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# Al-Qaida and the Balkans: Myths, realities and lessons

By Marko Attila Hoare, 28th April 2005

Review of Evan Kohlmann (2004), *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network*, Berg: Oxford and New York, 239 + xiv pp.

The so-called 'anti-war movement' against the intervention of the United States (US), the United Kingdom and their allies in Iraq has involved the forging of some peculiar new alliances, none of which is more incongruous than the alliance of radical Islamists, right-wing libertarians and radical leftists that makes up the movement's more extremist wing. One of the ironies of this is that the same left-wing and right-wing militants who are now marching alongside their Islamist comrades in a common *jihad* against the US-led coalition, frequently claim that it is hypocritical for the US to be waging war against Islamic terrorism given the US record in the Balkans: the

US, they claim, supported Islamists in Bosnia and Kosovo against the Serbs. This, of course, begs the obvious response: if the US support for Islamists in Bosnia and Kosovo was objectionable, why are leading lights of the ‘anti-war movement’ themselves now supporting the Islamist ‘resistance’ in Iraq? Since the ‘anti-war movement’ is in reality an anti-American movement, it is hardly surprising that its celebrities support the right of Islamists to kill Americans, but object to their killing of Serbs who, in their eyes, were merely defending the principles of national sovereignty and/or revolutionary socialism from the evils of NATO, the US and the European Union. ‘Anti-war’ activists condemn the alleged US-Islamist alliance in the Balkans not because they fundamentally dislike Islamists, but because they fundamentally dislike the US (or, in the case of the right-wing libertarians among them, the US’s support for democracy abroad).

Nevertheless, and however hypocritical they may be, the accusations of the ‘anti-war’ people need to be answered. So far as the Kosovo Albanians and the Kosovo Liberation Army are concerned, accusations of Islamism seem particularly farcical: the Albanians are the world’s most moderate Muslims; their national movement was historically founded by Catholics; and they are among the US’s staunchest allies in the world today. Kosovo Albanians actually demonstrated *in favour* of US intervention in Iraq, perceiving, as they did, Saddam Hussein to be a tyrant similar to Slobodan Milošević. In Bosnia, however, it is true that several thousand *mujahedin* from the Middle East, some of whom had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan, did arrive to fight for the Muslims against Serb forces. The atrocities carried out by some of these *mujahedin* against Serb and Croat civilians have formed the basis for indictments by the Hague Tribunal for war-crimes against several senior Bosnian generals, including Rasim Delić, who commanded the Bosnian Army in the war years of 1993-95. The presence of these *mujahedin* formed a mainstay in Serb and Croat nationalist demonising of the Bosnian Muslims. Inevitably, after 11th September, various anti-Bosnian nuts such as Yossef Bodansky, Justin Raimondo and Srdja Trifković, have painted a lurid picture of the Bosnian regime of Alija Izetbegović as a sort of European branch of Al-Qaida; the arrival of the *mujahedin* in Bosnia as part of a wider Islamist conspiracy coordinated by Izetbegović and Osama bin Laden.

When I first came across Evan Kohlmann's provocatively titled book, I feared it would be more of the same sort of nonsense. In fact, it is as eloquent a refutation as one could hope to read of the idea that Izetbegović's Bosnian Muslims were in any way ideological fellow travellers of Al-Qaida, or its partners in terrorist activity. Written by a genuine expert in the subject – Kohlmann is an International Terrorism Consultant – this is a lucid and informed account of the involvement of the *mujahedin* in Bosnia, one that lays the myths to rest. It is a story of radical Arab Muslim veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan who seized upon the Bosnian war as another front in embattled Islam's struggle against its enemies. In turn, the desperate regime of Izetbegović, abandoned by the West and in danger of military collapse, accepted help from this dubious source. The Islamic radical circles that mobilised and armed the *mujahedin* in Bosnia were far from the Blofeld-style monolithic terror-organisation of popular imagination in the West, but rather a network of like-minded spirits for which Al-Qaida itself provided an organising kernel. But Al-Qaida was merely one element working among a multitude of Islamic organisations involved in Bosnia, many of them charities with official backing from more moderate sections of Islamic and Middle Eastern opinion, and it is unclear whether there was any very precise boundary between who was linked to Al-Qaida and who was not.

The distinction appears to have mattered little, if at all, to the great majority of the *mujahedin* in Bosnia. Bin Laden himself had no direct involvement in *mujahedin* operations in Bosnia, and plays very much an off-stage role in these events. Although his close associates were directly involved, and although he apparently hoped to use the *mujahedin* presence in Bosnia to create a base for operations against the US and Europe, this was a case of a minority of extremists attempting to latch on to a much larger Islamic movement of support for the Bosnian Muslims – one that united different shades of liberal, conservative and radical Islamic opinion – in order to manipulate it for their own ends. Most *mujahedin* in Bosnia had no such complicated long-term ambitions, but were merely concerned with the immediate struggle to defend Muslims in Bosnia.

Ironically, in light of later ‘anti-war’ activists’ accusations of US support for Al-Qaida in Bosnia, there was a wide perception among Islamic radicals at this time that the US was supporting the Serbs to exterminate the Muslims. In the words of one such radical at the time: ‘Who is the one who is fighting the Muslims? And, who is the one who wants to destroy them? There are two main enemies. The enemy who is at the foremost [sic.] of the work against Islam are [sic.] America and the Allies. Who is assisting the Serbs? And who is providing them with weapons and food? Europe, and behind it is America’ (p. 73). The US, for its part, played no role whatsoever in arming or organising the *mujahedin* in Bosnia, and indeed looked with suspicion upon their presence there. This presence would not be tolerated once the US was in a position to end it. There is thus no parallel between the US attitude to the *mujahedin* in Bosnia, and its prior attitude to the *mujahedin* during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

For those Islamists who hoped to turn Bosnia into a major base for operations against the rest of Europe, the experience rapidly proved disappointing. Bin Laden himself complained in a 1993 interview that although he had the same vision for Bosnia as he did previously for Afghanistan, the situation in the Balkans ‘did not provide the same opportunities as Afghanistan. A small number of *mujahedin* have gone to fight in Bosnia-Herzegovina but the Croats won’t allow the *mujahedin* in through Croatia as the Pakistanis did with Afghanistan’ (p. 77). Yet it was not only the problematic logistics that made Bosnia a poor base for a wider *jihad*. The connection with bin Laden and with wider terrorist plans is more interesting in hindsight, but at the time, the real dichotomy was between the foreign *mujahedin*, who formed an autonomous force on the ground in Central Bosnia, and the native Bosnian military. Here the relationship very quickly soured as the fundamentally opposed goals of the two groups quickly became clear. Stjepan Siber, deputy commander of the Bosnian army, said publicly in June 1993: ‘It was a mistake to let [the Arab guerrillas] in here. No one asked them to come. They commit most of the atrocities and work against the interests of the Muslim people. They have been killing, looting and stealing. They are not under the control of the Bosnian army and they must go. We hope that in the next few days President Izetbegović will order

them out' (p. 90). The recently indicted Rasim Delić condemned the *mujahedin* for 'perpetrating senseless massacres, like their enemies... they are kamikaze, desperate people' (p. 90). On occasion, regular Bosnian Army troops were forced to use force to protect Croat civilians and churches in Central Bosnia from the *mujahedin*.

Some ordinary Bosnian Muslims were attracted by the *mujahedin*'s bravery and prowess in battle and joined their ranks on that basis, but they made unwilling Islamic fundamentalists. And most Bosnian soldiers were disgusted by the *mujahedin* vision. According to the contemporary viewpoint of one Bosnian officer quoted here: '[t]he idea that we are going to build a Muslim state here like Libya is ridiculous... I would fight against such a state' (p. 93). One local Muslim joked at the time that the Arabs 'ask us to pray five times a day, but we prefer to have five drinks a day'. (p. 93). In Kohlmann's words: 'In spite of vigorous efforts to 'Islamicise' the nominally Muslim Bosnian populace, the locals could not be convinced to abandon pork, alcohol, or public displays of affection. Many Bosnian women persistently refused to wear the hijab or follow the other mandates for female behaviour prescribed by extreme fundamentalist Islam' (p. 115). With the signing of the Washington Agreement that ended the Muslim-Croat conflict in March 1994, the readiness of young Bosnians to join the *mujahedin*, and of the Bosnian authorities to tolerate them, receded. Kohlmann notes: 'In the hour of crisis, the Muslim fanatics had stepped forward with money and weapons when no one else would. With the sudden change in tempo of the Bosnian war, the bizarre and artificial Islamist phenomenon slowly began to fade back into the shadows' (pp. 115-116).

The Bosnian leadership was not yet able entirely to dispense with the *mujahedin* since the war with Karadžić's Serbs was continuing. But with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord in November 1995, foreign *mujahedin* were required to leave the country. NATO forces then took effective action to close their bases and deport them. The *mujahedin* responded with petty acts of violence against representatives of the international community, yet were unable to offer serious resistance to their dispersing by Western forces, which occurred virtually without bloodshed. An American United Nations

aid-worker was murdered by members of the *mujahedin* in November 1995, and the Bosnian Army apparently captured and killed those responsible. Yet such violence represented the *mujahedin's* anger at efforts to disperse them, rather than forming part of a wider terrorist operation against the West. Final success in dispersing the *mujahedin* was not achieved by NATO until after 11th September, due to the Bosnian authorities' reluctance wholly to turn against their former allies, some of whom had married Bosnian women and obtained Bosnian citizenship. Such was the extent of the alleged Bosnia-Al-Qaida connection. For all the grandiose plans of various Al-Qaida militants with regard to Bosnia, the radical Islamists were evicted from the country quietly and ignominiously, and Bosnia has yet to experience the kind of terrorist outrages to which New York, Madrid and Istanbul have fallen victim. As Kohlmann notes: 'when push came to shove, neither the Bosnian Muslim government nor its people stood up to defend the Arab radicals as the Taliban did in Afghanistan. Instead, in the wake of 11th September, the indigenous Bosnians changed paths dramatically and became a key ally in the war against terror' (p. 225).

The irony is that, for all the talk among some elements in the 'anti-war' movement of the US having masterminded the entry of Al-Qaida into Bosnia, the presence of the *mujahedin* there was actually evidence of the US's *unwillingness* to support the Bosnian struggle for survival. Kohlmann is highly critical of Izetbegović's alliance with the *mujahedin* and his reluctance to take action against them after Dayton, but he acknowledges that Izetbegović's hand was forced during the war and that the Bosnians may not have survived militarily without the *mujahedin's* assistance. It appears highly unlikely to the present author that the *mujahedin* actually made the difference between Bosnian survival and collapse, but this is a conclusion much easier to reach in hindsight than it would have been for Izetbegović in the dark hours of the war.

Kohlmann is very clear about the responsibility of the West and of the lessons to be learned: 'When we leave smaller, embattled peoples to the whims of purely diabolical men – be it Slobodan Milošević or Osama bin Laden – we permit the gravest of injustices. In the end, the bravery and

goodwill of the Bosnian people may have been the most crucial factor responsible for the ultimate failure of the Arab-Afghan experiment in Bosnia. Despite terrible war and starvation, the Bosnians desperately clung to their individual identity and held out against Salafi and Wahhabi brainwashing' (p. 226). Consequently: 'One can say conclusively that the attempt to create a local fundamentalist state in Bosnia (parallel to the development of the Taliban in Afghanistan) failed utterly... Even at his most radical, Alija Izetbegović was far from a Mullah Omar or even a Radovan Karadžić' (p. 229). Kohlmann concludes: 'Thus, the importance of Bosnia cannot be ascribed to the success of Arab-Afghans in local recruitment or in the establishment of an Islamic state. For Al-Qaida, the real value of Bosnia was as a step in the ladder towards Western Europe' (p. 230).

This excellent book is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the truth about an episode of the Bosnian war that is so frequently misrepresented by those with a political motive for doing so. The present author remains unconvinced by Kohlmann's insistence on the importance of Bosnia as a 'step in the ladder towards Western Europe' for Al-Qaida, given the apparent success which Islamist terrorists appear to have enjoyed in moving across European and American borders, in recruiting among the immigrant Muslim communities of Western Europe and in striking in various Western countries. Bosnia appears rather – from the perspective of this non-expert in international terrorism – to have been more of a detour and an irrelevance. Yet the implications of Kohlmann's conclusion is unavoidable: when the West colludes in oppression and injustice toward Muslim peoples, be they Bosnians, Kosovars, Chechens, Palestinians, Kurds or Kashmiris, we drive into the arms of our enemies those who would rather be our allies.

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