

ISLAMIC WARRIORS

Global Network Provides Money, Haven

By Steve Coll and Steve LeVine

Aug 3, 1993

Page: A.01

The new generation of militant Islamic groups involved in bombings and attacks on governments from the Middle East to New York depends on an informal network of support centers scattered from the Persian Gulf to the United States, according to government officials and Islamic activists.

Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the smaller Persian Gulf kingdoms, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslav republics, Europe and the United States all today contain such informal support centers where Islamic radicals can find money, haven or ideological inspiration - despite efforts by some local governments during the last few months to clamp down.

Connections run between these scattered centers in the form of international charitable or evangelical institutions, charismatic personalities and informal financial transfers. The most common source of financial support is private donations or charitable contributions by wealthy Saudis or other rich Muslims, estimated by participants in the movements to amount to tens of millions of dollars each year.

"Islamic movement finances come through genuine people," said an activist in the London office of a pro-Iranian Islamic group. "That sort of money, even if it is from someone corrupted, he is giving the money for Allah - it is not for show."

In any event, the activist concluded confidently, "When you're talking about the grass-roots movements, you don't need so much money."

The variety and complexity of the backing is typical of the problems that frustrate Middle East regimes struggling with dynamic, sometimes violent Islamic movements - Egypt, Israel, Algeria, Tunisia and, to a lesser degree, Saudi Arabia. In this world, participants say, hierarchy is rare, audited accounts are rarer, and the only truly unifying force is a broad, ideological commitment to political Islam.

The young radicals arrested in the recent terrorism cases in New York appear to have constituted one grouping in this broader sphere. The defendants came to New York from diverse parts of the Muslim world. Some had links to institutions involved in the galvanizing wars in Afghanistan and the Balkans. Some were drawn together by the charismatic preaching of the Egyptian radical Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, spiritual adviser to Egypt's Islamic Group, who advocates borderless religious war against infidels.

Given the splintered, ideological and often voluntary character of external support for contemporary Islamic radicalism, can official efforts to disrupt the Islamic movement's centers of external support around the world succeed? And even if they did succeed,

would such disruption make much difference to the progress of Islamic militancy in the Middle East and elsewhere?

Clearly, a number of prominent officials in Middle Eastern and Western governments involved think so. They and some independent analysts believe that violent elements in the Islamic movement make up a tiny, unpopular minority that can be marginalized by internal suppression and attacks on external sanctuaries and flows of financial support.

But activists in the movements, supported by other independent analysts, argue that this is just wishful thinking based on a profound misunderstanding of the Islamic movement's popular base. Those advocating violence may indeed be a minority, this argument goes, but attempts to repress them or to put pressure on the wide, essentially peaceful world of Islamic charity because some money reaches revolutionaries will only further radicalize the Muslim world.

"They're playing into their hands," said Rachid Ghannouchi, exiled leader of Tunisia's radical Nahda, or Renaissance, movement. "The people angry and divided will be enlarged. Such money and such help paid by individuals in the {Persian} Gulf has been used in relief and in solving indirectly the problems the governments face."

In part because of the recent terrorism cases in New York, one of the pan-Islamic revival's loose radical groupings most worrisome to secular or pro-Western governments in the Middle East is the multinational, itinerant circle of young Arab volunteers who have been directly involved in religiously inspired violence in Afghanistan, Bosnia or Middle East streets.

After the World Trade Center bombing in February, several regional governments attempted to clamp down in a coordinated fashion on centers of support for these radical war veterans, according to officials.

The moves followed pleas from Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and, indirectly, Israel, they said. These governments believe that support provided to Arab fighters abroad, and related private charity funds, are leaking to the Islamic insurgencies they face at home.

The main centers of attention in this clampdown have been Pakistan, Sudan, Croatia and Saudi Arabia.

In April, Saudi Arabia announced a ban on private charitable contributions sent overseas without approval from Riyadh's generally pro-Western government.

The announcement marked a public reversal of Saudi policy during the 1980s. In those years the Saudi treasury poured at least \$2 billion into the Afghan resistance against communism. Along with other gulf states, Riyadh sent what Western analysts estimate to have been several hundred million dollars annually to the secular Palestine Liberation Organization.

The kingdom also bankrolled Arab volunteer fighters in Afghanistan through its official evangelical charity, the Muslim World League, according to a charity official and others. In addition, the league, which has a reported government budget of about \$30 million annually but also relies on private contributions, funded peaceful institutions associated with Algeria's Islamic movement and Islamic institutions in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Now such official funding has been stopped or drastically reduced in some cases, according to many Western and Middle East officials and Islamic activists interviewed, as well as published statements by members of the Saudi royal family. Those interviewed cited several reasons: Riyadh is troubled by vocal Islamic radicals at home; the Saudi royal family is unnerved by the recent wave of violent Islamic insurgency in Egypt and elsewhere, and Saudi Arabia is furious at Palestinians and Islamic radicals, past recipients of Saudi largess, who criticized Riyadh's handling of the Persian Gulf War.

"They realize they are contributing to the creation of a Muslim movement - training people," said one radical Islamic activist. Added a Muslim World League official, "The government cannot have the same policy all the time for all places. Now it's a different time everywhere."

The April announcement marked an apparent attempt by Riyadh to extend this new outlook to private funding by wealthy Saudis whose activities were earlier encouraged or tolerated.

Some of these private Saudis have themselves become radicalized and support radical movements outside the kingdom, for a variety of reasons. Some oppose their government's undemocratic royal autocracy and see themselves as part of an international Islamic movement battling dictatorships. Others are motivated less by politics than by religious faith, responding in part to the Saudi government's longtime preaching about the righteous imperatives of pure Islamic law, which some Saudi theologians interpret to mean that injustice and secularism should be opposed by force, if necessary.

One wealthy Saudi businessman who evidently has adopted this outlook is Osama Binladen, offspring of one of the kingdom's best-known and most prosperous business families.

During the 1980s, Binladen answered the call for "holy war" against communism in Afghanistan, traveled to the front lines and bankrolled Egyptian, Saudi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Algerian and other Arab volunteer fighters, according to Arabs and Pakistanis involved in the war.

Today Binladen lives in exile in a posh neighborhood of Khartoum, Sudan, building roads and airports for Sudan's new radical Islamic government, financing a lavish guest house for itinerant Arab veterans of the Afghan conflict and lecturing at times on revolutionary Islam, according to Sudanese businessmen, officials and diplomats. Several

hundred Arab veterans of the Afghan war are estimated to have sought haven in Sudan, diplomats said.

Widely described as unwelcome in his native Saudi Arabia, Binladen is seen by Egypt's authoritarian government as "the anti-Christ," as a Western official put it. The Saudi financier is alleged by Egyptian and Western officials to provide funds to some Afghan war veterans accused of sponsoring anti-government violence in Egypt.

Binladen's aides deny this. Binladen himself declined to be interviewed. A Sudanese state security officer posted at his office in Khartoum said Binladen fears arrest or assassination by Egyptian, Saudi or Western government agents.

Arguably, the best way to think about Binladen's multistory Khartoum guest house is not as a centralized, string-pulling headquarters of Egyptian or other radicalism, but rather as one among many scattered centers of gravity where militant Islamic radicals may find haven, succor or support.

Binladen is a rich radical with a following. "They don't believe in organizations," said Hamza Hasan, an exiled Saudi who edits an anti-government magazine in London. "They think they are a jamaa (an Arabic word that means "group" or "society" and often connotes loose organization but firm commitment to religion)."

Charitable Concerns

The vast majority of the 22 Islamic charities registered in Zagreb, Croatia's capital and a base of support for Bosnia's besieged Muslims, are apolitical humanitarian groups or evangelical societies based in Persian Gulf countries. There is no evidence that these groups support violence. Rather, many provide needed relief to Bosnian Muslims and other civilians amid dangerous conditions.

However, among the Islamic charities active in Zagreb are the state-run Iranian Red Crescent, which has been caught sending arms to Bosnian Muslims, as well as the Alkifah Refugee Center of Brooklyn and its sister group, the Services Office, based in Peshawar, Pakistan. These last two have in the recent past sponsored Islamic volunteer fighters, according to Pakistani and Arab activists.

The Peshawar-based Services Office has been for a decade a principal gateway for Arab volunteers seeking to join the Afghan war, according to activists in Peshawar. Abdel Rahman, the radical Egyptian cleric, has met with officials at both the Services Office and the Alkifah Center. and has been described as close to them.

Indeed, there is evidence that some of Abdel Rahman's followers accused in the New York cases moved between these centers of support in the United States, Peshawar and Zagreb. One of the main accused in the alleged plot to bomb the U.N. headquarters and other targets, Sudanese-born Siddig Mohammed Siddig Ali, telephoned his sister from

New York in May and told her that he was headed for the Bosnian conflict, according to the sister, Nur Ali, interviewed in Khartoum.

The Alkifah Center's Zagreb office is housed in a modern, two-story building staffed by Arabs who identified themselves as Algerians. The office contains booklets, audiotapes and videocassettes produced by Abdullah Azzam, the charismatic Palestinian who ran the Peshawar Services Office for almost a decade, recruited Arabs to the Afghan war with widely circulated sermons about the need for Islamic holy war, and helped those who answered the call to join the conflict. Azzam was murdered in Peshawar in 1989.

In Zagreb, the Alkifah deputy director, Hassan Hakim, said that his volunteers were engaged only in helping about 100 Bosnian refugee families and that the Azzam material he stocked reflected only an "ideological" affiliation. He said his center was connected only with the Brooklyn branch and received financial contributions from the United States. Hakim claimed not to have heard about recent publicity concerning links between the Brooklyn center and some defendants in the New York terrorism cases.

Yet there is some evidence that the former Yugoslav republics have become a haven for some Egyptian radicals.

A European-based Islamic activist involved with the Zagreb charities said Egyptian Islamic radicals were among those involved with the Zagreb nexus and that Egypt's government "was concerned that Egyptian Islamists were being funded through the back door in Bosnia." A Cairo sympathizer with Egypt's Islamic violent radical groups said there were indeed members of those groups in Zagreb and Bosnia.

Egypt's interior minister, Alfi, said he had "no information" about the matter, characterizing such accounts as "a possibility" subject to the results of "many investigations . . . not yet completed."

The Role of Iran

Among all these centers of external support for Islamic radicalism today, one is distinct from the rest: Iran, where the Islamic revolutionary government is openly committed to the export of its radical ideas around the Middle East.

Yet rather than a headquarters of pan-Islamic militancy, Iran is better understood as an active but in some respects handicapped competitor for influence in the resurgent Islamic revival.

That Tehran has both clients and ambitions in the ongoing Islamic revival is widely acknowledged.

Across from the Foreign Ministry in north Tehran is an old government building housing protocol offices for foreign diplomats and branch offices for two radical Islamic

movements - Hezbollah, from Lebanon, and Hamas, from the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

As they enter, ambassadors from Western countries and moderate Arab regimes doing business with the protocol officers step to the right, while representatives of the Islamic movements step to the left.

The exact amounts of Tehran's financial transfers to these and other Islamic groups overseas are unknown. Iran's parliament has earmarked \$20 million in aid for the Palestinian cause, according to Arab sources in Iran. But Israelis estimate that no more than several million dollars has been reaching Hamas annually from Iran, channeled through Tehran's overseas Islamic propagation organizations. Considerably larger sums, as well as training and logistical support, are thought to reach Hezbollah and its terrorist affiliate, Islamic Jihad, in Lebanon.

Broadly, Iran's strengths as a player in the pan-Islamic revival are seen to be the inspirational power of its original revolution, its track record in funding and supporting strikes against Western and Israeli interests, and its open rhetorical embrace of radical Islam in all its variations.

"We do not have any centrally organized support structure for the revival of Islamic sentiment in the world," said Ahmed Javad Larijani, a member of the Iranian parliament and vice chairman of its foreign relations committee. "But we are putting a lot of effort to revive an idea, which we believe will be a stimulus."

Yet Iran's revolution remains infused with two elements that are anathemas to many radical Islamic Arabs: Iran's Shiite Islamic faith, predominant in Iran but a minority sect elsewhere, and its Persian nationalism, for centuries a bane to Middle Eastern Arabs. Moreover, Iran's overheated economy is bleeding cash, a problem seen by Western and regional officials as cramping Tehran's ability to fund clients and sympathizers abroad.

The most prominent of these clients are Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, whose members share Iran's Shiite faith and revolutionary zeal. Among other things, Islamic Jihad has claimed credit for the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people.

Iran's many-faceted foundations, known as bonyads, are one key aspect of its institutional and financial support for these groups. At least a half-dozen such foundations established after the 1979 revolution operate in a nebulous twilight zone between the public and private sectors that is peculiar to Iran's post-revolutionary Islamic regime, according to diplomats, businessmen, officials and Western analysts.

The foundations were established as charity organizations to help the downtrodden and to propagate the ideals of the revolution. Now they are multibillion-dollar conglomerates owning real estate and hundreds of companies, industries and hotels around the country.

They say they need the money to keep caring for the needy and the families of war victims. Yet not all their work is charitable.

Foundation leaders often travel with diplomatic passports, and Western analysts see their overseas offices, particularly in Lebanon, as a vehicle for transferring money to groups such as Hezbollah. Their budgets are enormous. An official in the Bonyad Mustazaafan, the largest, said his foundation's budget amounts to one-quarter of Iran's gross national product. Few are in a position to check such an estimate, since the foundations are accountable to few and are seen as virtually ungovernable, diplomats and Iranians said.

The nominal line of authority for the foundations runs through structures devoted to Islamic propaganda worldwide that report ultimately to Iran's supreme spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Israeli analysts believe this is the structure that sends money to its radical Islamic movement, Hamas.

Yet Western analysts say there is another line of command, running through the ministry of intelligence to the office of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. This chain is seen as more directly responsible for state-sponsored terrorist strikes overseas.

Veteran diplomats in Tehran, for example, say that Islamic Jihad of Palestine, a small, cell-based, violence-prone group that operates mainly in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, has links to the Iranian intelligence ministry.

What has been the recent effect of stepped-up diplomatic pressure on Iran and the coordinated clampdown against other, often Saudi-linked external support centers for radical Islam? Activists involved say that while the moves have had some impact, the effects have not been dramatic.

"No one can control the flow of money from Saudi Arabia," said one Saudi. "It is not one person - it is a thousand. We are here. Money comes to us from inside Saudi Arabia. We have private talks with businessmen. Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. But it comes."

This story was reported by Washington Post correspondent Steve Coll, in Egypt and Israel; special correspondent Steve LeVine, in Khartoum, Sudan, and Zagreb, Croatia; and Post correspondents Nora Boustany, in Iran; Caryle Murphy, in Egypt; and David Hoffman, in Israel. Researcher William Hifner also contributed.