

Jihad After Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans Phenomenon

By Mohammed M. Hafez

NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, Arabs who volunteered to aid the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan dispersed from the conflict zone to pursue their newfound passion: jihad in the path of God. Known as “Arab Afghans,” these veterans participated in national insurgencies and civil wars, facilitated international terrorism and became ideologues of global jihad.¹ Today, Iraq’s global jihadists are facing a similar moment. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) is under tremendous military pressure from Sunni tribes, nationalist insurgents and U.S.-Iraqi counter-insurgency operations. There is a distinct possibility that AQI could be driven out of Iraq in the near future. It is unclear, however, what the movement will do next. The experiences of Arab Afghans suggest that the defeat of AQI may generate new threats associated with the dispersal of its fighters in the region and around the world. Therefore, it is vitally important to revisit the experiences of the Arab Afghans to develop lessons for present day Iraq.

The Arab Afghans

Arab Afghans were a tiny contingent in the anti-Soviet struggle, or “a drop in the ocean” according to one former prominent Arab volunteer.² Generous estimates put the number of Arab volunteers in the Afghan conflict at 3,000 to 4,000 at any one time, especially after 1986.³ In total, approximately 10,000 Arabs served in

the area.⁴ Most volunteers were based in Peshawar and other Pakistani cities bordering Afghanistan. They included humanitarian aid workers, cooks, drivers, accountants, teachers, doctors, engineers and religious preachers. They built camps, dug and treated water wells, and attended to the sick and wounded.⁵ Arab volunteers with jihad as a goal mostly came in the late 1980s.

Yet, despite their marginal military role in the anti-Soviet campaign, Arab Afghans acquired many of the elements necessary for sustained violent activism. A substantial number of volunteers participated in military training camps established by the Pakistani intelligence

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services and run by commanders of mujahidin factions. These camps gave Arab Afghans skills in guerrilla warfare and terrorism.⁶ In addition, many of the Arab Afghans were socialized in *takfiri* ideologies (which declare as apostate secular regimes in the Muslim world). Vigilant security services to prevent zealots from distributing the works of radical ideologues did not exist, and governments were unable to counter the *takfiris* with their own breed of establishment Islam.⁷ No less important were the network ties that were forged between diverse factions and nationalities. These networks became important for moving jihadists from one conflict zone to another, and they facilitated the acquisition of money

and forged passports.⁸ Most critically, the Arab Afghans experience produced capable leaders, religious ideologues and military commanders who would play vital roles in places such as Algeria, Egypt, Bosnia and Chechnya.

The Dispersion of Arab Afghans

The year 1992 was perhaps the most important for the dispersion of Arab Afghans. The Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989 and the Afghan communist regime fell in 1992. Many of the Gulf volunteers went back home and were treated as heroes. Other Arab Afghans became assets of regimes and their security services. This was especially the case in Yemen, where the returning Arab Afghans were given a haven and were deployed against the socialist establishment of the former South Yemen.⁹

Those who did not reintegrate or serve as assets of governments embarked on a militant path. Four archetypes emerged:

1. *Facilitators of Jihad.* Many Arab Afghans saw their role as facilitators of jihadist movements in their home countries or around the world. Facilitation included training, financing and sheltering jihadists in Pakistani camps and guest houses. It also encompassed smuggling weapons, forging travel documents, printing propaganda materials and serving as communication liaisons between clandestine individuals. Facilitators also produced ideological and theological justifications for militant groups. These facilitators were mainly in Peshawar, but they also emerged in Europe (London in particular), Yemen, Sudan and Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban.

2. *National Islamic Revolutionaries.* Some Arab Afghans, particularly those from Algeria and Egypt, saw an opportunity in the early 1990s to overthrow their own regimes. Although the Algerian and Egyptian veterans did not initiate

1 The term “Arab Afghans” was initially used by some Arab governments—especially Egypt and Algeria—in the early 1990s as a derogatory reference to individuals who were seen as “troublemakers” or religious zealots who donned Afghan-style clothing.

2 Abdullah Anas, *The Birth of the Arab Afghans: The Autobiography of Abdullah Anas between Masoud and Abdullah Azzam* (Arabic) (London: Dar Al Saqi, 2002), p. 87.

3 According to Steve Coll, “The CIA’s Islamabad station estimated in a 1989 cable to Langley that there were probably about four thousand Arab volunteers in Afghanistan, mainly organized under [Abdul Rasul] Sayyaf’s leadership.” Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 201.

4 Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Free Press, 2006).

5 Muhammad Salah, “Events of the Jihad Years: The Journey of Afghan Arabs from Everywhere to Washington and New York” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, October 17-21, 2001, part 2 of 5.

6 Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 144.

7 Khalid Sharaf al-Din, “Fundamentalists’ Leaders Boogymen Organizations to Confuse the Security Organs” (Arabic), March 7, 1999, part 2 of 3.

8 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Quoted in Salah, “Events of the Jihad Years,” part 4 of 5.

9 International Crisis Group, “Yemen: Coping with Terrorism and Violence in a Fragile State,” January 8, 2003; Jonathan Schanzer, *Al-Qaeda’s Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004).

the insurgency in their respective countries, their skills, networks and experience helped the insurgent movements tremendously.¹⁰

3. *Global Jihadists.* A number of Arab Afghans took their training, experience and networks to other conflict zones, especially Bosnia and, later, Chechnya. Their aim was to aid fellow co-religionists in their own struggles for secession or liberation. Roaming jihadists used a variety of means to enter conflict zones. The most common was illegal infiltration with the help of professional smugglers or through bribing local officials and border security agents. Others posed as humanitarian activists, relief workers, or journalists seeking to cover a war zone. Some relied on fake passports, even diplomatic ones, acquired through forgers in Pakistan or Europe.

4. *Unaffiliated Terrorists.* Less common were the volunteers who carried out successful and foiled terrorist attacks in the name of Islamic causes either in their home countries or in the West. An exemplar of this pattern is Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Center attack. In 1990, he went to Afghanistan to train in the Khaldin camp, run by Arab volunteers. He trained for about six months, learning weapons tactics, basic explosives and military maneuvers. He graduated to a more advanced course in remote-controlled bomb-making and experimented with some explosives in Afghanistan's civil war. He used his connections in Peshawar to acquire an Iraqi passport, which he used to enter the United States.¹¹

Comparing Arab Afghans with Foreign Fighters in Iraq

Although Arab Afghans were a relatively small group that had little influence on the course of events in Afghanistan, they were able to carry out terrorist attacks around the world, start new national and transnational terrorist cells, aid several insurgent movements, build camps to train future generations of radical Islamists and launch a surprise attack on the only

remaining superpower in the world. These considerations do not bode well for the dispersal of jihadists from Iraq. Foreign fighters in Iraq are more threatening than their Arab Afghan predecessors in several respects.

Exposure to Combat

Foreign fighters in Iraq have been exposed to intense combat since the Iraqi insurgency escalated. Unlike Arab Afghans who fought less on the battlefield, the foreign fighters in Iraq engaged coalition forces in direct combat, carried out car bombs and suicide attacks, deployed a range of improvised explosive devices and rockets, conducted kidnappings and beheadings, shot down aircraft, engaged in complex attacks against hardened targets and assassinations of high-value personnel, and intimidated the Iraqi government, the majority Shi'a population, and, more recently, Sunni insurgents and tribes that oppose them.¹²

Networking

Jihadists in Iraq are connected to experienced trainers, gun runners, human smugglers, guns-for-hire, criminals, forgers and other radical Islamist groups. AQI has transformed its largely foreign membership into an Iraqi one through cooptation and money. Deposed Ba'athists that cannot be integrated in the new Iraqi order may find a home in the global jihadist movement as guns-for-hire or facilitators of jihad. Although the Afghan mujahidin did not join al-Qa`ida's global movement in the 1990s, this may have been a practical problem of language. Iraq's Ba'athists speak Arabic and can mix with the Arab-dominated global jihadist movement. This was not the case with the Afghan mujahidin.

Enhanced Communications Environment

The proliferation of internet-based technologies facilitates the communication needs of dispersing jihadists and facilitates their movement. The internet enables them to maintain communication with their networks in Iraq with relative ease, reach out to other jihadist groups for guidance on

how to enter other conflict zones, and access their training manuals without having to carry them across borders. Dispersing terrorists will likely mine the internet for practical information on visas, travel regulations and routes to take.

Despite the clear advantages available to Iraq's foreign fighters over their Arab Afghan predecessors, three factors could mitigate their threat potential in the future.

First, foreign fighters are the main supply of suicide bombers in Iraq, which means they will not be around to threaten other states.¹³

Second, neighboring states are not likely to offer fleeing jihadists an inviting safe haven akin to the one Pakistan offered Arab Afghans in the 1980s and 1990s. The Arab Afghans were able to move between Pakistan and Afghanistan with relative ease, settling in Peshawar's many guest houses and training camps without fear of harassment or arrest. Iraq's dispersing jihadists will not have such a haven to exploit. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Turkey are aligned with the United States and have been targets of radical Islamists. Therefore, they have no incentives to shelter fleeing jihadists. Syria and Iran might choose to provide a safe haven for fleeing militants, but they will do so discretely to avoid incurring further hostility or military action from the United States. Jihadists that go to Iran and Syria will not be able to set up camps like the ones that developed in Pakistan during the 1980s or under the Taliban in the late 1990s.

Absence of an inviting safe haven next to Iraq means that dispersing jihadists will have to cross multiple borders and acquire documentation to enter distant havens. This, in turn, increases their vulnerability to detection and arrest. Many foreign fighters in Iraq have to turn over their cell phones, money and passports to smugglers or the insurgent groups that host them.¹⁴ If they choose

10 Mohammed Muqadem, "The Journey of the Algerian Afghans from the [Armed Islamic] Group to the Al Qaeda Organization" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, November 25, 2001, parts 1-7; Salah, "Events of the Jihad Years," part 3 of 5.

11 Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 248-49 and p. 278.

12 Michael Knights and Brooke Neumann, "A New Afghanistan? Exploring the Iraqi Jihadist Training Ground," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1, 2006.

13 Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007); Richard A. Opel, Jr., "Foreign Fighters in Iraq Are Tied to Allies of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2007.

14 Qasim Hamadi, "Detailed Information on 600 Al Qaeda

to leave, they will have to acquire money and forged documents to cross multiple borders to make it back to their homelands or new destinations.

Finally, dispersing jihadists will encounter vigilant Arab and European governments that are aware of their potential threat. During the Afghan campaign, Arab and European governments took in returning volunteers because they were aided by some of these governments to fight the Soviet Union. Volunteering for Iraq, in contrast, is considered a criminal act by most of these governments. Returnees from Iraq will encounter arrests, interrogation and possibly surveillance to make sure they are not a threat. European governments are not likely to welcome jihadists in their territory as they did Arab Afghans during the 1990s. These governments are on the lookout for jihadists seeking to destabilize their countries or take advantage of their territories.

Conclusion: Policies for Countering the Threat of Dispersing Jihadists

The experiences of Arab Afghans suggest several lessons for containing the potential threat coming out of Iraq.

Lesson 1—Conflicts Attract Jihadists

Many Arab Afghans went to where the action was located—Bosnia, Chechnya, Algeria and Egypt. Jihadists who wish to leave Iraq in the near future are likely to seek other conflict zones, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia, where they are likely to be welcomed by fellow militants in need of support. Foreign fighters might also seek to join insurgent Islamist groups in North Africa, especially in Algeria.

Lesson 2—Jihadists Exploit Safe Havens

Dispersing Arab Afghans exploited safe havens and governmental support in Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen. All three countries had populations sympathetic to jihadism, were relatively weak states and harbored political calculations that involved exploiting militants for national or regional interests. Therefore, countries and communities with populations sympathetic to

jihadism and governments unwilling or unable to deny a haven to jihadists are at risk of attracting dispersing foreign fighters in the near future. Pakistan's tribal regions, where radicals have been receiving shelter since the 1980s and where al-Qa`ida's core leaders are believed to be currently based, is the most likely destination of fleeing jihadists. Another possible destination is Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon because those camps are policed by Palestinian factions, not the Lebanese government.

Lesson 3—Networking is the Key to Success

Arab Afghans during the 1990s benefited from the network ties that developed during the anti-Soviet campaign. It took network links to enter into new conflict zones, finance training camps and acquire forged documents to move from country to country. Facilitators of jihad in Pakistan, Europe and Sudan were the backbone of the emerging al-Qa`ida global network and the key to its high-profile operations. Foreign fighters in Iraq have succeeded in forging new network ties with former Ba`athists and Sunni insurgents. Therefore, dispersing jihadists are likely to exploit these networks to exit from Iraq or build connections between facilitators inside Iraq and terrorist cells outside the country.

Governments concerned about the threat of dispersing jihadists can pursue a number of measures:

- Prioritize the problem by making programs that track the movement and dispersion of jihadists a top intelligence priority. Counter-terrorism departments must dedicate resources and personnel to monitor dispersion from Iraq and track its development over time. They must also develop databases on terrorism incidents with links to Iraq-based groups to look for patterns in network facilitation, methods and tactics.

- Treat emerging conflicts where local Muslim actors are involved, weak states and ungoverned regions as potential magnets for dispersing jihadists. Collaborate with allied intelligence services to anticipate the influx of militants into these areas and develop information on smuggling networks

and routes that may facilitate the transfer of dispersing jihadists. Routes to Afghanistan and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas should be a top priority because al-Qa`ida is likely sheltered there and has strong support structures in both countries.

- Provide allied intelligence agencies the names of Iraqi and foreign detainees in U.S. detention facilities in Iraq. These individuals should be flagged for additional scrutiny at border entry points. Immigration agencies should also have access to the names of former detainees and known foreign fighters in Iraq in case they apply for asylum as Iraqi refugees.

- Assist states to improve the quality of their passports and update their border control technologies to make it difficult for individuals to enter their territories with falsified documents.

- Engage in a robust diplomacy to dissuade governments from offering unofficial safe havens to fleeing militants. Impose sanctions and threaten the assets of sub-state actors and political parties that shelter returning jihadists for militant purposes (especially in Yemen and Pakistan).

- Develop extradition treaties and repatriation protocols to facilitate the handover of apprehended foreign fighters and fleeing jihadists. European governments in the past refused to extradite individuals to countries with dismal human rights records and capital punishment. Therefore, it might be advantageous to encourage Arab governments to provide assurances that extradited militants will not face extrajudicial punishments or death sentences in order to facilitate their repatriation from Europe.

- Explore offering amnesty and reintegration programs to repentant foreign fighters seeking to exit the path of jihad. Those who return and provide information on their networks could be given immunity from prosecution or reduced sentences to be served in rehabilitation centers similar to the Saudi model.¹⁵

da Fighters in Documents Captured by American Forces in Al-Anbar" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, January 13, 2008; Karen DeYoung, "Papers Paint New Portrait of Iraq's Foreign Insurgents," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2008.

15 Christopher Boucek, "Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:16 (2007).

These measures comprise a comprehensive strategy to counter the threat of dispersing jihadists. They make the process of dispersion more difficult, expose militants to the risk of being apprehended at borders, deprive them of support networks and new safe havens, facilitate their repatriation to their home governments and encourage them to exit the path of jihad through rehabilitation and reintegration.

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