

## From the Mujahadeen Comes a Man with a Mission

Al Qaeda in its present form did not yet exist. What did exist was a growing number of militant Arab groups angered by the forced displacement of the Palestinians, the violence against Muslims, and the growing interference in the Middle East by Western governments. In 1979, another incursion into a Muslim country set the seventeenth son of a devout Wahhabist Saudi construction magnate—a self-made billionaire said to have railed often against the Jews and their Western allies—into the mountains of war-torn Afghanistan to join the fight against the Soviets. This son, Osama bin Laden, emerged nine years later as the personification of Al Qaeda. In July of 1973, Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan, a former prime minister and cousin to the ruling royal family, staged a coup that ended Afghanistan monarchy. Although he himself was not a Marxist, the communist People Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which had close ties with the Soviet Union, provided considerable support. During Daud's first tenure as prime minister, he had high-minded intentions of social and economic modernization and reforms and knew that to carry them out in Afghanistan would require aid from large and stable outside sources. The obvious choices were the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Admitting it was a gamble, Daud turned to the Soviet Union, not knowing that later the country would turn on him. The Soviet Union did provide considerable support over the next decade, as did other countries—including the U.S.—but it also installed, unbeknownst to the Afghans, sleeper agents in such prominent positions as minister of the interior, minister of commerce, and interpreter to the President. The Soviets wanted passage through Afghanistan to finish carving up Pakistan. Though Afghani-Pakistani relations were far from warm, Daud wanted no part of hostile actions against a fellow Muslim nation. Alerted by the Pakistanis to the questionable loyalties of some of his supposed allies, Daud began systematically marginalizing the Marxist PDPA and weakening ties to the Soviets. Then, in April 1978, he and his entire extended family were murdered. The PDPA took over and quickly roused the animosity of much of its citizenry. Muslim insurgent groups known as the mujahadeen (ones who struggle) sprang up opposing the secular Marxist regime. Ever quick to join in any movement that might prevent the spread of Communism, the United States became involved in July of 1979 when President Jimmy Carter approved U.S. aid to the anti-Soviet fighters. In December of that year, Soviet troops killed Afghani President Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal as the new leader. (Magnus 1998, 129) Tanks rolled in and the armies took over the country. The largest of the various mujahadeen guerilla forces, aided by extensive U.S. financing, training, and firearms, coordinated their efforts and eventually forced the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989. They had grown from a small band of Islamists fighters inspired by a desire to institute the practices of revivalist Islam in their country to a disunited but dedicated citizenry from all walks of life who fought a technologically uneven war and, for all practical purposes, won. (ibid, 136) Mohammad Najibullah led the country for a few years, but that government collapsed in 1992, and the mujahadeen struggled with disunity and infighting among the various groups without ever forming a strong government. The country floundered, overrun with a lawless wave of warlords, opium growers and bandits. Then in 1994, a violent robbery galvanized a former mujahadeen who had returned to his pre-jihad life as a teacher in a madrasa. He gathered a band of his Taliban (students of Islam) and tracked down and punished the perpetrators. The country floundered, overrun with a lawless wave of warlords, opium growers and bandits. Then in 1994, a violent robbery galvanized a former mujahadeen who returned to his pre-jihad life as a teacher in a madrasa. He gathered a band of Taliban (students of Islam) and tracked down and punished the perpetrators. The mullah, Mohammed Omar, had lost an eye in battle against the Soviets, which added to his reputation as a dedicated protector of Islam and Afghanistan, and he soon became a potent political force as he and his Taliban moved from city to city rousting many leaders deemed to be un-Islamic. By November the captured and established rule in Kandahar. Other fundamentalist Muslims joined them, and soon they were a movement, known as the Taliban, gaining power not so much by fighting but by promising to end the fighting, and to restore civil order under sharia law. They ousted leaders who had used their positions for personal gain, and endorsed those who upheld fundamentalist Islam. They disrupted the opium trade, which violated Islamic law and contributed to corruption, foreign intervention and materialism. With Mullah Omar as the head of council, the Taliban managed to tame the wild country by imposing the standards of strict Islamic-rule standards that are considerably appallingly repressive and regressive by Western societies. These are standards, though, that are embraced by the Wahhabists, a purist Sunni Islamic movement started in the mid-18th century and based on the writings of Islamic scholar Ahmed ibn Taymiya and founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab. Most of the followers prefer the name Sulfafis after the Salaf as-Salih, or the rightly guided or pious predecessors: unlike traditional Sunni Muslims, Sulfafis do not believe they need scholars of Islamic law to interpret the religion for them. They reject anything they see as idolatry or innovation, as well as many of the more mystical teachings and esoteric interpretations of the Sufi sect. Thus there are strict prohibitions against such practices as speaking of or to any prophet or angel other than Allah, the use of charms or beads in worship, praying at or erecting elaborate graves, pictures, photographs, tobacco and any innovations of worship.

## About the Author

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