



**Report #1 in a New Series
“Connecting the Dots”:
“America’s First
al-Qaida Fighters”
April 2010**

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Introduction

In a new series of short reports titled “Connecting the Dots”, NEFA analysts touch on a wide range of subjects concerning various aspects of terrorism. When vital information is treated as historical, it can lose its impact relating to current events. Reflection and re-evaluation of documents, articles, and interviews can be a very valuable tool in terms of identifying patterns, recognizing relationships, and connecting circumstances.

In this first report, we revisit the fact that a handful of American Muslims were involved in the founding of al-Qaida as they were recruited a few months before al-Qaida was formed in Bin Ladin's al-Masada (the Lions Den) camp in eastern Afghanistan.

“America’s First al-Qaida Fighters”

Although initial press reports from Pakistan indicated that American al-Qaida member Adam Gadahn might have been arrested in Karachi in March 2010, it turned out instead, Abu Yahya Azzam, head of operations in Afghanistan, was the one actually arrested by Pakistani authorities in Karachi.¹

Recently, the names of several Americans have surfaced who are linked with Jihadi groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Some were converts to Islam, such as Adam Gadahn or Bryant Neal Vinas, while others, like Anwar al-Awlaki, were American Muslims. It is known, however, that Americans have long been a part of Usama bin Ladin’s entourage.

In the second half of the 1980s, during the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviets, the Maktab al-Khidamat (MaK), or the Services Bureau, established an office in Brooklyn called the Alkifah Refugee Center. It started out as a desk in the al-Farooq Mosque, but soon moved to 566 Atlantic Avenue above a perfume factory. The Center’s main objective was to raise money and to recruit fighters for

¹ “Pakistan ‘detains al-Qaeda Commander’,” *BBC*, March 8, 2010; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8554707.stm; Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Pakistan delivers but doubts remain,” *Asia Times*, March 9, 2010; http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LC09Df01.html.

the Afghan jihad.² This became the headquarters of the MaK operations in the U.S., and the U.S. became one of the main fund-raising targets for the Mujahidin; branches of the Services Bureau were opened in 33 cities.³ According to open source reporting, over 200 persons were sent to the Jihad from the Alkifah Refugee Center in Brooklyn alone.⁴

As Lawrence Wright remarks in *The Looming Tower*, many in al-Qaida's inner circle came to the Jihad from America.⁵ When al-Qaida was founded in the summer of 1988, two American Muslims played a role in it. Both were born in Syria, but lived in the U.S. and had U.S. citizenship. Luay Bayazid, using the alias Abu Rida al-Suri, was living in Kansas City before he went to Afghanistan, and Enaam Arnaout, using the alias Abu Mahmud al-Suri, was, in 1993, one of the founders of the charity, Benevolence International, in Illinois. Seemingly performing the role of secretary, Abu Rida is known for having taken notes for Usama bin Ladin, during summer of 1988 meetings that led to the founding of al-Qaida. Abu Mahmud was involved more as the administrative organizer which might explain why the al-Qaida archive was in his possession until the offices of Benevolence International in Sarajevo were raided by the Bosnian police in March 2002.

At least four persons coming from the U.S. were registered for Bin Ladin's Masada training camp, in May of 1988. In this register that totaled over ninety persons, the majority of traceable persons originated from Saudi Arabia also came from Yemen, Egypt, Malaysia, Uganda, Sudan, Jordan, Bahrain, and the U.K. Almost half of the persons in the register could not be traced.⁶

The four men who came from the U.S. to join Bin Ladin's camp in the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan were Jamal al-Fadl, Wadi el-Hage, Abed al-Muqadam Abdallah, and Issa Abd al-Rahman.⁷

Sudanese national, Jamal Ahmed Muhammad al-Fadl, was born in 1961 according to the register; he listed student and driver as his occupations. Before he came to Masada, he trained at the Khalid ibn al-Walid camp for one month. There, he was trained in light weapons, AK-47 Kalashnikov, the Grinov machine gun (7.62mm), the RPK machine gun (7.62mm), the RPG, and the DShK AAA gun. Al-Fadl mastered the Grinov. Other details include the fact that at the time, he was still a bachelor and he only participated in the jihad for forty days. Two

² Benjamin Weiser, Susan Sachs and David Kocieniewski, "U.S. sees Brooklyn link to World Terror Network," *New York Times*, October 22, 1998.

³ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower. Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York 2006) p. 179.

⁴ Alison Mitchell, "After blast, new interest in Holy-War recruits in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, April 11, 1993.

⁵ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower. Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York 2006) p. 191.

⁶ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988.

⁷ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988, 329, 338, 339 and 346.

attributes that made him suitable to join al-Qaida in the months to follow were his willingness to engage in Jihad ‘until victory or death’ and additionally, that he was willing to do everything the Emir asked of him. That said, other abilities that seem to have been touted were his cooking, driving, and construction skills.⁸

Wadih el-Hage, who used the alias Abd al-Subur, was 28 years old when he registered at Masada. He listed Tucson, Arizona as his address of record. By that time, he had already fought for five years at the fronts of Afghanistan. He was trained in the use of most types of weapons, mines, explosives, and booby traps. He was engaged in the Jihad for a total of three years and he was willing to fight three more weeks starting from the 15th day of the month of Ramadan. He spent two and a half months in Jaji and obeyed orders well.⁹

Abd al-Muqadam Abdullah, who used the alias Abu Yusuf, was 36 years old when he registered at the Masada camp. He provided a P.O. Box in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as his address. At that time, he sold electronic security devices and was married with has five children. Before he came to the Masada camp, he was trained in the Khalid ibn al-Walid camp for two weeks. He too trained there in light weapons, AK-47 Kalashnikov, the Grinov machine gun (7.62mm), the Degtyarev light machine gun, the RPG, and the DShK AAA gun. Abdullah wanted to participate in the Jihad for at least one month, and he referred to himself as a specialist in electronics and communication devices; he had knowledge and experience in military sciences.¹⁰

The last person who came from the U.S. to Bin Ladin’s camp was Issa Abd-al-Rahman, who used the alias Abu Issa Amriki. It is not known if he lived in the U.S. or if he had U.S. citizenship, but it can be assessed that he lived in the U.S. When he registered at Masada, he had no previous experience in fighting. He had not attended the Jaji camp and he did not participate in any operations. However, he must have received prior training as he had experience with the Kalashnikov, the Grinov, the RPG, the DShK, and explosives. Abd-al-Rahman was willing to participate in the Jihad between 40 days and four months.¹¹

So even before al-Qaida was officially formed, it is clear that at least six people coming directly from the U.S. were involved with Usama bin Ladin’s first camp, Masada, in Jaji, in the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. At that time, it was U.S. policy to support the Mujahidin in their fight against the Soviets, but it is interesting to note that FBI officials, after the first attempt to blow up the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, reacted with disbelief when they discovered

⁸ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988, 329.

⁹ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988, 338

¹⁰ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988, 339.

¹¹ Tareek al Musadat, 86, 87, 88; File 8; Register of fighters entering the Masada camp in Afghanistan in May 1988, 346.

that the number of people leaving from the U.S. to participate in the Jihad in Afghanistan was much larger than originally realized.¹²

According to an FBI assessment in the 1990s, between 1,000 and 2,000 Jihadis left the U.S. to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. Federal agents monitored some 40 to 50 jihadists leaving each year from just two New York mosques during the mid-'90s.¹³ In 1995, a terrorism expert for the NYPD described New York as a hotbed for terrorism. The District Attorney's office estimated that up to 125 potential Islamic terrorists were operating in the metropolitan area. They were organizing conferences and meetings around the U.S. and organized para-military training camps especially in Pennsylvania.¹⁴

Although it was not unusual for U.S. government agencies to support the recruitment of Muslim volunteers to aid in the fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets, there did not seem to be a robust picture of the on-going activities in the 33 recruitment centers in the 1990s. The fragmentation of information and the unwillingness within agencies to cooperate were in general at the root of why the U.S. government as a whole had a limited knowledge concerning the activities within the radical elements of the Muslim communities at that time.

A 2002 article in *US News & World Report* described the U.S. government approach towards the Islamic radicals in the U.S. as such: "*FBI and CIA officials say that fear of political spying charges has kept them from monitoring suspicious trips by U.S. citizens abroad. Nor does the State Department have files. 'Why would we keep records?' asks one official. 'These are people who are dropping out of U.S. society.' With few such records, government files on al Qaeda backers here were woefully incomplete.*"¹⁵

However, the intelligence picture was not entirely incomplete at the time. In 1995, Robert I. Friedman reported in *New York Magazine* that U.S. Army Special Forces Sergeant Ali A. Mohamed was giving lectures in the al-Farooq mosque in Brooklyn and that he was providing training for prospective recruits.¹⁶

Two of the four recruits mentioned in this report became important within the al-Qaida organization. Wadih el-Hage became Usama bin Ladin's secretary in Sudan in the mid 1990s; Jamal al-Fadl became important in the day-to-day operations in the organization and served as a deputy to Mustafa Abu Yazid, also known as Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, who was running al-Qaida's financial commission. Al-Fadl stole money from the organization and subsequently offered his services to the U.S. government, becoming an important witness in the court

¹² Robert I. Friedman, "The CIA's Jihad," *New York Magazine*, March 27, 1995, pp 36-47.

¹³ David E. Kaplan, "Made in the U.S.A. Hundreds of Americans have followed the path of Jihad. Here's how and why," *US News & World Report*, February 6, 2002.

¹⁴ Robert I. Friedman, "The CIA's Jihad," *New York Magazine*, March 27, 1995, pp 36-47

¹⁵ David E. Kaplan, "Made in the U.S.A. Hundreds of Americans have followed the path of Jihad. Here's how and why," *US News & World Report*, February 6, 2002.

¹⁶ Robert I. Friedman, "The CIA's Jihad," *New York Magazine*, March 27, 1995, pp 36-47.

case against the 1998 Africa Embassy bombers. In that case, al-Fadl testified against Wadih el-Hage, who was subsequently convicted and sentenced to life without parole in 2001.

Conclusion

American Jihadis have always played a role within the inner circle of Usama Bin Ladin. The fact that after 9/11, leading FBI officials identified 1000-2000 people who traveled to Jihad theaters in the 1990s was an indication that the leadership within the intelligence community did not perceive radical Muslims inside the U.S. as a real threat.

Radicalized individuals who participated in the Jihad were active in plots against the U.S., while some of them were born in the U.S., most of them were naturalized citizens. American Jihadis were involved in the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia in 1993 and in the Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

It is speculative to assess how many of these (former) Jihadis currently live in the U.S. and present a threat to society.

These days, a new generation of young Muslims, raised in the U.S., seem to be increasingly vulnerable for Jihad recruitment and increasingly, they are turning up in East Africa (Somalia) and South Asia (Afghanistan-Pakistan). Now is the time to ensure there is a more robust understanding of the complicated nuances of radicalization processes and that all available information is shared liberally between the law enforcement and intelligence communities so that a body of knowledge can be developed and better utilized to identify and stop radicals in time to divert future tragedies.