

# Saudi-American Forum

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## **The Crucibles: 9/11, Afghanistan and the Fashioning of a Foe [Part II]**

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### **Executive Summary [Part II]**

Those who assert that Saudi Arabian involvement in the Afghani-Soviet conflict directly links the Kingdom with Islamic militancy are neglecting the fact that neither Saudi Arabia nor the United States were allowed to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the clash. It was, in fact, Pakistan who created and used the militant and fundamentalist Muslim movement as a tool to manage troubles that might spill over the border into Pakistan. In their efforts, the Pakistani government greatly increased the number of religious schools, or madrasas, in order to collect and mobilize Afghani youth to fight the Soviet Union. Upon the Soviet withdrawal, these schools would give rise to the Taliban. It was the inter-state movement of people organized primarily by the Pakistanis and Muslim Brotherhood that connected the various singular Muslim entities and imparted them with the organizational and military skills they employ today. So, while the Saudis and the CIA were involved in the conflict, the incubator of modern militant Islam was Pakistan. As both Saudi and US involvement aided in ridding Afghanistan of the Soviet Union, they also facilitated Pakistan's creation of the breeding ground for al Qaeda. Now the two nations must unite under the new common goal of ridding the Middle East of the militant fundamentalists.

In "The Crucibles: 9/11, Afghanistan and the Fashioning of a Foe," Gregory Dowling examines these important issues that shape the current dialogue on US-Saudi relations. The Saudi-American Forum is pleased to present Mr. Dowling's essay, distributed in two parts. Part I was distributed last week and is available online in the Saudi-American Forum.

### **Pakistan Orchestrates...**

It is critical to note that neither the Kingdom nor the United States were involved in the direct management of the campaign against the Soviet Union. That task fell to Pakistan, and specifically, its Directorate for Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Confirmation of the centrality of Pakistan's role is reflected in the fact that virtually all assistance, financial and material, to the Afghani resistance from either the Kingdom or the United States was channeled through and distributed by the ISI. Certainly, Pakistan was ideally positioned as a border state to act as the

'staging ground' for the campaign. But its dominance, indeed Pakistan's refusal to allow any other country to have the lead role, was based on matters well beyond geography that touched on the country's very integrity. Pakistan's own objectives transcended and indeed trumped both U.S. and Saudi interests.

Key among Pakistan's concerns was the containment, indeed eradication, of any distinctive nationalist ethos among the myriad ethnic groups that comprised Pakistan's population. One sizable group in particular, the Pashtuns, who were concentrated on both sides of the country's border with Afghanistan, had long been seen by Pakistani authorities as a potential threat given the aspiration among some of this community for a unique Pashtun homeland, 'Pashtunistan'. The dangers of Pakistan fracturing along ethnic lines was dramatically evidenced in 1971 when East Pakistan broke away to establish Bangladesh, a development that grew out of a strong national ethos among the Bengalis. And when, just two years later, a Pashtun assumed the head of the Afghani state, Sardar Muhammad Daoud, and called upon Pakistan's Pashtuns in the border areas to secede and become part of Afghanistan, fears of a more extensive dismemberment intensified.

What became critical for the Pakistani leadership was to find a mechanism that could effectively subvert the Afghani government's appeal to its Pakistani citizenry while turning Afghani Pashtuns into effective agents of Pakistani national goals. What the Pakistani state - then under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto - adopted as its policy was the promotion of a militant and fundamentalist Islam among Pashtuns. Within Afghanistan, Pakistani authorities pursued links with those members of the Pashtun community who expressed an Islamic zealotry and were committed to the establishment of a strict Islamic state in that country. Afghan Pashtuns of this persuasion were given support by the Pakistani military leading to the establishment of a guerilla force and a low intensity war against the Soviet-backed Afghani state. As one astute writer has noted, "(s)ix years before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the mujahideen had been born."<sup>7</sup>

The Soviet invasion did not initiate the struggle, what that did was internationalize it, thereby intensifying it. The Soviet action did not alter Pakistan's approach to the struggle; to the contrary, it allowed Pakistan's subsequent leader, General Zia al Haq, to implement his political objectives with greater vigor and success. As expressed in an excellent and recent study of Pakistan, for " General Zia, the invasion seemed like a gift from Allah."<sup>8</sup>

The intensification of the 'forward' policy in the wake of the Soviet invasion was complimented by a domestic program to vigorously reassert the primacy of a strict adherence to Islam in Pakistani politics and society. One manifestation of the domestic program was General Zia's growing reliance on Islamist political parties, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami. This alliance, in turn, acted to reinforce the bias towards to the most fundamentalist elements within the Afghani resistance.

### **...And Educates...**

A second manifestation was a government program to expand religious schools, the now infamous madrasas, including those that provided Islamic instruction in accordance with the Deobandi tradition. Although not the dominant expression of the faith in the country, key

elements of the tradition ideally positioned it to support government objectives both at home and the 'near-abroad.' The Deobandi tradition stressed a strict and literal application of the Sharia in the individual's daily life just as it incorporated a tradition of militancy (the Deobandi tradition initially coalesced in the mid-19th century among Muslims strongly and militantly opposed to the British presence in the subcontinent). Moreover, it was a tradition that had strong roots among the Pashtuns with one of the most famous of its religious schools, the Haqqaniya madrasa, in the North West Frontier Province. Finally, important Deobandi madrasas, such as the Haqqaniya, were closely linked with the Islamic political party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami.

As the Afghani war progressed following the Soviet invasion, the number of these Deobandi madrasas was to be dramatically expanded. They provided an ideal mechanism to deal with the influx of Afghani Pashtun refugees, many of them orphaned children, displaced by the conflict in Afghanistan. Part school, part orphanage, they offered the Pakistani government not only a place to collect and hold the young refugees but to mobilize them for the struggle against the Soviet Union, ensuring that the impetus to participate in the struggle was not grounded in a Pashtun irredentism. The fact that so many of the young were orphans, violently stripped of their ties to family and clan, undoubtedly aided the process of political mobilization. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami willingly participated in this development as it offered the party a means to expand its political influence within Pakistan again demonstrating the mutually reinforcing dynamic of domestic and foreign policy agendas.

### **...To Graduate Just the Right Kind of Students**

The Taliban were, of course, the most celebrated Afghani Pashtun students of the Deobandi madrasas. Their rapid and successful rise to political prominence in Afghanistan, subsequent to the Soviet withdrawal and the ultimate collapse of their client state in 1992, caught observers by surprise. Yet, such a movement among the Afghani Pashtuns was precisely the sort envisioned by the Pakistani state under President Zia: politically motivated by religious not ethnic zeal and linked to Pakistan. The Taliban were perfectly representative of the contemporary Deobandi madrasas' narrow and limited curriculum: dedicated to the application of Sharia law in daily life, adverse to modernity and strongly opposed to Western secular society. They had little if any grasp on how to implement an effective system of governance, a matter that only enhanced the opportunity for Pakistani influence. Their greatest asset was arguably their ability to act unfettered by the profound social and ethnic cleavages that bedeviled any form of Afghani political unity. This asset was amplified by a general desire among the Afghani peoples for peace and order after decades of strife. There is little question that the movement's successes were a reflection less of the inherent capabilities of the Taliban leadership than the chaotic and deplorable state of affairs into which Afghanistan had fallen.

As the foregoing makes clear, attempting to classify the militant Islamic tenor that characterized the Afghan campaign or the emergence of the Taliban as Saudi-inspired developments is to completely miscast events. With specific regard to the Taliban, there is no question that Saudi Arabia, in the wake of the Pakistani state's all out support for the movement, contributed vital financial and material assistance. The Kingdom also offered diplomatic support becoming one of only three countries (Pakistan and the UAE the other two) that officially acknowledged it as the legitimate Afghani government. Indeed, the Kingdom may have looked upon the Taliban regime

sympathetically as the latter sought to govern in accord with Islamic law. But such support as was extended was grounded essentially in considerations of *realpolitik*. The Taliban appeared to offer a serious opportunity to return political stability to the country while offering the Kingdom the chance to exert influence in a region of considerable significance to it. Supporting the Taliban also enabled the Kingdom to ease the burdens of an embattled Pakistan, an important ally, now contending with a chaotic Afghanistan without U.S. aid. Equally, Taliban-Saudi diplomatic links positioned the Kingdom to act as a key intermediary with the regime on behalf of the United States.

## **Guest Workers Welcome**

There was, of course, another much celebrated influx of individuals into Pakistan during the war against the Soviets, Muslims from across the globe, Arab and non-Arab both, who came to participate in the jihad. Although the Kingdom's intelligence services were engaged, clearly facilitating the effort, it would be more than a stretch to see this as a Saudi-run operation. Indeed, it can be argued that Saudi Arabia could not have undertaken such a task on its own. Those international Muslim organizations sponsored by the Kingdom, such as the Muslim World League, were notably ill-equipped to serve as a conduit for politically activist Muslims. This reflected the fact that the Kingdom's own 'outreach' programs, while stressing a fundamentalist approach to the faith, have been staunchly apolitical in outlook curtailing the possibility of links with those espousing a more militant agenda.

According to the French scholar Olivier Roy<sup>9</sup>, the networks that sprung up to effect the movement of these fighters into Pakistan were closely linked to cadres of the Muslim Brotherhood, an international, politically activist Islamic movement founded in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century but now found throughout the Islamic world. It comes hardly as a surprise that this effort was actively promoted by and closely overseen within Pakistan by the ISI with some assistance from the Jamaat-e-Islami, the political party cultivated by Zia al Haq, with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Indicative of the association with the Brotherhood was the fact that the office set up in Peshawar to manage the influx, Makhtab al Khidmat (the Services Center), was initially run by a Jordanian member of the Brotherhood, Abdallah Azzam.

Their entry into Pakistan was certainly welcomed by Pakistan, the United States and Saudi Arabia for its propaganda value in transforming the image of the war from a regional one into one where the Islamic world was united against the Soviet Union. But it was Pakistan's ISI who sought to transform something of rhetorical value into a useful instrument, 'the first Islamic international brigade'<sup>10</sup> as the ISI's head General Hameed Gul envisioned these combatants. The 'Islamic brigade' may have been most attractive to Pakistan as it offered a means to amplify the military impact of its preferred Afghani mujahideen thereby helping them dominate the fractious resistance to the Soviets.

However, by all accounts, the effective contribution of these fighters to the Soviet defeat was limited. But that was not the true significance of their involvement in the Afghani jihad. In a very important sense, what these combatants did for the conflict was secondary to what the conflict did for them. Crucially, the Afghani war provided these heretofore-disparate groups and individuals with the means and opportunity to create an autonomous, non-state, global network

to support their Islamist objectives where none had existed before. As Ahmed Rashid has noted, the Afghani war where "...these radicals met each other for the first time and studied, trained and fought together. It was the first opportunity for most of them to learn about Islamic movements in other countries and they forged tactical and ideological links that would serve them well in the future. The(ir) camps became virtual universities for future Islamic radicalism."<sup>11</sup> And it was in these camps, tutored by instructors who in turn had been taught by the CIA, that the so-called Arab Afghanis gained valuable instruction in guerilla warfare techniques.

These combatants were as much 'liberated' by their activities as they ever acted as liberators for the Afghani people, coming as they were from countries wherein Islamic activism was severely circumscribed if not suppressed by the state. By going to fight in Afghanistan, they were not simply participating in an act of 'global Islam,' they were establishing a 'global Islam.' Like every foreign agent in the Afghani conflict, their involvement became a means to other ends.

### **And the Most Famous Arab Jihadi Is?**

Usama bin Laden, who typifies for many the Saudi connection with Afghanistan just as he has achieved near iconic status as the face of Islamic terror, enters the picture through his involvement in fund raising and recruitment activities for the 'Islamic brigade.' His family background in the construction industry also enabled him to build facilities for both the Afghani mujahideen and the foreign combatants. A broadening of administrative responsibilities came late in the conflict when he took over the management of the Makhtab al Khidmat upon the assassination of Assam the year the Soviet Union departed. This type of organizational experience, the knowledge he gained of Islamic networks worldwide, and his close familiarity with the physical infrastructure that supported the combatants, Afghanis and foreign, would prove invaluable in his later incarnation as one of al Qaeda's leaders.

Interpreting Usama's involvement in Afghanistan as that of a 'Saudi agent' or somehow an expression of a distinctly Saudi ethos is problematic. Usama's dedication to the effort reflects, importantly, the wide-ranging intellectual influences of the Muslim Brotherhood. During President Nasser's reign and the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, the Kingdom had offered asylum to its members. Usama had apparently been deeply affected by one of his university teachers in Jeddah who had been a member, and he had formed a friendship with Abdallah Azzam who had been one of his classmates. It was such connections that likely propelled him to participate. If one wanted to identify for whom he worked as an 'agent,' it would have been the nascent "Islamic brigade' and the ISI.

Usama was back in the Kingdom by 1990 unquestionably inspired by the Afghani experience. The inherent contradictions between his views and that of the Saudi government were quickly manifest. The catalyst for the break between the Kingdom and Usama was the Saudi government's decision to turn to the West and the United States, in particular, for assistance upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait later that year. Usama's proposal of reconstituting the 'Islamic brigade' to defend the Kingdom had been flatly rejected (with one can only assume a mixture of bemusement and horror). Usama's vision was not one that invited support from the Saudi state.

## **Full Circle**

In the wake of the break with the Saudi government, Usama traveled to Sudan where he undoubtedly hoped to find a more supportive political environment for his views. While his Islamist views may have made the Sudanese government sympathetic, it was undoubtedly the financial and material assistance he was able to potentially extend to a beleaguered state that made him most welcome. And it was there, as the bombings in New York in 1993 and the attack in 1995 on the Riyadh office of the U.S. military mission to the Kingdom suggest, that he began the process of organizing what came to be al Qaeda. The attacks, however, put the Sudanese government under considerable pressure from both the United States and the Kingdom for his deportation. The Sudanese government's acquiescence could only confirm the lesson of the Kingdom's earlier rejection: his emergent organization, if it was to be truly effective, could not be beholden to any state.

By 1996, Usama was back in Afghanistan, no longer a Saudi citizen, the Saudi government having stripped him of that privilege in 1994. In the political chaos that continued to characterize Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Soviet defeat, he was to find an ideal environment in which to operate. Afghanistan was a country with a regime, the Taliban, marked not only by an overriding commitment to the absolutist implementation of Sharia but struggling to assert its command over the country. In the Taliban, Usama was to find a regime that would be beholden to his organization, not the other way around.

It is entirely possible that the return of Usama to Afghanistan in 1996 was orchestrated by Pakistan. Reporting by such close observers as the journalist Ahmed Rashid note that the Pakistani government was instrumental in introducing Usama to the Taliban upon his return. One can appreciate the appeal to the Pakistanis of putting Usama's quite considerable skills in raising men, material and monies at the service of the Taliban as the regime struggled to assert its authority. Pakistan was certainly not averse to recreating the 'Islamic brigade.' Nor would this development have been particularly disturbing to the Kingdom. Usama was back in a very real sense to where he started and presumably fully preoccupied with a daunting task that would preclude his focusing his attention elsewhere. It is also not unreasonable to speculate that the Kingdom expected that as the Taliban increased its sway in Afghanistan it would be best positioned to exert increased control over Usama and his activities. What neither the Kingdom nor Pakistan expected was that the Taliban's relationship with Usama would develop into one of dependency of the former on the latter, providing the emergent al Qaeda with an ideal location to pursue its own objectives.

## **Trying to Put Humpty Together Again**

Al Qaeda flourishes where state power is weak. For that very reason, Afghanistan, a country whose profound socio-cultural cleavages work against the easy or successful consolidation of political power around a single state structure, was both the place of its genesis and became the most attractive environment in which to operate. Irony abounds in the fact that the United States' and the Kingdom's common goal in Afghanistan to disrupt the centralization of power under a Soviet sponsored regime should have proven so effective in creating an environment in which a common nemesis could thrive.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that the United States was instrumental in enabling the transformation of the networks that Usama helped establish during the anti-Soviet campaign into al Qaeda. This charge resides not so much in what the United States did during the Afghan war but in the fact that the United States abandoned Afghanistan once the Soviet Union had departed. The United States had effectively exploited the preexisting fractures in Afghanistan's political culture to defeat the Soviet Union. Indeed, the years of conflict had exacerbated these divisions. With the defeat of the Soviet Union, the United States did little if anything to stabilize the country and contribute to the reestablishment of a functioning state system. The United States had left a political void that al Qaeda was, in turn, able to exploit to its own ends. The last great proxy battle in the Cold War was a brutal demonstration of the notion that ends will justify the means. But 9/11 raised questions in a notably tragic form about whether the prize was worth the cost. The very fact that the United States is now back in Afghanistan attempting to accomplish what it had previously neglected suggests an answer.

### **Working Towards the End Game**

The U.S.' proxy war in Afghanistan against the 'Evil Empire' was a classic example of Cold War objectives overlaying a preexisting and complex regional dynamic, of local forces dictating and transmuting America's own idealized aspirations. It is an unavoidable historical truth that the U.S.' final conflict in the last 'global struggle' against communism marked the beginning of the next one, the 'war on terror.' Equally critical, and of particular reference to Saudi Arabia, the fact that Islamic militancy shaped the conduct of the Afghani war was not, as many ludicrously suggest, a Saudi import. Nor was al Qaeda a creature of the Kingdom; it was one of the unintended consequences of what in retrospect were grievously misguided policies.

It is understandable that not only the United States' government but the American public are deeply uncomfortable with the notion that the United States played a contributory role to the horrors of 9/11. It is that very resistance that underpins our accusatory attitude to the Kingdom. By making the Kingdom the 'whipping boy,' we are able to avoid punishing ourselves. But if we are able to successfully counter al Qaeda, a positive relationship with a stable Kingdom is vital.

The United States, Pakistan and the Kingdom bound their fortunes together in Afghanistan, and though succeeded in accomplishing the immediate objective, are all suffering the profoundly dangerous consequences of their acts. To effectively contend with the terror they all confront, joint action is again a necessity. And that, in turn, demands for one thing - that the American public shed its 'ceremony of innocence.'

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#### **End Notes**

7. Mary Anne Weaver, *Pakistan, In the Shadow of Jihad and Afghanistan*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002, p.60.
8. Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: eye of the storm*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, p.16.
9. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp.116-118.
10. The description employed by the ISI head General Hameed Gul in conversation with Ahmed Rashid and quoted in his *Taliban Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001, p.129.
11. *Ibid.*, p.130.

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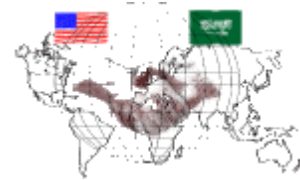
### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Gregory J. H. Dowling** is an independent analyst on the Middle East currently researching a history of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) that focuses on the concessionary relationship with the Saudi Arab state. He was employed for more than a decade as an advisor with Aramco's Government Affairs Organization and has written for, among others, Business Monitor International and the Economist Intelligence Unit. Mr. Dowling holds degrees from Tufts, Georgetown, and King's College, Cambridge.

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