

# Street Literature on Usama Bin Laden

## A REVIEW OF CHEAPER ARABIC BIOGRAPHIES FOUND IN ARAB ALLEYWAYS

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER YOUSSEF ABOUL-ENEIN, USN

Books in much of the Arab world are considered a luxury. Although accessible to the public, libraries such as the great new library in Alexandria, Egypt, seem to be the purview of scholars. The vast majority of the Arab public is busy eking out a living and does not have the time and money to travel to the libraries usually located in centralized locations such as Cairo, Kuwait City, or Riyadh. This is the drawback of having one library in a major urban center and not having branches at the community level as you would find in the United States. In addition, young Arab students are not taught how to access the library and how to research and access books. Therefore, many pay attention to the small booklets that permeate corner mosques and markets. These books, which often range in price from 50 cents to \$2, offer those with the inclination to read books a chance to explore an issue beyond the satellite television that saturates the Middle East. These cheaper street books represent perhaps the main source of how the majority gain information beyond reading the newspaper. But what makes these small booklets worth looking at is that they represent the street perception of an issue, history, or biography. Although in Arabic, American policy makers and military planners should be aware of the existence of these booklets and make an effort to acquire them. It is the only way to stay inside the decision-making cycle of our adversaries.

This review essay will focus on Abdullah Khalifa's short biography on Usama Bin Laden, entitled, *Usama Bin Laden Bain Al-Jihad wal Irhaab* (Bin Laden between Jihad and Terrorism). The booklet was published in 2001 by Dar Al-

Ahdath for Journalism and Media Services in the Dasman district of Kuwait City. Unlike other cheap booklets acquired off the street which are typically printed in poor quality paper, sometimes rag paper, this booklet's pages are made of more durable, higher quality paper which is attainable in Kuwait and Arabian Gulf countries. The booklet has no price, no biography of the author, and no references, but was clearly written months after September 11, 2001, as a means of rationalizing Bin Laden's heinous actions and the troubled history Al-Qaeda has had with the United States. It is worth reading the wild conspiracy theories in this 113-page booklet not only for interesting biographical vignettes of Bin Laden, but to also understand what the United States is up against in countering these false perceptions through the use of public diplomacy. The very title of the book is suggestive of the unacceptable argument that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter; the dichotomy between what is moral jihad and terrorism? This subtitle is what attracts a person perusing the books and booklets in a stall or street vendor after Friday prayers.

The booklet's first mistake is the date in which Usama Bin Laden's father, Mohammed Bin Laden, died; the booklet says it was 1970. In reality, he had died in a helicopter crash in 1967 when Usama was 9 or 10 years old. Mistakes like these make street biographies an unreliable source; yet the cheap cost, portability, and number of available copies make these accounts an important part of the Bin Laden lore. The booklet takes readers to 1979 when Usama graduated from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah. There he came under the influence of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam,



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the Palestinian firebrand cleric who was teaching Islamic courses at the university. Khalifa's booklet is right on the mark as to the influence of Azzam on Usama Bin Laden. The Palestinian militant cleric established *Maktab Al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen* (Services Offices for [Arab] Jihadists) in Peshawar, Pakistan, that would funnel tens of thousands of Arab jihadist volunteers to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Pages discuss how from:

**1979 to 1982** — Usama supported Azzam's efforts by first developing a system of financing the anti-Soviet jihad through contributions from leading Saudi families, using his family name and connections. This was a time in which many Arab regimes, Egypt in particular, saw the utility of dumping their more troublesome and violent Islamist extremists in the Soviet-Afghan War in the hopes they would not return, but at the same time they would be fighting Soviet communism.

**1982** — Usama first enters Afghanistan to directly fight the Soviets. He also brings funds as well as construction assets and expertise to Azzam's group and other Afghan Mujahideen factions. This would include engineers from the Bin Laden Construction Group.

**1984** — Usama establishes his own Arab Afghan Organization *Bait Al-Ansar* (The House of the Helpers); *Ansar* is more than just "helpers," it refers to those who aided Prophet Muhammad in the early days of Islam. This organization complemented

Azzam's group, but suffered initially as Bin Laden did not have the experience of the older *Maktab Al-Khadamat* organization of Azzam. Therefore Bin Laden's organization focused on tactical training and the in-processing of Arabs wanting to fight the Soviets. *Maktab Al-Khadamat* focused on recruiting and collections. It is important to understand that when Azzam was killed, Bin Laden became head of both organizations, which became the central core of Al-Qaeda. *Bait Al-Ansar* perfected training techniques to acclimatize Arabs in fighting the Soviets and their Afghan allies unconventionally. Graduates took on a reputation of being zealous shock troops and the lion's share of these Arab volunteers went to Gulbuddin Hekmetyar and Abdul-Rasul Sayyaf.

**1986** — In this year, Bin Laden expanded his operation to include six military training camps that were mobile in order to escape Soviet military raids. During this period, a more formalized method of assigning Al-Qaeda talent was developed with the bulk of Arab fighters being high school and university students, but among them were physicians, engineers and retired Arab military personnel both officers and enlisted. Those with combat experience gained from serving in Arab armies would be used as trainers and field commanders. The former Al-Qaeda operations officer (third in command after Bin Laden and Zawahiri) until his death in 2001 was Mohammed Atef, a retired Egyptian police colonel. Another Al-Qaeda operative reputed to be in Iran and considered an operational planner is Saif Al-Adel, a former Egyptian military officer. Since Egypt instituted a mandatory draft for all males, it is safe to assume that Egyptian members of Al-Qaeda have at least three to four years of basic military training. The end of 1986 saw the Battle of Jaji in which Bin Laden and a contingent of Arabs trained in *Bait Al-Ansar* camps held off several assaults by Soviet *Spetsnaz* (Special Forces). The assault took several weeks, and the Arab jihadists held the mountain redoubts and used a network of tunnels and caves to

elude and surprise Soviet troops.

**1986-1989** — These years are considered the apex of the Arab jihadist movement in Afghanistan. The booklet discusses not only the Battle of Jaji, but also lists Arab jihadist contingents participating in five battles, dozens of skirmishes and hundreds of ambushes. These 36 months would have been the easiest time to funnel recruits, weapons, and funds from the Middle East to Afghanistan.

### The Origin of the Name Al-Qaeda

In 1988, Bin Laden began getting inquiries on the status and whereabouts of hundreds of Arab youths from parents wanting to know if they were killed, captured, or missing. He began instituting a bureaucratic system to address these inquiries, and this evolved into an elaborate tracking system on each recruit from training to assignment and finally martyrdom. In *Bait Al-Ansar*, Arab recruits would be received at the airport and then processed and evaluated for skills they can bring to bear in the jihad. From there, they were taken to one of six camps for military training and close order combat tactics. After completing their training, they would be sent to frontline mujahideen units. The booklet claims Al-Qaeda stands for the database. Others think it originated as a nickname for the combined Azzam-Bin Laden organizations from reception to training to martyrdom, which was called *Al-Qaeda Al-Sulba* (The Firm Base).



Department of Defense photo

*A frame from a December 2001 videotape released by the Department of Defense shows Usama bin Laden and an associate.*

### The True Genius of Abdullah Azzam and a Legacy to Bin Laden

Sheikh Abdullah Azzam was born in 1935 in Jenin. He left Palestine after the 1967 Six-Day War and believed the only way to regain Palestine was through violent jihad. The 1967 Six-Day War would discredit Pan-Arabism, and from the ashes of humiliated Arab nations emerged a kind of Islamist counterculture movement known as the *Sahwa* (Islamist reawakening). Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and Azzam would be swept up in this movement which attempted to rationalize Arab defeat by reinterpreting past Islamic grandeur from a purely militaristic vein. The ultimate heyday of the *Sahwa* movement would occur during the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the Shah in Iran. Azzam's genius was to harvest this anger and organize it into groups that would aid the Afghan cause against the Soviets. His model of harvesting young radical Islamists' discontent and channeling it towards challenging regimes would haunt the world beyond his assassination in 1989 and was later replicated by Bin Laden in Somalia (1993), Yemen (1994), Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.

In the booklet, there is no discussion of Bin Laden's strategic disagreements with Azzam as the Soviet presence was coming to an end. Azzam wanted to perfect the Islamic Amirate in Afghanistan and Bin Laden wanted to return battle-hardened Arab veterans to their respective countries to foment an Islamist Radical revolution. Azzam's assassination in 1989 decided the argument.

### The Strategic Bin Laden

Usama's strategic thinking also changed with the times; his hatred towards the United States was renewed by his perceived view that the Saudi royal family was dependent on America for its security against Saddam Hussein. Bin Laden had no overall strategic appreciation for the enemy the Saudis were facing in Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard divisions. Inviting his Arab mujahideen to take an irregular war into Iraq would bring a

whirlwind that Arab governments, primarily the Al-Sauds, knew they could not control. In 1996, Bin Laden's declaration and new movement was *Al-Jihad Lee Ikhrāj Al-Kufar min Jazeerah Al-Arab* (The Jihad to Expel the Infidels from the Arabian Peninsula). From 1996 to 1998, the booklet discusses how Bin Laden, the Taliban, and Egyptian Islamic Jihad debated the initial declaration of 1996, adding that it did not have the force of a clerical writ (*fatwa*). As this debate was ongoing, Bin Laden made several strategic decisions as Al-Qaeda leader:

- His alliance with the Taliban became so strong that he broke his agreement to stay neutral among the different Afghan warlords. This was driven by frustration over efforts to peacefully unify the Afghan tribes. Bin Laden provided Arab suicidal shock troops to factions supportive of the Taliban.

- He engineered a fatwa sanctioning the killing of Taliban foe Ahmed Shah Masood.

As the Taliban evolved as the dominant force in Afghanistan in 1998, Bin Laden elicited the support of 40 Pakistani and Afghan clerics to endorse his 1996 declaration to remove the infidel (Americans) from the Arabian Peninsula. Egyptian Islamic Jihad members that composed the strategic leadership of Al-Qaeda, and represented by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, along with jihadist factions in Kashmir urged Bin Laden to expand the fatwa to include killing Americans of fighting age anywhere and anytime along with Jews. These debates led to Bin Laden's 1996 declaration becoming his infamous February 1998 Declaration of the World Islamic Front for the Killing of Crusaders and Jews. It is important to realize that Taliban leader Mullah Omar was unhappy with this publicity and even more angered by the bombing of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. But Mullah Omar had to balance this with Bin Laden's utility to the Taliban cause. During this time the booklet discusses how 50 fanatical Arab jihadists held off a lightly defended section of Kabul from Ahmed Shah Masood. The Taliban were overstretched and engaged in fighting Shiites and Uzbeks in and around Bamiyan. North of Kabul became an opportunity for Ahmed Shah Masood's forces to exploit and he would have taken the capital had Bin Laden's Arab jihadists not reinforced that approach in 1998. This along with funding, and intermarriage made Bin Laden an inextricable host in the symbiotic relationship with Mullah Omar. It is after the battle for Kabul in 1998 between Bin Laden's Arab contingent and Ahmed Shah Masood, that the two became implacable enemies. Two days before September 11, 2001, Bin Laden operatives posing as journalists with a camera crew detonated a bomb assassinating Ahmed Shah Masood. It is unclear how many times Bin Laden attempted to assassinate the "Lion of Panshir" (a name Masood earned for his tactical prowess against the Soviets) and vice versa.

### The Personal Bin Laden

Usama Bin Laden, the booklet recounts, is a pious and practicing Muslim. He shares the hardships of his men (food, clothing, and housing). Usama spends more time with his men than with his own family. Despite the flattering picture, the booklet indicates that Bin Laden is not decisive and prefers to make major decisions with clerics and other allies. This portrayal is debatable since such strategic decisions as 9-11 and declaring war from

Afghanistan were all taken by Bin Laden with little discussion or debate, much less consensus. While living in Saudi Arabia, he would spend one day a week with his family and extended relatives usually outside Jeddah in a farm he owned. The booklet also notes that three of Bin Laden's wives have advanced degrees, one a doctorate degree. Finally, the booklet discusses Bin Laden's health, which it claims is excellent and his affinity for honey to cure ailments. On a financial level, the booklet cites two major financial blows to Bin Laden's net worth. The first was the freezing of his Saudi assets after his citizenship was revoked in 1991, and the second was the Sudanese government renegeing on projects such as the *Tahedi* Road he built that links Khartoum to Port Sudan. The booklet claims that Bin Laden relies more and more on contributions to sustain him and his cause and less on his personal wealth.

### Conclusion

Why note these street biographies and cheaper booklets? For one, it represents the street lore of Bin Laden, a perception of maintaining his image as a Robin Hood-like figure defending the rights of the downtrodden. Although an idealistic portrayal, there are aspects of the booklet to note, which can be of use to military planners fighting this adversary. It highlights Bin Laden's strategic mind; this booklet shows that Bin Laden adjusts his strategy based on external influences (Egyptians, Kashmiri fighters and the global media). The booklet also highlights his uniqueness in the jihadist movement. Despite those who claim that thousands of Bin Laden's can be replicated, the reality is only few persons have his access to funds, connections to contributors built over decades, connections to radical clerics that can deliver *fatwas*, combat experience with the Soviets and then the ensuing Afghan Civil War, as well as his organizational skills. If Bin Laden is captured or killed, it would be a serious tactical degradation of Al-Qaeda, for he brings a lot of strength to the organization. Zawahiri (Bin Laden's deputy) also brings strengths to the organization in the form of long-range strategic planning. Bottom line: this material aids American military leaders in understanding the enemy, and reminds us not to underestimate Bin Laden. This booklet, although slightly flattering of Bin Laden, represents a more restrained biography; there are other booklets that portray a more mythical and outrageous figure. When reading these booklets, it is important to compare them to scholarly work such as Peter Bergin's *The Osama Bin Laden I Know* (Published in 2006 by Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster) or *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam & the Future of America* (Edited by Michael Scheurer and published in 2003 by Potomac Books).

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Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein is a Navy Medical Service Corps officer specially assigned as Middle East Policy Advisor at the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He has highlighted many Arabic books of military interest in the pages of U.S. Army professional journals. Aboul-Enein is co-author of the Army War College monograph *Islamic Rulings on Warfare*, published in 2004. He wishes to thank the Pentagon and Georgetown University librarians for making this booklet available and PS1 (SW/AW) David Tranberg, USN, an undergraduate at the University of Maryland University College, for editing and discussing this work.

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