



Jihadists Find Convenient Base in Bosnia

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Terrorists who previously targeted the U.S. are now in Bosnia, where they have access to a "one-stop shop" of jihad training camps, weapons and illegal Islamic 'charities' -- all at the doorstep of Europe, terrorism experts said.

"[Convicted terrorist] Karim Said Atmani recently returned to Bosnia after being released early from French prison for 'good behavior,'" terrorism expert and author Evan Kohlmann said.

Atmani, a Moroccan, was linked to the "millennium bomb plot" and convicted by a French court of colluding with Osama bin Laden. He has been linked to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an organization responsible for airplane hijackings and subway bombings in France.

"This is very disturbing," said Kohlmann. "Atmani promised he would wage jihad until the end. That doesn't mean until a plea deal, or early release; it means until death or victory."

Also finding haven in Bosnia is Abu el Maali, who like Atmani, was a foreign national who fought in the Bosnia war. El Maali was later accused by French authorities of attempting to smuggle explosives in 1998 to an Egyptian terrorist group plotting to destroy U.S. military installations in Germany. He was also accused of leading terrorist cells in Bosnia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"This activity is very significant," said Kohlmann. "Senior members of the former Muslim Brigade and their top commanders are still there, and they're still active."

The Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHF), a charity that was later found by the U.S. Treasury to be underwriting terrorist operations including al Qaeda, shut its offices in Bosnia after the U.S. announcement but reopened under the name "Vazir." The new organization was registered as an "association for sport, culture and education."

In 2002, the U.S. Treasury Department reported that the Bosnia office of Al-Haramain was linked to Al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya, an Egyptian terrorist group that was a signatory to bin Laden's Feb. 23, 1998, fatwa -- or religious edict -- against the United States.

Cybercast News Service viewed videotape shot by Kohlmann of activity at the former Sarajevo offices of Al-Haramain. "All they did was white-out the old sign," said Kohlmann.

Cybercast News Service has also obtained a video that terrorism analysts say depicts an active jihad training camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a region previously described by analysts as an ideal gateway for terror missions into Europe.

The video, which is over four minutes in length, shows outdoor maneuvers, explosives training and training inside what appears to be a school gym. Exercises in hostage-taking are also shown.

Cybercast News Service obtained the footage from Gregory R. Copley, president of the International Strategic Studies Association. The footage, said to have been shot before autumn 2004, was first aired in May 2005 before an audience of senior military officials during the Strategy 2005: The Global Strategic Forum held in Washington, D.C.

The presence of active jihadist camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina was also confirmed by attorney and counter-terrorism expert Darko Trifunovic, who previously served as a diplomat in the foreign service of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kohlmann said that the main camps used during the war have been closed, and a different tactic for jihad training has emerged: disguising them as youth camps. "These days, usually the kind of jihad camp you'll see in Bosnia and other countries are so-called 'youth camps.'" They are usually led by a former member of the mujahadeen, someone with military experience, and perhaps a fundamentalist cleric, said Kohlmann.

"They take young people into the hills or even a national park and conduct makeshift jihad training. As ridiculous as it sounds, they've found it's very difficult to track this sort of thing."

Christopher Brown, research associate with the Transitions to Democracy Project at the Hudson Institute, echoed the report. "A lot of

these camps are very mobile," he said. "Bosnia has a lot of rugged territory where such camps can be set up temporarily."

The idea that there are no jihadist camps in Bosnia and radical Islam has not gained any foothold there, as some analysts suggest, is "ridiculous," according to Brown. He points to the raising of two Waffen-SS divisions under the encouragement of the mufti of Jerusalem during World War II, up to the spread of Wahhabism by the Saudis beginning in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Al Qaeda cells were set up in Bosnia in the early 1990s by Ayman al Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's right-hand man, and bin Laden was said to visit the area twice in the mid-1990s," Brown added. "Iran was very involved in supporting the Islamist separatist movement in Bosnia, and Hezbollah was doing training there in the 1990s."

Training also takes place inside youth centers and school gyms, according to Trifunovic.

The goal is a network of like-minded cells as opposed to having the sort of permanent camp that would fuel an active frontline, said Kohlmann. "It's not that surprising. This sort of thing goes on in the U.S. as well," he said.

"Only a very small minority of Bosnians are attracted to this," said Kohlmann. "This is primarily a foreign phenomenon -- mostly consisting of Syrians, Egyptians and Algerians."

From the time of the Bosnian war, local Muslims experienced friction with the foreign jihadists and opposed the idea of an Islamic state, as well as condemned their atrocities, said Kohlmann. That friction continues.

Marko Attila Hoare, research fellow at the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge, cautions against arriving at broad conclusions based on the reports of jihad camps. "The evidence suggests that talk of 'active jihadist camps' in Bosnia has been greatly exaggerated," he said.

"Over 10 years since several thousand Islamic radicals fought in the Bosnian war of the 1990s, Bosnia -- unlike New York, Madrid and London -- has yet to experience a single Islamist terrorist outrage. Nor have any Bosnian Muslims been implicated in Islamist terrorist acts elsewhere. Al Qaeda tried and failed to turn Bosnia into a jihadist base; the moderate version of Islam practiced there is not conducive to Islamism," said Hoare.

Statistics compiled before the war and in 2004 suggest that the majority of Bosnian Muslims do not attend mosque regularly and have a predominantly European secular outlook regarding politics.

Hoare has previously described the Palestinians, Chechens and "other enslaved Muslim peoples" as "caught between the Scylla of colonial oppression and the Charybdis of Islamofascism."

Hoare has contended that "there can be no freedom for Muslim peoples without the defeat of the Islamofascists and everything they stand for; and there can be no defeat of the Islamofascists without liberty for all Muslim peoples."

Hoare told Cybercast News Service: "It is entirely likely that foreign Islamists are still trying to recruit disaffected Bosnian Muslims, but these latter are likely to make less willing recruits than are members of the Muslim communities of Western Europe."

Hoare's analysis is in line with that of French political scientist Giles Keppel, who in the book "Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam" described the Islamists' attempt to graft jihad onto Bosnian operations as a failure.

Defense analyst Frederick Peterson believes that to a certain degree, talk of majorities not favoring the Wahhabist strain of Islam is a "deceptive argument."

"There doesn't need to be a majority to be a threat. When push comes to shove, they will identify with the side most like them and either be silent, harbor or abet," Peterson said. "We know that the mujahadeen in Bosnia were al Qaeda and Iranian-sponsored, and they are still there today."

"We have terrorist operatives who have targeted the U.S. back in a relatively un-policed region that offers one-stop shopping in conventional arms and open spaces for training, ideological support, recruitment drives and funding," said Kohlmann. "It's a very disturbing phenomenon."

By Sherrie Gossett
Cybercast News Service