

The Wall Street Journal Europe, November 01, 2001

Al Qaeda's Balkan Links

November 1, 2001

by Marcia Christoff Kurop

The Balkans' uncharacteristically silent exit from the world stage as the most prominent international hot spot of the last decade belies its status as a major recruiting and training center of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. By feeding off the region's impoverished republics and taking root in the unsettled diplomatic aftermath of the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts, al Qaeda, along with Iranian Revolutionary Guard-sponsored terrorists, have burrowed their way into Europe's backyard.

For the past 10 years, the most senior leaders of al Qaeda have visited the Balkans, including bin Laden himself on three occasions between 1994 and 1996. The Egyptian surgeon turned terrorist leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri has operated terrorist training camps, weapons of mass destruction factories and money-laundering and drug-trading networks throughout Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Turkey and Bosnia. This has gone on for a decade. Many recruits to the Balkan wars came originally from Chechnya, a jihad in which Al Qaeda has also played a part.

These activities have been exhaustively researched by Yossef Bodansky, the former director of the U.S. House of Representatives' Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare. The February testimony of an Islamist ringleader associated with the East Africa bombings have also helped throw light on these actions.

They have however been disguised under the cover of dozens of "humanitarian" agencies spread throughout Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. Funding has come from now-defunct banks such as the Albanian-Arab Islamic Bank and from bin Laden's so-called Advisory and Reformation Committee. One of his largest Islamist front agencies, it was established in London in 1994.

Narco-Jihad Culture

The overnight rise of heroin trafficking through Kosovo -- now the most important Balkan route between Southeast Asia and Europe after Turkey -- helped also to fund terrorist activity directly associated with al Qaeda and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Opium poppies, which barely existed in the Balkans before 1995, have become the No. 1 drug cultivated in the Balkans after marijuana. Operatives of two al Qaeda-sponsored Islamist cells who were arrested in Bosnia on Oct. 23 were linked to the heroin trade, underscoring the narco-jihad culture of today's post-war Balkans.

These drug rings in turn form part of an estimated \$8 billion a year Taliban annual income from global drug trafficking, predominantly in heroin. According to Mr. Bodansky, the terrorism expert, bin Laden administers much of that trade through Russian mafia groups for a commission of 10% to 15% -- or around \$1 billion annually.

The settling of Afghan-trained mujahideen in the Balkans began around 1992, when recruits were brought into Bosnia by the ruling Islamic party of Bosnia, the Party of Democratic Action, from Chechnya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, as well as Italy, Germany and Turkey. They were all given journalists' credentials to avoid explicit detection by the West. Others were married immediately to Bosnian Muslim women and incorporated into regular army ranks.

Intelligence services of the Nordic-Polish SFOR (previously IFOR) sector alerted the U.S. of their presence in 1992 while the number of mujahideen operating in Bosnia alone continued to grow from a few hundred to around 6,000 in 1995. Though the Clinton administration had been briefed extensively by the State Department in 1993 on the growing Islamist threat in former Yugoslavia, little was done to follow through.

The Bosnian Embassy in Vienna issued a passport to bin Laden in 1993, according to various reports in the Yugoslav press at the time. The reports add that bin Laden then visited a terrorist camp in Zenica, Bosnia in 1994. The Bosnian government denies all of this, but admits that some passport records have been lost. Around that time, bin Laden directed al Qaeda "senior commanders" to incorporate the Balkans into an complete southeastern approach to Europe, an area stretching from the Caucasus to Italy. Al Zawahiri, the Egyptian surgeon reputed to be the second in command of the entire al Qaeda network, headed up this southeastern frontline.

By 1994, major Balkan terrorist training camps included Zenica, and Malisevo and Mitrovica in Kosovo. Elaborate command-and-control centers were further established in Croatia, and Tetovo, Macedonia as well as around Sofia, Bulgaria, according to the U.S. Congress's task force on terrorism. In Albania, the main training camp included even the property of former Albanian premier Sali Berisha in Tropje, Albania, who was then very close to the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Not even stalwart NATO ally Turkey escaped the network. Areas beyond government control were also visited by bin Laden in 1996 according to London-based Jane's Intelligence Review. The government has been battling two terrorist groups: Jund al Islam, whose assassinated Syrian leader was one of bin Laden's closets confidantes, and the Kurdish PKK, whose leader, Abdullah Ocalan, merged his group's activities with those of Iran's Hezbollah in 1998.

Furthermore, as revealed in the February 2001 East Africa bombing trial testimony of Jamal al Fadl -- an al Qaeda operative in charge of weapons development in Sudan -- uranium used in "dirty bombs" that release lethal radioactive material, had been tested in 1994 by members of the Sudan-based Islamic National Front in the town of Hilat Koko, in Turkish-held northern Cyprus. Cyprus, both its north and southern sides, has also become a center for offshore money laundering by Arab banks fronting al Qaeda funds into the Balkans. The CIA puts al Qaeda's specific Balkan-directed funds -- those tied to the "humanitarian" agencies and local banks and not explicitly counting the significant drug profits added to that -- at around \$500 million to \$700 million between 1992 and 1998.

So where was the U.S. in all this? It was not until 1995 that the

Clinton administration was forced to start pursuing the Islamist network in the Balkans. Not quite a month after the Dayton accords had been signed in November 1995, an influx of Iranian arms came into Bosnia with the apparent tacit approval of the administration, in violation of U.N. sanctions. While publicly pressing Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic to purge remaining Islamist elements, the administration was loath to confront Sarajevo and Tehran over their presence.

Instead, Islamist groups went quietly underground as the windfall of weapons landed in their hands. They later joined up with a new Islamist center in Sofia established as a kind of rear guard by the al Zawahiri. Following the Zagreb arrest and extradition of renowned Egyptian militant Faud Qassim, an al Zawahiri favorite, the Sofia-based militants planned the deployment in Bosnia of terrorists capable of planning and leading possible major terrorist strikes against U.S. and SFOR facilities, according to al Fadl's testimony to the House Task Force on Terrorism.

Islamist infiltration of the Kosovo Liberation Army advanced, meanwhile. Bin Laden is said to have visited Albania in 1996 and 1997, according to the murder-trial testimony of an Algerian-born French national, Claude Kader, himself an Afghanistan-trained mujahideen fronting at the Albanian-Arab Islamic Bank. He recruited some Albanians to fight with the KLA in Kosovo, according to the Paris-based Observatoire Geopolitique des Drogues.

Controversial Relationship

By early 1998 the U.S. had already entered into its controversial relationship with the KLA to help fight off Serbian oppression of that province. While in February the U.S. gave into KLA demands to remove it from the State Department's terrorism list, the gesture amounted to little. That summer the CIA and CIA-modernized Albanian intelligence (SHIK) were engaged in one of the largest seizures of Islamic Jihad cells operating in Kosovo.

Fearing terrorist reprisal from al Qaeda, the U.S. temporarily closed its embassy in Tirana and a trip to Albania by then Defense Secretary William Cohen was canceled out of fear of an assassination attempt. Meanwhile, Albanian separatism in Kosovo and Metohija was formally characterized as a "jihad" in October 1998 at an annual international Islamic conference in Pakistan.

Nonetheless, the 25,000 strong KLA continued to receive official NATO/U.S. arms and training support and, at the talks in Rambouillet, France, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright shook hands with "freedom fighter" Hashim Thaci, a KLA leader. As this was taking place, Europol (the European Police Organization based in The Hague) was preparing a scathing report on the connection between the KLA and international drug gangs. Even Robert Gelbard, America's special envoy to Bosnia, officially described the KLA as Islamic terrorists.

With the future status of Kosovo still in question, the only real development that may be said to be taking place there is the rise of Wahhabi Islam -- the puritanical Saudi variety favored by bin Laden -- and the fastest growing variety of Islam in the Balkans. Today, in general, the Balkans are left without the money, political resources,

or institutional strength to fight a war on terrorism. And that, for the Balkan Islamists, is a Godsend.

Links

Bin Laden's Balkan Connections

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/our/our09.shtml>

Balkan wars and terrorist ties

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/our/our02.shtml>

Director of the U.S. Congress' Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional warfare: "Some Call It Peace"

http://members.tripod.com/Balkania/resources/geostrategy/bodansky_peace/bp_part1.html

NATO Probes Claims that Bin Laden is in Kosovo

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/april00/hed80.shtml>

Persecution Watch : Kosovo

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/may00/hed127.shtml>

Defang the KLA

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/library/picture/hackworth.html>

Destabilizing the Balkans: US & Albanian Defense Cooperation in the 1990s

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/rs/archive/mar01/rs126.shtml>

Bin Laden in Kosovo

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/april00/hed76.shtml>

Bosnia Arrests Three Suspected Bin Laden's Associates

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/july01/hed3790.shtml>

A Bosnian Village's Terrorist Ties; Links to U.S. Bomb Plot Arouse Concern About Enclave of Islamic Guerrillas

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/wtb/wtb12.shtml>

Bin Laden opens European terror base in Albania

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/wtb/wtb08.html>

US tackles Islamic militancy in Kosovo

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/wtb/wtb06.html>

US alarmed as Mujahidin join Kosovo rebels

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/wtb/wtb05.html>