

Al-Qaeda In Bosnia: Myth Or Present Danger?

CHAPTER 8 (abridged): The Mujahedin Community in Bosnia and the Dayton Peace Accords

The signing of the Dayton peace agreement in November 1995 and the beginning of its implementation in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended the wartime alliance of the global jihad movement and the predominately Muslim Bosnian Army that was fighting for the survival of the country and its largest ethnic group, Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks, as they have called themselves since 1993).

By the end of 1995, most of the foreign mujahedin had left Bosnia. Some returned to their homelands, some sought exile in Western Europe, while a number of them continued to fight on new battlefields -- from Chechnya to Kosovo, from the Palestinian Territories to Kashmir, from Somalia to Afghanistan and Iraq.

A number of them remained in Bosnia, however.

Jürgen Elsässer, author of the book "How Jihad Came To The Balkans," maintains that this proves, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the wartime alliance was not a short marriage of convenience after all.

"If this had been the case, the Bosnian authorities would have obeyed the terms of the Dayton peace accords from late 1995, which stipulated that all foreign fighters must leave Bosnia by the end of January 1996," Elsässer said. "What did the Bosnian authorities do instead? They gave Bosnian citizenship and Bosnian passports to at least 700 or 800 of these Arab mujahedin, so that they could be regarded as (Bosnian) citizens and would not have to leave the country. That was the clear sign that this alliance continued, even after all battles had been finished."

The logic behind the decision by the Bosniak leadership to allow a number of Arab mujahedin to stay in Bosnia after peace was established appears rather simple, according to Esad Hećimović, a journalist with the Sarajevo weekly "Dani." Hećimović has been closely following the activities of the mujahedin community in Bosnia for many years.

"A part of the Bosniak political leadership felt some kind of special debt toward the mujahedin," Hećimović said. "The first demands from the Americans to the Sarajevo government to put a definite end to these relations were made in September 1996. The Dayton agreement of

November 1995 stipulated that all foreign military instructors and volunteers had to leave Bosnia. This did not occur immediately. But the American government soon confirmed that this requirement had been fulfilled and that there were no longer any active [mujahedin] military units on Bosnian territory. This was done so that the American government could continue to assist Bosnia.

"The termination of all military and intelligence cooperation by the Sarajevo government with Iran, as well as the withdrawal of all foreign instructors and volunteers from Bosnia, was the key condition that the U.S. Congress set before any further U.S. assistance could be extended. However, it is evident that the mujahedin changed their roles. They no longer played the role of the mujahedin but rather "married and disbanded," as it was called then. They remained in Bosnia as married people and formally disbanded as a military unit.

"Since that time, there has been recurring doubt as to the real reason for their remaining. We can see different motives. Certain individuals were hiding in Bosnia from criminal investigations and arrest warrants, issued in their native countries, sometimes even by Interpol, while others actually continued a completely normal, civilian life with their families, attempting to engage in small businesses," Hećimović said.

Due to the nature of their mission in Bosnia, as well as the fact that they often used many different identities and dates and places of birth, it was never easy to determine the exact number of mujahedin remaining in Bosnia. This was a particular problem for the authorities in Sarajevo after September 11, 2001, said Ivica Mišić, the former deputy minister of foreign affairs and the head of the State Counterterrorism Team at the time.

"In an effort to clear this up, we launched an investigation that eventually concluded that between 1,400 and 1,800 Arab-Afghan mujahedin remained in Bosnia after the war," Mišić said. "The number of those who had obtained Bosnian citizenship in one way or another during the war or immediately after was never totally clear, but it never exceeded our initial guess."

According to estimates, some 11,000 Bosnian citizenships were issued from 1992 to 1995 to the foreign members of the three warring armies (Bosnian, Serb, and Croat). However, in the context of the events that have occurred in the world since 1996, it is mainly some 1,500 citizenships, issued to mujahedin fighters of Afro-Asian origin, that are considered controversial. These mujahedin became citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina according to a law, valid at the time, which in theory

enabled every member of the Bosnian Army to obtain Bosnian citizenship.

Although understandable, the decision by the Bosniak leadership to allow some members of the mujahedin community to remain in Bosnia after the war turned out to be a bad one, said Evan F. Kohlmann, a leading expert on international terrorism and author of the book "Al-Qaida's Jihad In Europe: Afghan-Bosnian Network."

"The Bosnians kept the mujahedin around for two reasons," said Kohlmann. No. 1, they did feel that they had a certain sense of obligation to these people. What the Bosnians said was, 'Look, we don't have enough of an obligation to you to wage an international jihad on your behalf. However, you did come here and save us during a very difficult part of the war. You were very useful to us, and we recognize that, and we're not going to turn our backs on you. So, if you want to stay here and settle down, if you want to become nonviolent, if you want to raise a family, you're Bosnian citizens, you're members of the military, it's fine, no problem. But you can't use this place to wage war against NATO troops that are arriving here.'

"What happened was that the Bosnians also in some way felt they needed to keep the mujahedin around. Keep in mind that in 1995, the Dayton accord was great, but it was no guarantee of anything. If you look at the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords, there've been dozens of agreements like that, and yet there has been no long-standing peace. So, the Bosnians felt that, just in case, in the event that hostilities should reawaken either with the Serbs or with the Croats, that they would need to keep the mujahedin around as an extra card, as a reserve."

Fresh memories of the war, utter distrust toward their former enemies, as well as the imminent arrival of tens of thousands of American and European soldiers with a mandate to implement the peace agreement made many Bosniaks feel uneasy.

To some Muslim clerics at the time, such as Muharem Štulanović, the disbanding of the mujahedin represented part of a "greater plan."

"Those who are coming now are bringing the seed of all evil of this world, and they will attempt to sow that seed in our Bosnian land," Štulanović warned in the autumn of 1995, in a sermon that is still available on some Islamic websites. "They want the destruction of the mujahedin. May Allah almighty destroy them! And all those who oppose the mujahedin! They want our army to be disbanded. My brothers, one cannot trust them! Those provisions of the Dayton peace agreement that need to be observed should be observed, but we cannot give ourselves

over to their mercy! Even if our weapons are not loaded, they should at least be somewhere close at hand! Close enough so [the Serb massacres of the Bosniak civilians that occurred in] Srebrenica and Žepa do not happen again."

That the weapons were "close at hand" was ensured, among others, by the commander of the mujahedin in Bosnia, Abu el-Ma'ali. The French intelligence service DST claims that el-Ma'ali, with the assistance of Bosniak leaders, succeeded in hiding the weapons that the army of Bosnia-Herzegovina was supposed to hand over after the signing of the Dayton peace agreement, including large numbers of shoulder-fired, low-altitude surface-to-air missile systems called "Strela-2M" (NATO reporting name SA-7 "Grail").

Also indicative of the mistrust and precaution of the Bosniak leadership in the days following the Dayton agreement was a military parade in the central Bosnian town of Zenica, when some 10,000 Bosnian Army soldiers, including the El-Mujahedin unit, marched in front of Bosnian Muslim President Alija Izetbegović and Bosnian Army commander Rasim Delić. The members of El-Mujahedin wore green headbands with a slogan in Arabic that said "Our Path Is Jihad," as they exclaimed "Allahu Akbar!" ("God is great!") and "Jihad!"

The military parade in Zenica left such a strong impression that video recordings and photographs of the event are still routinely used on television, newspapers, and on Internet blogs to underline the "danger of militant Islam that prowls in the heart of Europe."

"This was our demonstration of power. We must prove we have the power for further fighting if it's needed, if Dayton doesn't work," a spokesman for the Bosnian Army in Zenica explained at the time.

Such occasions, with the prominent participation of the mujahedin, strengthened the impression that the army of Bosnia-Herzegovina had acquired an increasingly pronounced Muslim character by the end of 1995. The Bosniak leadership, which since the beginning of the war had been claiming it was in favor of and fighting for secular and civil society in an internationally recognized, multiethnic, and multicultural Bosnia, was in this case trying to show that in the post-Dayton Bosnia it did not intend to be any less egalitarian than its enemies of yesterday. However, the "mujahedin factor" gradually became an increasing hindrance, according to Evan F. Kohlmann.

"As time went on, I think it also became a very embarrassing situation for the Bosnians," Kohlmann said. "As time went on, these guys became involved in more and more criminal activity in Bosnia, terrorist activity

outside of Bosnia. It also became an issue where the Bosnians couldn't then admit what they had done, because it was too late. I think in some ways they were trying to cover up what they had done, because I think in retrospect they realized it was a very poor decision. Just like the Serbs and the Croats, the Bosnian Muslims don't like to admit that they're wrong about anything. But I think that, implicit in their actions, you can see that they regretted that decision. The problem was it was too late to change it, and they decided that instead of approaching the United States, instead of approaching other Western countries, they would simply try to conceal the problem.

"Part of it was that they were very sensitive about Serb propaganda," Kohlmann continued. "Serb propaganda throughout the whole war had portrayed the Bosnian Muslims as violent extremists, fundamentalists, and as eager to jump on the bandwagon of the mujahedin. So the last thing that the Bosnians wanted to do was to come out and say, 'Hey, listen, we actually did support the mujahedin. Now they're bad people, our mistake.' That would not have gone over well in terms of their propaganda. So, I guess they figured – deny, deny, deny.

"That hasn't really entirely changed even now, but in some ways it began to change after 9/11 because some people in the Bosnian Muslim government began to: a) realize the significance of what the United States was involved in; b) the consequences for those who were not involved in the campaign against terrorist groups; and c) see that the individuals who were left in Bosnia who were connected with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan represented a threat not just to the security of the United States but also to the security of Bosnia."

It is also possible that the ambivalent attitude toward the mujahedin reflected a crucial dilemma that had tempted the Bosniak leadership throughout the war. Faced with the threat of the physical extermination of the nation, as well as international plans for the partitioning of the country, some members of the Bosniak political leadership long had flirted with the idea of establishing a small, exclusively Muslim state in the heart of Bosnia. This idea was clearly represented by some in the Bosniak delegation during the negotiations in Dayton in the fall of 1995. Though eventually suppressed, the idea was never entirely abandoned.