

## **Bin Laden's Army**

**Author:** [IWPR](#)

Osama bin Laden has established an international Islamic army in Afghanistan.

In the wake of the massive terrorist attack on the United States, the chief suspect, Osama bin Laden, and the radical Muslim Taleban movement that harbours him in Afghanistan, may be in line to experience the full might of America's retaliation.

Bin Laden appeared on the scene in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the CIA needed him and his extensive connections in the Arab world to co-ordinate military aid to the Afghan Mujahedeen in their fight against Soviet intervention.

On returning to his native Saudi Arabia, bin Laden, who comes from one of the many offshoots of the Saudi royal family, reincarnated himself as a hard line dissident, lambasting the Riyadh authorities for their ties to the United States.

He insisted the presence of US military bases in Saudi Arabia was against the interests of the Muslim peoples. The Saudi authorities eventually exiled bin Laden, after which he moved to Sudan, where government is in the hands of Muslim fundamentalists.

When the United States went after him in September 1998, following the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for which he was held responsible, bin Laden fled back to Afghanistan.

By then, the Taleban movement had captured the capital, Kabul, and secured most of the country. Bin Laden's stay in Afghanistan became possible after the Taleban leaders and Riyadh struck a deal. The latter recognised the former in exchange for a guarantee that bin Laden cease his public criticism of the Saudi royal family.

In summer 1997, Saudi Arabia, along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, recognized the Taleban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. Bin Laden kept his side of the bargain. The Saudi authorities have not heard a single word of criticism from him.

Bin Laden was a welcome guest in the Taleban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. The movement needed his money, strategic management skills and his connections with radical Islamic movements elsewhere to bolster their military power.

His presence did, in fact, help the Taleban to emerge as leader of an international Islamic struggle against both "infidel" countries and those Muslim states which the Taleban reckoned had abandoned the "true" Islamic way.

The Taleban's reasons for not extraditing bin Laden to the United States, in spite of convincing proof that he was behind several major terrorist attacks on US interests, sounded convincing to the world's Muslim community.

According to religious tradition, they said, a Muslim could not turn out a guest. "Even an enemy seeking refuge should feel safe in a Muslim house," the Taleban leaders said, in a gesture that only raised their

stock in the Muslim world.

To the rest of the world, the Taleban's explanation sounded ridiculous, proof - if any was needed - that the authorities in Kandahar (the Taleban's powerbase) had little understanding of the rest of the world's values.

On September 12, Kandahar denied US allegations that bin Laden had masterminded the previous day's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, claiming the Taleban had already deprived him of all means of communicating with the world outside. On the same day, bin Laden appeared in a television broadcast to praise the heroism of the suicide bombers, while denying his own involvement.

The Taleban leaders appear genuinely to believe their historic mission, which is understandable given their faint knowledge of the world outside and their often low educational level.

The background of the Taleban strongman, Mullah Mohammad Omar, sheds some light on the character of the movement he leads. His education consisted of only a few years spent at a village school near Kandahar. He was wounded in the head and lost an eye taking part in the religious war, known as a "Jihad", against Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

On occasion, I have accompanied foreign diplomats to Kandahar to meet Mullah Omar and have talked to diplomats who also met him. Many question his mental balance and say his reaction to information depends on his changeable moods. Such is not the case, however, with other Taleban leaders, such as the foreign minister, Mullah Mutawakil.

Today, bin Laden runs numerous training bases in Afghanistan for Muslim mercenaries from Egypt, Yemen, Iran, Syria, Algeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Central Asia and Chechnya. There are 30 to 40 such bases over Afghanistan. A discreetly named Pakistan-based organization, Maktab-ul-hadamat (Services Bureau), is in charge of enrolling trainees. Training is sponsored by the Saudi Arabian and Kuwait-based Tarik-ul-Islam organisation, which bin Laden co-founded.

Who are Islamic militants, and what motivates them to fight for the Taleban? On a visit to Afghanistan late in August and early in September, I talked to numerous contract soldiers who had been captured by the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance. These conversations revealed that these Muslims had been indoctrinated to believe that their paramount mission in life was to join a holy struggle against infidels.

They were told it was the only way to become a true Muslim and that if they were lucky enough die in the struggle, they would be admitted to paradise like Shaheed, the hero who sacrificed his earthly life for the Prophet's cause.

There are articles on precisely this subject in the magazine Fat-ul-mubin (The Holy Victory of Islam), which the Taleban tried to deliver via the Red Cross to fighters held by the Northern Alliance. The prison authorities refused to distribute the magazines to the inmates. But most of them remained faithful to the ideals they had been taught, in any case. In one cell containing 25 men, no more than five appeared ready to give up their armed struggle.

One Pakistani prisoner, aged 27, who had been in jail for five years, told me he had come to Afghanistan to help the Taleban capture it and turn it into a truly Muslim country, where the Muslim Holy Law, or Shariat, would enjoy ultimate authority. When I answered that in northern Afghanistan, Pakistan is considered an aggressor, he replied that this was unimportant. "After we help the Taleban here, they will help us establish a truly Muslim order in Pakistan. Pakistan is not a true Muslim state now," he said.

I heard the same reasoning from a Burmese prisoner. He said his country's 30 per cent Muslim minority was persecuted and even exterminated by the government, which represented the Buddhist majority. His hope was that once Islam triumphed in Afghanistan, Burma's turn would come.

Some Uigur prisoners from China's Xinjiang province, by contrast, had come to Afghanistan almost by accident. They had gone to Pakistan to study Islam, as they said this was impossible in China. Their instructor at the Madrasah, or religious academy, had told them to begin their Islamic education by joining the "Jihad" in Afghanistan. One of the Uigurs had been captured the morning after he came to the frontline.

The guerrillas of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, headed by Juma Namangani and Takhir Yuldashev, are a different matter. None of these experienced warriors has yet been captured. Namangani is a respected field commander, well trusted by bin Laden. Ideologically they are almost impregnable. Unlike many volunteers from Pakistan and elsewhere, IMU fighters are "professionals", paid for their "work".

Along with the Arabs, they form the core of the international Islamic army that bin Laden has established in Afghanistan. Their numbers are sometimes overestimated, with figures of 5,000 or more appearing in the media. This seems excessive. A more realistic number is 700 to 1,000.

Recently rumours have circulated that the Taleban had appointed bin Laden as its defence minister. These are unlikely to be true, as Kandahar would not do such a thing unless it wanted to senselessly enrage the United States.

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