

SHEIKH Omar Abdul Rahman, who faces the death penalty after having been convicted of planning the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, leaves many heirs willing to continue his campaign against the West — thanks to the US and Saudi Arabia.

Current and former officials now acknowledge that the US — which has increased security at airports and other sensitive installations fearing an attack by Rahman supporters — helped oversee an international laboratory for Islamic extremists. This has included weapons production, training camps and carte blanche to smuggle drugs to help pay for these activities.

Today, thousands of radical Moslems are being trained at US-established guerrilla camps on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Already, US officials have attributed several airline bombings to these Moslem fighters, who are believed to be aligned with Sheikh Hassan Turabi, the godfather of the worldwide

Islamic blow

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Islamic fundamentalist movement.

The terrorist activity, called the Islamic blowback, is financed by Saudi princes as well as one of the most rapidly developing drug trades in the world. US officials say the chief warlord is Goobedin Hekmatiar, once a favorite son of the CIA who turned out to be the most anti-West of the Afghan fighters.

Western diplomats say despite warnings from many governments, the US continues to maintain a benign attitude toward the Islamic terrorist network, now based in 13 countries. This contrasts with the attitude of Israel, Egypt, Algeria,

Jordan and France, the last of which recently distributed a report asserting that Islamic terrorism aims to destabilize most of the Middle East.

The US effort, sponsored by the CIA and financed by Saudi Arabia, began in the early 1980s, when Washington sought to build a guerrilla movement to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. A rallying cry was sounded around the Arab and Moslem world to fight the godless Kremlin; training was provided by Pakistani intelligence.

"They set up camps and called for volunteers," recalls Jack Blum, a former staffer on the Senate

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Foreign Affairs Committee.

Blum says the problem began at the war's end. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan but the training in Pakistan continued. The graduates in sabotage, weapons and bomb assembly and guerrilla warfare practiced their new-found skills around the region. Many joined the secessionist Moslem movement in India's Kashmir region. Others went to fight the regime of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Still others established training camps in other parts of Asia and Africa, particularly Sudan.

By the late-1980s, some of these graduates and their Islamic fundamentalist leaders were beginning to penetrate the US. Some of them entered the country on false documents; others were given permission by the CIA.

The US has asked Pakistan to

shut down the camps along its border with Afghanistan. Pakistan claims the training has ended and the recruits are gone but US officials assert that activity continues.

"The Pakistanis are not in control over the border areas," Blum says. "Now the camps are sustained by the drug business. The Pakistani-Afghan border is one of the most drug-infested in the world. The main drug dealers are connected to the [Pakistani] government."

Finding weapons is not a problem, US officials say. To start, large numbers of US weapons, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, were left in the camps unaccounted for.

BLUM says he was told of the Islamic blowback in 1988, in the last years of the Afghan war. Afghan groups warned US officials that Hekmatiar was stealing American weapons given to fight the Soviets and selling them.

The response in Washington, Blum says, was an embarrassed silence. "Everybody said 'Shh, shh. You can't talk about it,'" he recalls. "There was substantial denial."

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For their part, many senior US officials insist that Islamic fundamentalism remains a manageable irritant that does not threaten the Middle East, let alone the US. Instead, they see fundamentalism as a response to poverty.

"It is not monolithic, but presents different faces in different countries, according to the different conditions in those countries," says US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Pelletreau in the latest issue of *Middle East Quarterly*.

Privately, some US law enforcement officials say Washington continues to play down the problem,



Sheik Rahman, convicted of plotting to bomb New York landmarks. (AP)

even as it acknowledges that Islamic fundamentalism, as represented by Rahman, is threatening US interests. They note that Pakistan has escaped US reproach although allowing the Islamic terrorists to continue training. Similarly, the Saudis have easily explained away support for the volunteers as being a private and unauthorized effort to support the fundamentalist movement.

"Their reluctance to block private contributions to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad," says a December 1994 report by the Congressional Research Service, "may stem from the unwillingness of the Gulf regimes to offend their wealthy and powerful constituents, or provoke terrorist attacks within their own countries."

Some US officials now fear that a country hostile to Washington could end up using the thousands of recruits to wage a terrorist campaign against the West. "When you combine fundamentalist ideology with the idea that it's all right to do anything," Blum says, "and you can put together money and training, you have something very lethal."
