

Aid to Afghan Rebels Returns to Haunt U.S.

Washington Created a Monster By Arming Zealots, Many Say

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The roundup of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman and other Islamic militants in the New York area is writing a sour last chapter to one of the great U.S. foreign policy success stories of the 1980s: U.S. support for the Islamic insurgency that drove Soviet troops out of Afghanistan.

Many current and former government officials, independent analysts and Arab diplomats are now saying Washington "created a monster" by encouraging a rebellion based on religious zealotry without stopping to analyze what would happen if the zealots triumphed.

Several of those detained in New York for their alleged involvement in the World Trade Center bombing or plans to attack other high-profile targets participated in the Afghan rebellion as recruiters, trainers or fighters, according to U.S. investigators and Arab diplomats. Abdel Rahman, now in federal custody in New York state pending deportation proceedings, was reportedly a prolific recruiter, preaching sermons urging young men to join their Muslim brothers in the war, according to reports from Cairo. An Afghan link extends as well to a number of accused terrorists in Egypt, Algeria and other Arab countries.

Through Pakistani channels, the CIA provided weapons, money and training for the Afghan insurgents because they were fighting Washington's Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, whose troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Young men from several Arab countries not directly involved in the conflict, including Egypt, Jordan and Algeria, went to Afghanistan to join what they viewed as a "holy war" against communist invaders.

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These young men learned about military tactics, weapons and explosives. Retaining their zeal and their skills long after the last Soviet troops pulled out of Afghanistan, they have become a recurring threat to other nations, including the United States, according to officials and diplomats.

The United States did not create the Afghan insurgency. Inspired and aided by revolutionary Iran, Afghan militants were conducting a guerrilla war against the pro-Moscow government in Kabul even be-

fore the Soviet invasion. But after Soviet troops moved into Afghanistan and were perceived as a threat to Pakistan, the United States embraced the Afghan militants as its Cold War proxies.

"The flame that was burning, once the Soviets left, continued to burn," said Robert B. Oakley, who monitored the war as U.S. ambassador to Pakistan. He said the Afghan war had the same inspirational effect on young Muslim men in several countries as the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War had for idealistic young leftists in the 1930s.

They watched the mullahs of Iran overthrow the pro-Western shah, then saw Iranian-supported rebels take on the Soviets in Afghanistan. They accepted arms and money from the United States, although today Iran, not the United States, is their cultural ideal.

"There was no recognition until very recently," Oakley said, "that these people might come back to the United States or raise hell in other Muslim countries."

According to Charles Hill, who was executive assistant to then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz through much of the administration of President Ronald Reagan, "there was no naivete about who these guys were, they weren't sweethearts." But it "never crossed anybody's mind" that their campaign against infidels would continue against new targets, including the United States, after the Soviet withdrawal.

"We had tremendous battles inside our government over who was getting our resources and whether we were creating a monster, but only after the Soviet pullout," said a senior U.S. official who asked not to be named because he is still involved in regional policy issues. "Before the Soviet pullout, it was open season, just kill as many Russians as possible."

In his recently published memoirs, Shultz refers to the Afghan rebels as "freedom fighters" and reports only one policy disagreement about aiding them: The Defense Department opposed giving them Stinger antiaircraft missiles out of fear that they would be lost to Soviet troops or sold to terrorists elsewhere. Ultimately the United States did provide the shoulder-held missiles, which were instrumental in neutralizing Soviet air power.

Shultz named Morton Abramowitz,

then director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as a leading advocate of deploying the Stingers.

"Everyone knew there was great concern about some of these people" who received them, Abramowitz said, "but that was not clearly relevant. The main focus was to do our best to get the Soviets out."

The Defense Department's fear that the Stingers would fall into the wrong hands appears to have been well founded. Reports last week in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times said the CIA is seeking \$55 million to purchase missiles that are showing up in the international black market. A CIA spokesman refused to confirm or deny the reports.

Jack Blum, a former investigator for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that during the war, "the call went out to the dispossessed of the Middle East, so they could go fight in a holy war, but there was no thought given to the 'disposal problem,' as they called it after the Bay of Pigs." Blum was referring to the Cuban and American survivors of the failed 1961 invasion of Cuba, many of whom were later involved in criminal activities in this country and elsewhere.

"We spent a lot of time looking the other way in Afghanistan," Blum said.

According to accounts at the time and the recollections of several officials, Pakistan insisted on giving most of the aid to a particularly extreme, anti-Western faction in Afghanistan, at the expense of more moderate elements. The United States tolerated this arrangement because that group "killed the most Russians," one former official said.

According to Bernard Rubin, a scholar of Afghan affairs at Columbia University, "anyone here who suggested we should be concerned about the politics of the groups we were aiding was considered terminally naive. The objective was to kill Russians."

He said U.S. policy did contribute to the creation of a monster, but "the monster's name is Hekmatyar, not Abdel Rahman." Gulbuddin Hekma-

tyar headed the most extreme and most anti-Western of the Afghan groups, the one favored by the Pakistani intelligence service that controlled the distribution of money and weapons. Hekmatyar is now prime minister of Afghanistan—and still fighting the Russians in a border conflict in Tajikistan.

Several former officials said the United States would have preferred to use other Afghan groups, less anti-Western and motivated more by nationalism than religion, as its anti-Soviet proxies, but was obliged to defer to Pakistan because Pakistan was the supply channel. Pak-

istan's powerful intelligence service favored Hekmatyar, who reportedly had been its agent in Afghanistan for many years.

Algeria and Egypt, under siege from religious militants including veterans of the Afghan war, have tried to deflect U.S. criticism of their crackdowns on the extremists by blaming the United States for creating the problem in the first place. According to the Egyptians, the Pakistani city of Peshawar, which was the support center for the Afghan resistance in the 1980s, remains a base for Arab extremists left over from the Afghan war and now

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looking for new targets—such as the pro-Western government in Cairo.

"You should have supported it as a nationalist struggle against an invader, not as a jihad [Islamic religious campaign] against an infidel," an Egyptian official said. "The way it turned out, the extremists beat one secular country, now they're turning against others."

Rubin said such criticism is "misdirected. It's part of a diversionary tactic on the part of unsuccessful Arab regimes to find external scapegoats."

According to Oakley, the United States should not be blamed for the activities of the Arab freelancers who signed on with the Afghan cause.

"That was not our network," he said. "The United States was not financing or recruiting the people from the other Muslim countries. That was a whole parallel operation that started long before we got there."
