists have slipped out of Germany with the aim of going into hiding in the Afghan-Pakistani border region and learning the trade at terrorist training camps.”²³

Nevertheless, it seems clear that these figures are dwarfed by the number of British jihadists heading not only to Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but to other conflict zones such as Chechnya and Somalia. All the evidence suggests that the United Kingdom is presently producing more jihadists than many Muslim-majority states such as Malaysia, Nigeria or Oman and indeed perhaps even more than countries traditionally thought of as “exporting” terrorism such as Lebanon, Somalia or Sudan. This trend starkly indicates how the United Kingdom’s failure to adequately counter the flow of homegrown jihadists—or to reverse decades of failed government integration policies—presents serious security challenges not only for the United Kingdom, but also for its allies around the world.

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²² “From the Rhine River to the Jihad,” *Der Spiegel*, September 29, 2008.

²³ *Ibid.*