

## Return of the Arabs: Al-Qa`ida's Current Military Role in the Afghan Insurgency

By Brian Glyn Williams

IN THE PASHTUN TRIBAL belt, from the JDAM-blasted ruins of Usama bin Ladin's bombed out terrorist camp at Darunta near Jalalabad to the "red zone" between the volatile provinces of Khost and Paktia, local Afghans are increasingly talking in concerned tones about the return of the "Arabian" or "Ikhwanis," as Arab fighters are known in Pashtu.<sup>1</sup> Wealthy al-Qa`ida financiers are said to be lurking in the distant mountains distributing large sums of cash to Pashtun tribes on the other side of the Pakistani border, hardened Arab fighters from Iraq are rumored to be training Pashtuns in the previously taboo tactic of suicide bombing and al-Qa`ida leaders are reported to have an increasingly strong voice in the Taliban *shuras* (councils) in Waziristan and Quetta. If the rumors are true, it seems that al-Qa`ida is putting renewed emphasis on galvanizing military resistance in a land that has tremendous symbolism in jihadist circles as the original theater of action for the modern jihad movement.

The following is a preliminary effort to sift through these vague rumors and reports in order to gain a clear picture of al-Qa`ida's actual role in a Taliban guerrilla war that has, to all outward appearances, morphed into an Iraqi-style terrorist insurgency.

### Precursors: Al-Qa`ida's Field Army

In 1987, Usama bin Ladin proudly proclaimed that the somnolent Arab youth living under the *munafiq* (apostate) governments of the Middle East could come to his Ma`sada al-Ansar (Lion's Den of the Companions, a tunnel base built in the mountains of the Afghan border province of Paktia) to fight for their honor and faith against the "atheist infidels." By all accounts, Bin Ladin and his "Ansars" subsequently fought ferociously against Soviet *Spetsnaz* (Special Forces), defending

their positions with mortars, RPGs, machine guns and AK-47s.

While many media savvy Arab volunteers earned a reputation as "gucci jihadists" during the Soviet period, some did move on to become seasoned fighters. In the late 1990s, for example, Bin Ladin helped make the Arab jihadist dream of fielding a bona fide Arab *jund* (army) come true when he formed the O55 International Brigade to fight against the Northern Alliance. Based in Rishikor, a former Communist base just outside Kabul, this foreign legion—which was often known as the *Ansars* (Companions)—played a key role in the Taliban's defense of Kabul against Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, and in the Taliban conquests of Northern Alliance General Rashid Dostum's capital at Mazar-i-Sharif and Massoud's capital of Taloqan.

In addition to their activities as terrorists who attack "soft" civilian targets, as seen in the case of the infamous Hamburg *akhund* (cell) that attacked the U.S. mainland on 9/11, al-Qa`ida also had a fighting wing. This branch was engaged in frontal combat, often driving old Soviet-era tanks, utilizing light artillery and acting as shock troops for the Taliban in their struggles with the Northern Alliance. Thousands of Arabs in Afghanistan actually fought under al-Qa`ida's *al-Raya* (flag) in frontal combat from 1997-2001. Arab fighters who were trained in these camps bolstered the Taliban regime when it decided to confront the U.S.-led coalition in the fall of 2001. In light of their well-known fervor, it is not surprising that Arab fighters tenaciously held their positions in Taloqan, Kunduz, Kabul and Kandahar when the indigenous Taliban proved less inclined to fight to the death.

Yet, the technologically advanced Americans were not the Soviets, and key al-Qa`ida military leaders Juma Namangani (the military head of the O55 International Brigade) and Muhammad `Atif (al-Qa`ida's military leader) were killed by precision-guided U.S. munitions in November 2001. With the Arab state-within-a-state in the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan collapsing around them by December 2001, the Arab *Ansars* withdrew from Kabul and Kandahar to the remote Shah-i-Kot

Valley of eastern Afghanistan. In this valley they fought with greater effect against U.S. troops in 2002's Operation Anaconda, an asymmetric guerrilla fight that more closely resembled the mujahidin's skirmishes with Soviet heliborne *Spetsnaz* troops in the 1980s.

Following the mixed success of Shah-i-Kot, the remaining Arab fighters retreated over the border into Pakistan where they were given sanctuary by major Taliban leaders such as Jalaladin Haqqani, who had fought alongside Arabs in the Khost area during the 1980s. Up and coming middle-ranked Taliban commanders, such as Baitullah Mehsud and Nek Muhammad, also provided the Arabs and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan jihadists with sanctuary in the Waziri tribal lands of North and South Waziristan. Another Pakistani tribal agency to the north, Bajaur, served as the third fallback area for retreating Arab fighters. Ominously, all three border agencies previously had a history of serving as rear area staging grounds for Arab and Afghan mujahidin during the 1980s jihad and they would soon serve that role again.

### Building a "Pyre for the Americans"

While many in the West thought al-Qa`ida was nearly finished in the aftermath of the toppling of the Taliban, the coalition had a difficult time killing or capturing high-value targets such as Bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri (who narrowly missed being killed by a Hellfire missile strike in 2006) and a new generation of leaders who were operating in the Pashtun tribal areas, such as charismatic commander Abu Yahya al-Libi.<sup>2</sup> The latter leader seemed to be most successful in running a media operation with al-Sahab Media Production (The Clouds, which refers to the cloud covered mountains of Afghanistan). It was this media operation that began to provide a unique window into al-Qa`ida's re-calibrated military operations in Afghanistan.

While the media-savvy al-Qa`ida in Iraq leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi stole the limelight from 2003-2005, by 2005 al-Libi's media service began to compete with Iraqi insurgent webpages. Al-Libi

<sup>1</sup> Personal interviews, Pashtun tribal belt, April-May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Although in December 2005 a senior operational planner, Abu Hamza Rabia, was killed in a Predator attack in North Waziristan.

began by posting a series of online videos that showed small numbers of Arabs carrying out attacks on “Christian *kafirs* (infidels) and puppet *munafiq* (apostate) Afghan army troops.” These included such videos as “Pyre for the Americans in Afghanistan” and “The Winds of Paradise.”<sup>3</sup>

Al-Libi’s propaganda films featured combat footage of Arabs carrying out suicide bombings against U.S. soldiers, firing mortars at U.S. Forward Operating Bases (including one sequence that shows Arabs firing shells with the name Zarqawi painted on them), using IEDs against U.S. troops and ambushing U.S. soldiers.<sup>4</sup> According to the Arabic sub-headings, these videos were filmed in a series of Pashtun border provinces in Afghanistan ranging from Kunar Province in the north to Uruzgan and Zabul in the south.<sup>5</sup> In other words, these were the very border provinces where the first generation of Arab Afghan volunteers (many of whom had married local women, learned Pashtu and settled in the region) had fought in the 1980s.

By 2006, a more developed al-Sahab began to feature jihad *anasheed* (songs), video montage epitaphs for dozens of slain Turkish and Arab martyrs from Kuwait, Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and images of young Arabs wearing the Arab Ansar al-Mujahidin “uniform”—Arab *kaffiyya* scarves or Afghan *pakhols* (the round felt hat that became a status symbol for the first generation of Arab Afghan jihadists), Afghan-style *shalwar kameez* baggy shirts, camouflage jackets and the mandatory sneakers. The videos also showed platoon sized units of Arab fighters training in the forested mountains of Waziristan with AK-47 assault rifles, PK machine guns, RPG-7s, mortars and even anti-aircraft guns.<sup>6</sup> By

2007, they also featured images of Arab fighters ambushing Pakistani soldiers in the mountains of Waziristan, and the Pakistani authorities began to suspect that Arabs were bolstering the Taliban insurgency in their country.<sup>7</sup>

As in the previous jihad against the Soviets, the Arab fighters seemed much more concerned about photographing and filming themselves than their simple Afghan hosts, and this appears to be part of a calculated effort to recruit young men for the jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By 2007, jihadist websites from Chechnya to Turkey to the Arab world began to feature recruitment ads calling on the “Lions of Islam” to come fight in Afghanistan. It appears that many heeded the call.<sup>8</sup> This was especially true after the Anbar Awakening of anti-al-Qa`ida tribal leaders and General David Petraeus’ “surge strategy” made Iraq less hospitable for foreign volunteers.

#### Al-Qa`ida Adds an Edge to Taliban Insurgency

Since 2002, one of al-Qa`ida’s main roles has been diverting wealth from the Arab Gulf States to funding the struggling Taliban. One recently killed Saudi shaykh named Asadullah, for example, was described as “the moneybags in the entire tribal belt.” Men like Asadullah have paid bounties for Taliban attacks on coalition troops, provided money to Taliban commanders such as Baitullah Mehsud to encourage them to attack Pakistani troops and launch a suicide bombing campaign in that country, and used their funds to re-arm the Taliban.<sup>9</sup> Local Pashtuns in Waziristan and in Afghanistan’s Kunar Province have claimed that the Arab fighters pay well for lodging and food and provide money for the families of those who are “martyred” in suicide operations. According to online videos and local

reports, al-Qa`ida is also running as many as 29 training camps in the region, albeit less elaborate than those found in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

The Arabs have also played a key role in “al-Qa`idifying” the Taliban insurgency and importing the horror tactics of the Iraqi conflict to Afghanistan. Key Taliban leaders, such as the recently slain Mullah Dadullah, have claimed that they learned suicide bombing techniques from their Arab “brothers.”<sup>10</sup> Al-Qa`ida has also distributed tutorial jihadist videos throughout the Pashtun regions that give instructions on how to build car bombs, IEDs and inspirational “snuff film” images of U.S. troops being killed in Iraq. The first wave of suicide bombings in Afghanistan seems to have been carried out by Arabs, and it appears clear that it was al-Qa`ida—which has long had an emphasis on *istishhad* (martyrdom) operations—that taught the local Taliban this alien tactic. Arabs such as Abu Yahya al-Libi have also been influential in encouraging the technophobic Taliban fundamentalists to create “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” online videos of Zarqawi style beheadings, IED attacks and suicide bombings.

Furthermore, it appears that Arab fighters have actively partaken in insurgent activities within Afghanistan itself in increasing numbers. Insurgents in the Kunar Valley in Nuristan, for example, have chosen Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, an Egyptian who speaks Pashtu and is married to a local woman, to lead a group of as many as 170 fighters. Arab operations in this area are facilitated by its cross-border proximity to Bajaur Agency and support from a local Taliban leader named Ahmad Shah and insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the latter of which has a long history of working with Arabs. Arabs have also filmed themselves attacking coalition targets in Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Uruzgan, Logar and Zabul provinces.<sup>11</sup>

10 For the direct role of Arabs in transferring suicide bombing tactics from Iraq to the Deobandi Taliban, who previously had taboos on suicide bombing, see Brian Glyn Williams, “Afghan Suicide Bombing,” *Islamic Affairs Analyst*, August 13, 2007.

11 See, for example, an Arab attack in Khost, “As-Sahab Media: Mujahideen fire BM rockets on Occupation American Base in Afghanistan,” available at [www.liveleak.com/view?i=184\\_1201720200](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=184_1201720200).

3 See Qaeda al-Jihad’s surprisingly sophisticated video at [www.liveleak.com/view?i=184\\_1201720200](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=184_1201720200).

4 For an example of an Arab attack on a convoy, see “As-Sahab Media: Mujahideen Attack and Destroy Supply Convoy of Occupation American Forces in Afghan,” available at [www.liveleak.com/view?i=96a\\_1185478707](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=96a_1185478707).

5 See, for example, “Pyre for the Americans in Kharasan—Video of Mine Explosion Near a Gathering of American Forces in Konar,” available at [www.archive.org/details/Konar-Afghanistan](http://www.archive.org/details/Konar-Afghanistan).

6 See, for example, “Taleban/Al Qaeda Training Camp in Waziristan,” available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuJYY9Yg\\_lg&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuJYY9Yg_lg&feature=related).

7 See, for example, “The Mujahideen of Waziristan,” available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_kDBEJRDP1&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_kDBEJRDP1&NR=1).

8 Surprisingly, Turks seem to be joining the jihad in Afghanistan, and their martyrdom epitaphs and calls for Turks to fight in Afghanistan have appeared on such jihadist websites as [www.cihaderi.net](http://www.cihaderi.net). For more on Turkish involvement, see Brian Glyn Williams, “Turks Join the Jihad in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Terrorism Focus* 3:47 (2006).

9 Zarqawi declared a jihad against the Musharraf “puppet” government, and al-Qa`ida agents have tried killing the Pakistani leader on more than one occasion.

Most recently, Arabs have also been sighted farther afield fighting in the unstable southern province of Helmand under a first generation Arab Afghan leader named Abu Haris.<sup>12</sup> Local Helmandi villagers also reported seeing Arab fighters in the village of Musa Qala, a town that was occupied by the Taliban for most of 2007.<sup>13</sup> They reported that the Arab fighters set up suicide bombing facilities and were extremely brutal.<sup>14</sup> As in previous eras where they earned a reputation for butchery (in 1991, for example, Arab fighters hacked captured Communist Afghan Army soldiers to pieces following the capture of Jalalabad), the Taliban's Arab allies were reported to have executed locals they suspected of being "spies."

Such actions hardly endeared the locals to the Taliban, and there are bound to be future tensions between the Arabs and the Taliban that echo those that often caused "red on red" conflict between Afghan mujahidin and Arab Wahhabis in the 1980s. The distrust between the Arabs—who come to the "backward" lands of Afghanistan from the comparatively developed Gulf States—are said to stem from the Arab puritans' disdain for local Afghan Sufi "superstitions," their most un-Afghan desire to achieve "martyrdom" and their wish to lead their own fighting units.

A local Taliban commander captured the ambiguous nature of the Taliban-al-Qa`ida alliance when he claimed of the Arabs: "They come for the sacred purpose of jihad. They fight according to Shari`a law." He then, however, added an important caveat: "No foreign fighter can serve as a Taliban commander."<sup>15</sup> Even key al-Qa`ida field commanders, such as the recently slain Libyan leader

Abu Laith al-Libi (the commander who led al-Qa`ida's retreat from Afghanistan in 2001), operated under the command of Mullah Omar.

Despite the potential for tensions, al-Qa`ida's head of operations in Afghanistan, an Egyptian named Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid, who is said to have good relations with the Taliban, has proclaimed that al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan recognizes the authority of Mullah Omar. For its part, the Taliban has charged one Mehmood Haq Yar, a Taliban commander who has allegedly been to Iraq to learn the Iraqi insurgents' tactics, with making sure Arabs play a role in the Afghan jihad. It appears that both sides are united in their desire to topple the Hamid Karzai government and carve out an Islamic state in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

#### Conclusion

While it is difficult to estimate the number of Arab fighters in the region,<sup>16</sup> it seems obvious that al-Qa`ida central is determined to play a key role as a fundraiser, recruiter and direct contributor to the military efforts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, unlike the earlier generation of "gucci jihadists" who made little if any real contribution to the jihad against the Soviets, the current generation seems determined to remind the West that the "Lions of Islam" have not forgotten the "Forgotten War" in Afghanistan.

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leak.com/view?i=01f1185675192; and an Arab attack on a U.S. convoy in Zabul, available at [www.liveleak.com/view?i=dc1\\_1184687663](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=dc1_1184687663).

<sup>12</sup> Abu Haris appears to have created his own mixed Arab Afghan unit called the Jaysh al-Mahdi. See Waliullah Rahmani, "Al-Qaeda Uses Jaish al-Mahdi to Gain Control over Helmand Province," *Terrorism Focus* 4:34 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Jason Straziuso, "U.S. Intensifies Fight Near Taliban-held Town; Talks Under Way to Oust Arab Fighters," Associated Press, October 28, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> "All Eyes on Musa Qala," [www.afgha.com](http://www.afgha.com), October 10, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> "Foreign Taleban Rile Helmand Residents," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, October 30, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Coalition forces have killed or arrested hundreds of foreigners; Afghan government officials have spoken of "hundreds" of Arabs operating in some provinces; and the Pakistanis claim to have arrested thousands and killed 488 foreign fighters since 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Sahil Nagpal, "600 Pakistan Security Men Killed in 28 Suicide Attacks After Lal Masjid Operation," ANI, November 14, 2007.

*warlords in Afghanistan to interviewing Kosovar Albanian field commanders. Most recently he served as an expert witness at Guantanamo Bay in the case of Salim Hamdan, Bin Ladin's driver.*