

STREET LITERATURE ON USAMA BIN LADEN PART II: The Soviet-Afghan Years

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Usama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda movement represent major challenges to American military planners, and as such, any material written about him and his organization should be analyzed and studied with great care. The May-June 2006 edition of *Infantry* featured an analysis of street literature highlighting the strategic evolution of Bin Laden and his organization (See “Street Literature on Usama Bin Laden: A Review of Cheaper Arab Biographies found in Arab Alleyways,” pages 22-24). The response from readers desiring more analysis of pro-Bin Laden street literature has been overwhelming. Requests have come in from the Pentagon to war colleges and even colleagues from Naval Station Rota in Spain. As a result, part two will focus on a 1991 booklet that mythologizes his Soviet-Afghan war years (1980-1989).

In major Middle East capital cities, one can find a host of street literature about Bin Laden, but between the wild claims of his abilities to fight Soviet forces and other Afghan jihadist groups are kernels of knowledge that offer a realistic assessment of the Al-Qaeda leader, his health, his psychology, his world view, and the evolution of his military tactical prowess. Such street literature is one of the least known means by which Islamist militants influence public opinion, by offering those wanting to go beyond satellite television a means of reading in detail the mythology, the manipulation of Islamic history and texts as well as what a young impoverished man on the street can do to join the jihadist cause. U.S. war colleges should assign translated excerpts of these street biographies of Bin Laden. These books can range from less than 100 pages to more than 400 pages and have permeated Arab streets since the early '90s; war colleges and Special Forces schools can extract excerpts of this material as a basis for a robust discussion and assessment of one of America's major adversaries.

These books can be obtained from street vendors in prices ranging from 50 cents to \$3. This review will look at an earlier piece of Bin Laden street literature that details his Soviet-Afghan War years. *Usama Bin Laden Yarwi Maarek Massadah Al-Ansar Al-Arab bee Afghanistan (Usama Bin Laden Narrates the Battles of the Arabs of Massadah Al-Ansar in Afghanistan)* was published in 1991, by Manar Al-Jadid Press in Cairo. The author, Essam



Daraaz, was among those Arab jihadists who left Egypt to report on Usama Bin Laden's jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. His talent lay not in combat but in propaganda, journalism, and chronicling the Arab-Afghan movement in Afghanistan. He is perhaps one of the earliest individuals to convince Usama Bin Laden of the need to publicize his movement to globalize his network and reach among the Arab street. The 93-pages detail the early phases of Usama Bin Laden's vision to bring Arabs to the fight against the Soviets, and the network he developed that would evolve into Al-Qaeda today. This was a time when it was acceptable for Arab jihadists to be associated with Bin Laden and when Arab regimes all too gladly got rid of violent radicals by exporting them to the Soviet-Afghan war. It

was hoped they would never come back alive. Like many street publications, the dates are unclear and the tactics discussed are not crisp; there are also no maps that would aid the reader in following the engagements of Bin Laden's group. The dates covered are Bin Laden's phase where he jetted between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan from 1980 to 1984, and the years he settled in Afghanistan more permanently during the Soviet-Afghan War from 1985 to 1989.

Bin Laden's Gradual Involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War

According to the book, Bin Laden arrived in the region 17 days (January 1980) into the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan but never made it to Afghanistan. His first foray into the jihadist movement was to arrive in Lahore, Pakistan, connect with Jamiat Al-Islamiyah and through them provide money to the most radical of the Mujahideen factions led by Gulbudin Hekmetyar and Burhannudin Rabbani. Between 1980 and 1984, he returned to Pakistan from Saudi Arabia numerous times and solicited information on whereabouts of Afghan Mujahideen factions to contribute directly to them. He also formulated his vision between 1980 and 1984 of creating his own Arab organization that would enable Arabs to directly contribute their services, funds, and themselves to the Afghan cause. Usama Bin Laden would latch onto a mentor and professor from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, who had established the beginnings of an organization that greeted Arabs arriving in Pakistan and enabled them to

experience the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets. It would offer a counter-culture experience for those Arabs wanting to participate full-time or part-time in the jihad against the Soviets. Azzam's guesthouse was also an effective fundraising tool as it enabled donors to spend vacations at the front. The cleric and professor was the Palestinian Abdullah Azzam, who first saw a need to organize Arabs arriving in Pakistan and began by establishing guesthouses for them in Peshawar that would be called the *Maktab Al-Khidmat lil Mujahiddeen* (The Services Office for Arab Jihadists). This is the precursor to Al-Qaeda, the core organization from which Bin Laden would improve upon and globalize. Bin Laden was brought into this organization by his professor, and his skills proved invaluable in financing and organizing the group.

Bin Laden Reorganizes Azzam's Organization

Bin Laden heard many complaints of inefficiency in Azzam's organization, and he began to organize what was essentially Azzam's guesthouse into a structured organization, which included a:

- military committee;
- administrative committee;
- travel committee; and
- training committee.

The travel committee specialized in cross-border infiltration of Arab jihadists through the Pakistan-Afghan border. The book highlights how Bin Laden spent \$25,000 alone on jihadist literature, propaganda, books, and papers. Why the book highlights only this particular expense is unclear, but it demonstrates the importance the organization places on propaganda. By 1985, Usama Bin Laden had become a permanent resident of Maktab Al-Khidmat in Peshawar, and from 1985 to 1986 he began importing earthmoving equipment and engineers from the family construction firm into Afghanistan. He selected the mountain stronghold of Jaji to be an area from where he would lead Arabs in a separate brigade to attack the Soviets and Afghan communist forces or to supplement the two of the Mujahideen factions under Rabbani or Hekmetyar. The book discusses that Bin

Laden not only constructed trenches, tunnels and defensive fortifications, but more importantly he taught his followers how to operate and construct these fortifications.

Interview Between the Author and Bin Laden on Forming Massadah Al-Ansar

The author interviewed Bin Laden in Jeddah, and he articulates how when he was in his final years of studies he felt remiss as an Arab and Muslim about his duty towards the Afghans, noting how the Russians helped the Afghan communists and Muslims around the world were doing nothing. He tells the author that when he visited Afghanistan, he noted that the Mujahideen felt bolstered and empowered by the presence of Arabs in their midst. In the early months of the Soviet invasion, they treated Arabs as guests and prevented Arabs from fighting alongside them. In 1984, he asked permission from *Ittihad Islami Mujahideen* to bring more Arabs into Afghanistan and create additional safe houses for them, as well as training camps.

According to the book, the formation of Bin Laden's *Massadah Al-Ansar* (The Lion Den of the Companions) was a gradual process and represents a historic moment in the Arab jihadist movement. It unified a global network of like-minded violent Islamist radicals who shared the same world views; these views included that Arab regimes:

- Were to be violently opposed;
- Oppressed their people;
- Wrecked and stifled Islamic scholarship; and
- Imported alien ideologies.

The arrival of Arab jihadists in Afghanistan was the first step and migration from these Arab nations who rode the wave of Marxism, Baathism, Arab Nationalism and capitalism and have failed. It would be a physical declaration of independence, and the majority of *Massadah Al-Ansar* members were initially Saudia, according to the book and the author who interviewed Bin Laden.

One hundred Arab jihadists joined in the summer of 1984, but by the winter the number dropped to a dozen. Bin Laden tells the author that these young Arabs did

not appreciate the importance of this front and the necessity of killing infidels so that God's word reigned supreme. The dozen who remained were mostly from the Saudi city of Medina. Bin Laden seeks legitimacy through symbols and Medina is the city where the Prophet Muhammad is buried and home to the first Islamic society established in the early seventh century AD. According to the book, Bin Laden spent 1985 to 1987 tunneling, building, training and recruiting those committed to fighting the Soviets. He built *Massadah Al-Ansar* in the mountains of Jaji and acquired the name from a poem written by Prophet Muhammad's companion. An interesting tactical note is that an Afghan commander (named Abdul-Sameeah) ignored Bin Laden's advice to winter over at Jaji, considering it folly and a waste of manpower. The Afghan tribes would typically winter over in villages and not in the mountains. It seems Bin Laden and his dozen insisted they winter over in Jaji, and this may explain why only a dozen Arabs remained with him at that location.

Tactical Trial and Error, According to Bin Laden and His Associates

Abdul-Rassul Sayyaf ordered a first trial of the *Massadah Al-Ansar*-trained Arab unit in Ramadan 1986, granting the unit permission to fight in the Battle of Khost. It is important to pause and understand that Khost, which is located on the Afghan-Pakistan border in Afghanistan's southeastern end, would be assaulted by Mujahideen forces numerous times. It was an easy target as supply lines from Pakistan were virtually guaranteed. The book discusses an assault conducted in 1986 when the Arabs probed around a static communist troop defense. One hundred and twenty Arab fighters were divided into two groups:

- (1) Advanced fighters and
- (2) Support or reserve forces.

At 1800 the Arabs assaulted objective *Umm Khanadaq* (mother of ditches); 40 meters from entrenched communist defenses around the city of Khost. Their assault would be a complete failure according to the book, as the Arabs began with an ineffective mortar and artillery barrage that only heightened Soviet military awareness. Then the barrage ceased and the

Arabs assaulted, providing a pre-warning of when and from which direction the attack would come. The Afghan communist forces on watch let loose with the World War II *Goryunov* 7.62mm machine guns and suppressed the Arab assault. Bin Laden ordered withdrawal, and Afghan commanders felt their performance only reaffirmed their belief that Arabs could not fight. From the Battle of Khost, Bin Laden learned many lessons on training and preparation, exploitation of artillery by assault forces, reconnaissance, that assaulting a larger force directly was folly, and the value of larger firepower to suppress an assault.

One year after the Battle of Khost, a system was set up where young Arab volunteers would arrive in Peshawar and be taken to Jalalabad for two months training. Bin Laden hoped his *Massadah Al-Ansar* would offer additional training opportunities, but he had no experience in setting up training schedules. Coupled with the pressure of young Arabs wanting to immediately face Soviet forces, Bin Laden stressed that training and patience to maximize damage to the adversary was what they most needed. The book talks about the difficulty in reigning in young, inexperienced Arabs who wanted their first taste of battle. Seven months in 1987 were spent fortifying Jaji. Shelters were constructed, tunneling occurred, and to appease the eager young Arabs, he authorized small raiding operations that only garnered the attention of the Soviets. By then, *Massadah Al-Ansar* has been composed of a command and control room they called the *Badr* Center (after Islam's first Battle in the plains of Badr), a room for anti-air weapons was constructed, storage room for food, an armory, a guestroom and a kitchen. Bin Laden made another tactical blunder by ordering an assault on Soviet forces operating in Jaji without completing the tunnels and defenses at Massadah. Aside from incomplete construction, he also did not have enough weapons and ammunition for every Arab fighter in Jaji, as everything had to be brought up the mountain by pack mule.

The first real trial occurred during Ramadan 1987, when the Soviets and Arab jihadists in Jaji each planned different campaigns on one another. The Soviets and Afghan government forces planned a three-week campaign to annihilate the Jaji camp with a scorched earth policy of villages surrounding the camp and closure of the Jaji passes to Mujahideen forces. Ten thousand Soviet and Afghan communist troops were amassed with three Soviet brigades and one Soviet *Spetnaz* (Special Forces) brigade. The Soviets struck first with aerial bombardments of *Massadah Al-Ansar* lasting nine days. Like during the Battle of Khost, Bin Laden's leaders divided his force into advanced fighters and support forces. The advanced fighters were then divided into two groups: one protected *Massadah Al-Ansar* and fired surface-to-surface missiles, and the second was an assault force under the command of Abu Khalid Al-Masri. Bin Laden ordered the support force (those with the least training) to guard the rear of the tunnels, and he sent an experienced jihadist fighter with them.

After the Soviet aerial bombardment,

the Soviet offensive began with communist tanks on the lower side of the mountain approaching on an incline. Bin Laden and the jihadists used communications to concentrate fire on individual tanks, the signal of three bursts of fire (from which weapon is unclear) meant the Arab unit was surrounded and needed aid. The book highlights Arab jihadist and Mujahideen use of wireless phones to let Bin Laden's group know of the approach of *Spetnaz* forces. According to the book, Bin Laden used a concentrated fire of 35 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to repel the Soviet special forces assault.

The Arab jihadists, who now numbered under 100, began acquiring real tactical field experience such as distinguishing between the Kalakov assault rifles carried by Soviet special forces and the Kalashnikovs given to Afghan communist regulars. The Battle of Jaji also provided a lesson in Soviet field tactics; they did not advance while calling in artillery on Arab positions and were typically no more than 200 meters entrenched from where the artillery landed. Once the Soviet artillery stopped, they would then advance. Bin Laden also noted that transmitting a *Spetnaz* body count seemed to stiffen Arab resistance and boost morale. The book criticizes Soviet tactical performance saying they:

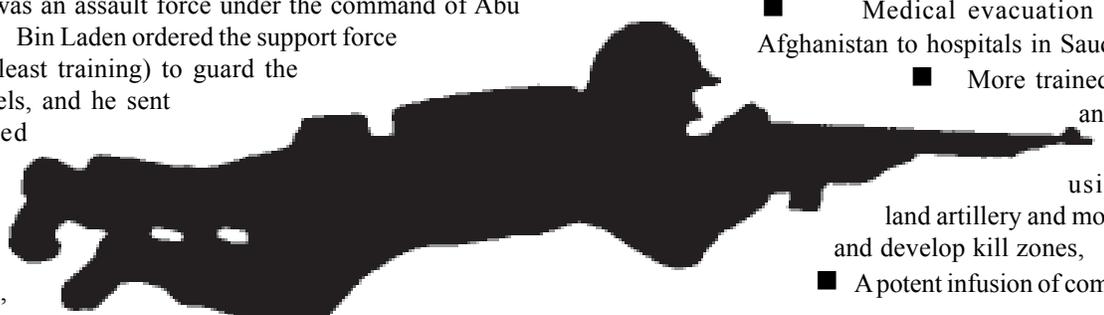
- Did not practice good field discipline and stealth maneuver;
- Constantly broke radio silence; and
- Rustled through scrub and brush giving away their positions and allowing Arabs to regroup for an ambush.

The Arabs who trained at Massadah noted that in a defensive war the Soviets were at a severe disadvantage because their ground forces were not as aware of the contours of the terrain. This was an era before extensive use of GPS mapping, and it seems the Soviets did not conduct much aerial reconnaissance before a major assault. One thing is clear about the Battle of Jaji (which was also called the Battle for *Massadah Al-Ansar* by the jihadists) is that the Arabs began taking note of the tactical capabilities of their adversary.

The Battle for Jalalabad

In many ways this battle would be prophetic in the way 21st century conflicts would evolve. This was the first urban war involving the Arab-Afghans. By then the book boasts that Bin Laden has established 18 *Massadah Al-Ansar* training centers. (This could be an exaggeration, as pre-9/11 showed no more than five training camps.) What is clear is that Bin Laden's group developed and acquired:

- Increased training centers,
- More rifles, rockets and RPGs,
- Medical evacuation system from Afghanistan to hospitals in Saudi Arabia,
- More trained artillerymen and mortarmen,
- Skill in using maps to land artillery and mortars on target and develop kill zones,
- A potent infusion of comms and trucks



to maneuver irregular troops around the battle zone, and

■ Captured weapons up to tanks were used to train jihadists on new systems.

The Soviets conducted a July 1987 assault on Jalalabad focusing on the neutralization of not only a Mujahideen stronghold, but a home for Arab jihadists like Bin Laden. Weapons caches peppered the city itself and outlying villages, and the Soviets encountered stiff resistance. The first indication of trouble for the Soviets was that the Arab and Afghan Mujahideen forces maintained a 72-hour constant barrage of mortar and artillery exchanges. Soviet tactical aircraft encountered anti-air guns and there was a saturation of rockets from multiple rocket launchers. The only tank under Arab control was a single T-62 tank used to guard one of the main roads to Jalalabad leading to the airport. By the admission of this mythologized version of Bin Laden's battles in Afghanistan, the tank deployment was useless in stemming the approach of the Soviets and Afghan communist regulars. Bin Laden and his forces withdrew into structures and ambushed Soviet armor with 75mm and 82mm anti-tank guns, RPGs at a range of 300 meters, and Milan anti-tank missiles. They destroyed two communist tanks, and 42 tanks were captured. The Arabs were provided six of those tanks, and former Egyptian army soldiers (Egypt has a mandatory draft of all male citizens) who had trained in armor were able to operate and then train others in the operation and repair of the T-62 tank. In the end, the Mujahideen forces were pushed out of the center of Jalalabad but at a tremendous cost. Yet in Al-Qaeda lore, this is a major psychological victory.

What Bin Laden Considers Lessons of the Massadah Al-Ansar Campaigns?

(I) The concept of Arab fighters in Afghanistan evolved from guesthouses to military training camps to military formations. One can expect this to be the model of how Islamist militant groups who take control of a neighborhood or state operate. Convert military training camps into military formations to exert dominance over society and bring a constant state of conflict with adversaries.

Studying this street biography and others of Bin Laden's early days in the Soviet-Afghan War provide a baseline by which one can begin to detect advances in strategy, tactics, and war fighting techniques of the Arab-Afghan movement.

(II) Arab jihadist youths must be spiritually, mentally, and physically trained and oriented for jihadist operations. This clearly indicates Bin Laden as a patient and calculating tactician, who believes in acquiring a qualitative edge in operatives and fighters to achieve his objectives.

(III) Training and lessons learned should be derived from each contact with the enemy. From the Soviet-Afghan War, Al-Qaeda learned lessons on ever-changing tactics and the need to learn from failed operations. U.S. forces and law enforcement must remain vigilant for new techniques and attempts to improve upon failed operations.

(IV) There should be adequate time allocated for a qualitative training program. Keeping Bin Laden from establishing a base of control as well as Al-Qaeda-like organizations from establishing a geographical permanence means a drop in the quality of fighters and suicide operatives. An objective for the United States is to deprive these Islamist militant organizations any opportunity to establish a presence from where to develop quality training regimens.

(V) Soviet airborne and special forces must be dealt with using the tactic of harassment, withdrawal, and ambush.

(VI) The Battle of Jalalabad (urban defensive battle) taught the need for active reconnaissance of approaching Soviet forces, marking known resupply and escape routes in and out of the city, and to utilize the fluid and flexible tactics learned in mountain fighting in the urban setting.

(VII) The profile of the jihadist Ali Al-Hazlan shows a Saudi who went from

discos and the luxuries of the Persian Gulf lifestyle to guilt over sin and then to jihad to expunge those sins. Operatives can go from discos to jihad and back again if tactically necessary.

Conclusion

There is much mythology surrounding Bin Laden both in Arabic and English. This adversary and the legacy he leaves behind once he is neutralized are much too important to ignore. While preparing this review essay, questions surrounding Bin Laden's death or illness once again permeated the national media. The booklet contained a collection of photos, one of which shows Bin Laden receiving what the book calls glucose treatments. The book goes on to describe only two physical ailments he suffers from: one is low blood pressure, and the second is severe lower back pain that necessitates that he lie down for extended periods to relieve back pressure. There is no indication of any other physical ailments.

Studying this street biography and others of Bin Laden's early days in the Soviet-Afghan War provide a baseline by which one can begin to detect advances in strategy, tactics, and war fighting techniques of the Arab-Afghan movement. It is vital that such Arabic works written by Bin Laden sympathizers be translated, analyzed, and rationalized for future American military leaders who will be combating the Al-Qaeda movement for decades to come.

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