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**The Mujahedin in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Case Study
in the Evolution of Global Jihad**

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Summary

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Introduction

The current volume of publications dealing with Islamist militancy and terrorism defies belief in terms of its contents. This can be perceived as part of a frantic effort to catch up for the lack of attention devoted to this phenomenon during the 1980s and 1990s, when this field of research field was considerably underdeveloped. The present level of research activity is struggling to keep pace with developments. Thus, it is primarily preoccupied with attempting to describe what is actually happening in the world right now and possibly to explain future developments. This is certainly a worthwhile effort, but the topic of this paper is a modest attempt to direct more attention and interest towards the much overlooked sub-field of historical research within Jihadi studies.

The global Jihad has a long history, and everyone interested in this topic will be quite familiar with the significance of Afghanistan in fomenting ideological support for it and for bringing disparate militant groups together through its infamous training camps during the 1990s. However, many more events have been neglected by the research community to the point where most scholars and analysts are left with an incomplete picture, that is most often based on the successes of the Jihadi groups. Yet there are plenty of examples of failures which have rarely been placed in the larger context and a thorough understanding of these events would undoubtedly provide a much more nuanced picture of the Jihad. Examples such as al-Qaeda's failure to establish itself in the Horn of Africa and its exodus from Sudan, the lack of local support for the foreign Mujahedin in Bosnia or the more general failure to unite disparate Jihadi groups all provide stimulus for further inquiry. The framework of this particular sub-field would require systematic studies on overlooked and underexploited historical events within Jihadi studies, and this would obviously include obscure militant groups and events.

Somewhat ironically, the only known effort to compile historical case studies with the aim of learning from past mistakes has been undertaken by the Jihadis themselves. The seminal work of Abu Musab al-Suri in his *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* is little known outside Jihadi ideological circles, yet al-Suri spent several years during a self-imposed sabbatical from the Jihad to devise a new concept of Jihadi warfare. Considering the thought put into this massive 1600-page treaty one has no option but to conclude that he succeeded. Few Western scholars have approached this important book with the respect it deserves, the exception being Brynjar Lia in his equally seminal *Architect of Global Jihad*.¹

The sub-field of historical Jihadi studies is wide open to anyone seriously interested in acquiring a deeper understanding of the development of the Jihad. There are plenty of failed militant Islamist groups, lost battles, strategic blunders and vicious ideological strife to examine. They all represent a minuscule part of a large mosaic that, when properly pieced together and understood, will

¹ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad. The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, Hurst, London, 2007.

eventually present a much more comprehensive picture of the development of the global Jihad over the past three decades. This is indeed an interesting historical journey and one that presents a number of surprises even for the initiated. The following case study on the Mujahedin who fought in Nagorno-Karabakh is exactly one such very small piece, yet for all its obscurity it sheds light on several subsequent events linked to the Jihad.

The Case Study's Framework

The scope of this article is narrow indeed as it is concerned with specific events which took place in the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh between 1993 and 1995. First, an outline of events is presented in which the focus is on the foreign Mujahedin, primarily of Afghan origin, who fought alongside Azeri forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh theatre of operations. The scarcity of sources, even unreliable ones, will unfortunately make this section very light reading. The second part analyses not only the role of the foreign Mujahedin in this particular conflict but also their possible impact on future events and their role in the global Jihad which was slowly emerging during the mid-1990s.

Besides the untold story of the Mujahedin, another element which triggered an interest in this subject matter is the silence of other Mujahedin and Jihadis. Events in Nagorno-Karabakh have largely been ignored by the West since they occurred, but also by militant Islamists, and this silence may be interpreted as an anomaly in the otherwise observant community of Jihadi activists and commentators. Jihadi literature, speeches and online propaganda material is ripe with references to battlefields where the Holy Warriors have fought. Afghanistan and Palestine are obvious examples, but specifically concerning the mid-1990s, the trouble in the Balkans and the Caucasus was used as a rallying cry around the world. Foreign Mujahedin gravitated to perceived zones of religious conflict, first in Bosnia and later in Chechnya. Their self-imposed mission was to protect the local beleaguered Muslims from the onslaught by infidel armies, whether they liked it or not. Very rarely have the Mujahedin who went to Nagorno-Karabakh been mentioned and no discernable recruitment drive has been detected, the sole exception being the situation which will be described here.

There are of course logistical reasons for this, but logistics do not explain the near-silence from leading Jihadi ideologues or commanders. Osama bin Laden has mentioned the war in Bosnia on numerous occasions, but as far as this author is aware, he has never mentioned the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict even once, let alone the many Mujahedin who died there. A possible explanation for the silence might be the embarrassment factor. This event could very well be the single most decisive defeat of Mujahedin coming to the aid of a perceived beleaguered Muslim nation. Whatever their zeal, the Mujahedin were no match for the disciplined and highly motivated Armenian militias active in Nagorno-Karabakh, who obliterated them. It must be stated here that the Mujahedin who went to Nagorno-Karabakh did so largely as mercenaries, yet they came with a different mindset and were indeed recruited through an Islamist Afghan warlord.

Researching the Mujahedin in Nagorno-Karabakh turned out to be one of the most challenging research agendas undertaken by this author. Very few sources are available and more often than not the same article has been reproduced or reprinted elsewhere without proper credit to the original source. Some sources were notoriously unreliable and were mostly partisan to the conflict. Even the best book by far on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict –*The Black Garden*– by Thomas de Waal has only one mention of the Mujahedin in spite of meticulous research on a difficult topic by an expert on the subject. What little there is to be found must be handled with great care. Both sides in the conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan, have laid down their weapons but still hurl bitter accusations at each other. While the Armenians were keen to exploit the issue in the conflict itself and on the international diplomatic scene, through inflating numbers and deftly exploiting the mercenary angle, Azerbaijan practically denied there were any Mujahedin fighting on its behalf. The latter

argument required a preliminary question in the following historical outline: did the Mujahedin actually exist or are we dealing with a phantom army of Afghan tribesmen? The answer to the first part of the question must be yes; however, things very quickly become confused when trying to come to terms with numbers, names, dates and combat operations.

The few examples which will be presented here are highly fragmentary indeed and under no circumstances do they do justice to the complexity of this phenomenon. Suffice it to say that the final word on the Mujahedin in Nagorno-Karabakh has yet to be written. Besides highlighting a specific episode in the annals of the global Jihad there is a second reason for this particular case study. Events in Nagorno-Karabakh must inevitably be placed in a larger context, as they certainly did not occur in isolation. The metaphor of a small piece of a larger mosaic is applicable in this context and it is prudent to ask what role and impact the foreign Mujahedin played in subsequent events.

The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict over the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan contained all the essential features of a war in the sense that it could have been avoided, was largely pointless and no side gained much in the end. Primarily because of simultaneous conflicts erupting in Bosnia and Chechnya, the troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh attracted very little international interest at the time. For this reason it seems appropriate to place the fighting into its proper context by providing a rough outline of the conflict.

The break up of the Soviet Union brought about the independence of the former republics which made up the USSR. An already confusing situation was in certain localities compounded by mutual claims to specific geographical localities, and Nagorno-Karabakh is one example among many. Whatever the historical heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh, the crisis of the early 1990s originated in Stalin's map of the Soviet Union, where borders were redrawn with a clear vision to divide and conquer. When Stalin was the acting Commissar of Nationalities, the Sovietisation of Transcaucasia was a high priority, yet the region was already an unruly and contested area, and troubles emanated from both local players and foreign powers. Because of the existence of optimistic and long-range plans for Turkey which are beyond the scope of this paper, a decision was made on 7 July 1923 to establish the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. During Soviet rule the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was not subject to discussion, yet mutually incompatible claims by Armenia and Azerbaijan resurfaced and relations deteriorated after independence in 1991. The conflict began in February 1988 and armed confrontations continued until the ceasefire in May 1994, although full-scale hostilities only erupted in the winter of 1992. In essence it was a low-intensity war, yet thousands were killed and hundreds of thousands were displaced in deliberate campaigns of ethnic cleansing.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 actual fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh was conducted by small units of Armenian and Azeri irregulars. However, with the withdrawal of Russian forces vast quantities of arms were at the disposal of the belligerents, particularly from mid-1992 onwards.² At the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union no Azeri army existed, and until it was created most of the Azeri forces engaged in operations were drawn from the OMON (Special Purpose Militia) of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) and irregulars affiliated with the Azerbaijani Popular Front political movement. The Azeri OMON units were often staffed by former Soviet soldiers, some with experience in Afghanistan.³

² Patrick Gorman, 'The Emerging Army in Azerbaijan', *Central Asia Monitor*, nr 1, 1993.

³ *Ibid.*

An independent and efficient Azeri army would have taken years to create, primarily because of the scarcity of native Azeri officers. This void was filled, out of wartime necessity, with foreign officers and instructors, most of them Russian and Ukrainian nationals who were offered generous incentives for their much needed assistance to the government of Azerbaijan. The situation in 1992 has been summed up by Gorman as follows: Azerbaijan had neither the manpower nor the material resources to simultaneously guard its southern borders, quell potential ethnic conflict in the north, rein in rebellious Turks in Nakhichevan and continue operations against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴

The dire circumstances of the Azeri government required foreign assistance, and the players in this particular conflict originated from several countries including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Afghanistan, the US and Iran to mention the most important. The cast of characters is reminiscent of another age and involves the following in no particular order: Turkish military advisors, international oil companies, freelance military advisors, stranded Russian soldiers for hire, Afghan warlords, Ukrainian mercenaries and Saudi financiers, to mention the most colourful.

Former Soviet soldiers found themselves stranded in the Transcaucasia, quite literally, and with little food, no pay and no master they did what was to be expected, they fought or sold off their arms to the highest bidder. The former Soviet soldiers appeared on both sides in the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. The actual fighting was as vicious as it was absurd at times. The disintegration of the Soviet 4th army resulted in elements of the 366th motorised rifle regiment fighting other elements of its former sister unit the 23rd division. Armoured units could be rented for the day, including crews and ammunition and, with a faltering economy, former Soviet regimental officers were paid in vodka to shell Azeri units when their artillery provided their only means of an income. Officers from the Russian 4th army worked for the Azeri army on a strictly mercenary basis and were supplemented by a small contingent of Turkish instructors. But it would be incorrect to assert that the Russian government was directly implicated: the Russians who fought or assisted the Azeri armed forces did so exclusively on an individual basis.⁵

Officers, specialists and technicians were in high demand, but so were reliable soldiers who could actually fight. Another reason for importing Mujahedin from Afghanistan is to be found in the patchwork of ethnicities within Azerbaijan itself. Minorities such as the Kurds and the Lezghins were reluctant to fight as they had other plans and allegiances. Mercenaries were ironically to be trusted as they fought for gold, not for God or country. Yet it must be stated that the full-scale import of Afghans did not originate in religious disputes, although claims have been made to the contrary. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was much more ethnic, nationalistic and territorial than religious in its origins.

Participants in the conflict actually warned of the danger of turning a communal strife and ethnic conflict into a religious issue. Robert Kocharian, the then head of the State Committee on Defence of Nagorno-Karabakh stated his concerns in 1993: 'The Azeris want to turn this war into a religious one, which we haven't accepted from the beginning and which we won't accept'.⁶ Though Kocharian's statement on Azeri motives must be viewed with some scepticism, it nevertheless illustrates the lesser role of religion in this context.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Svante E. Cornell, 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict', Report nr 46, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, 1999.

⁶ Daniel Sneider, 'Afghan Fighters Joined Azeri-Armenia', *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 November 1993.

The Mujahedin

The first question which must be addressed concerns the presence of Afghan Mujahedin in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: were they actually there and did they fight? The answer is simply yes, and confirmation comes from a multitude of sources and eyewitnesses to the events, as will be evident in the following section, which details as far as possible the involvement of the foreign Mujahedin.

According to Caucasus expert Thomas de Waal, Azerbaijan recruited between 1.500 and 2.500 Afghan Mujahedin. Officially they did not exist, and the Azeri government denied their presence. However, the sightings of out-of-place bearded and long-haired tribesmen in downtown Baku, some of whom wore traditional Afghan robes, was so frequent that their existence could not be denied.⁷ In 1994 the Afghan President, Burnahuddin Rabbani, said in a letter to the Armenian President, Levon Ter-Petrosian, that ‘the Afghan leadership disapproves the participation of Afghan citizens in activities in Nagorno-Karabakh’.⁸ Apparently, the number of Afghans migrating to Transcaucasia was noticed even in an Afghanistan in turmoil.

In 1994 Armenia complained to the UN Rapporteur of the use of mercenaries in the conflict. The fact that plenty of CIS nationals –ie, Russians and Ukrainians– were or had been serving with the Azeri forces seemed a lesser concern. The complaint stated specifically that nationals from Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan had been recruited by Azerbaijan. Here it is prudent to observe that the Turkish nationals mentioned were invited by the Azeri government and acted as instructors, that their number was estimated at several dozen and that there is no indication that they engaged in actual combat. The role of the Iranians remains unknown.

The mercenaries were paid between US\$700 and US\$1,000 a month. Pilots were paid US\$5,000 for each successful mission. The mercenaries were primarily stationed in the village of Tolipar, Djitanov oblast; the village of Selful in Shamkhor oblast; between Kucho and Mingechaour oblasts; and, finally, in the town of Ali-Bayram. They were serving in the 860th and 723rd motorised rifle brigades, and others, presumably Russian specialists, in the air force, artillery units and the security service. The letter stated that the Afghan Mujahedin were heavily involved in the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the estimate ran up to a tremendous 3,000 persons. Interestingly, the report said that the Afghans were engaged in ‘special tasks’, meaning punitive operations against Azeri deserters, due to their sense of discipline, or rather lack of it.⁹

At the time the complaint was filed to the UN, only one Afghan national had been captured alive. His name was Bakhtiar Verbole Baberzai and although other sources have used the alternative spelling of Bakhtiyar Verballah Vaberzaid, the person in question is one and the same. Baberzai was born in 1974 in Afghanistan and was a resident of Mouzari Sherif village. He had served as an officer in the Azeri army from April 1994 and was captured on 20 April 1994. According to information revealed to his captors he had been fighting with the Afghan Uzbek warlord Dostum’s army from the age of 12. Baberzai came to Azerbaijan via Iran, and led a small contingent of 20 Mujahedin. During fighting on 22 April he lost an eye in combat and was taken prisoner on the Karabakh front by an unidentified Armenian unit.¹⁰ The prisoner further said that he fought for money to support his family, but complained that of the promised pay of up to US\$5,000 upon

⁷ Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York University Press, New York, 2003.

⁸ ‘Afghan Wild Goose in a Karabakh Cage’, *Moscow News*, nr 23, 5-12 June 1994.

⁹ Letter dated 21 December 1994 from the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia addressed to the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Question of the use of Mercenaries. Available at <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/50/plenary/a50-390add1.htm>

¹⁰ ‘Afghan Wild Goose in a Karabakh Cage’, *op. cit.*

completion of his contract, he had only received token handouts amounting to a few dollars. He had fought together with a larger group of Mujaheddin of about 250 fighters.

The most significant evidence, however, originated from the battlefields in Nagorno-Karabakh. Documents captured from Mujahedin killed during the fighting in south-western Azerbaijan provided evidence that Afghan Mujahedin had indeed been hired and were directly involved in frontline activity.¹¹ The documents included Islamic literature printed in Afghanistan, personal notebooks, tactical charts on artillery positions and personal letters to addresses in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as personal photographs of Afghan Mujahedin at locations within Azerbaijan. The documents were primarily in Dari, but also in Pashto, both Afghan languages unrelated to Azeri. Some of the documents wore the letterheads of the Scientific Islamic Society of Afghanistan and the Ministry of Education of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Many of the names listed in the documents were of typical Afghan or Pakistani origin.

Having confirmed the presence of a substantial number of primarily Afghan Mujahedin in Nagorno-Karabakh, further inquiry into the circumstances of their involvement is required. The following topics have been identified to highlight specific elements: recruitment, training and combat.

Recruitment and Entry

The Azeri Deputy Minister of the Interior, Rovshan Jivadov, made a secret trip to Afghanistan in Mid-August of 1993. There he met with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the notorious warlord and leader of the Islamist faction Hezb-e-Islami. Somehow a business deal was struck, though the contents of the agreement remain unknown. It appears very likely that a large proportion of the Mujahedin came from the ranks of the Hezb-e-Islami itself. Hekmatyar's involvement in supplying fighters appears to be well established; however, the source of the Mujahedin has in at least one case been misidentified as the Hezb-e-Wahdat.¹²

The first batch of 200 Afghans were brought back to Baku by Jivadov. They were affiliated with the Hezb-e-Islami, leased by Hekmatyar and paid for by Saudi Arabia.¹³ No details have emerged on the nature of the rental agreement. Jivadov himself, who would presumably be the best-placed source, was not to live long as he was killed in March 1995 after seizing military barracks in Baku in connection with an attempted coup. At the time he was the head of OPON (the paramilitary police force and successor to OMON), and was injured and later died on his way to the hospital.¹⁴ In a twist of events that could only occur in Transcaucasia, no group other than the Grey Wolves and rogue Turkish security officials were suspected of supporting the coup. This confusing story is better described elsewhere, if at all.

According to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), in a report dated 23 May 1994 the Hezb-e-Islami had increased its recruitment drive for Azerbaijan. It should be noted that RAWA's reports, usually compiled under exceptionally difficult circumstances, are generally quite reliable. In promoting women and human rights and advocating secular democracy for Afghanistan, the women of RAWA have reported extensively on the situation inside Afghanistan. According to the report, a group of about 500 Afghans were then *en route* to Baku, although other groups had preceded this expedition. Most of the recruiting took place in Peshawar, Pakistan, and was organised by a Hezb-e-Islami commander, Fazel Haq Mujahid.¹⁵ An unverified report said that among the Afghan Mujahedin were an undisclosed number of Arabs who had

¹¹ Daniel Sneider, 'Afghan Fighters Joined Azeri-Armenia', *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 November 1993.

¹² *Washington Post*, 11 August 1993.

¹³ Letter dated 21 December 1994 from the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ De Waal, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ <http://www.rawa.org/reports3.html#Hek>.

fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union during the 1980s.¹⁶ Presumably some of the Arabs were flown into Baku together with the Afghan Mujahedin; this, however, remains unsubstantiated although it seems quite likely, especially in the light of subsequent events in Azerbaijan.

Training

Estimates fluctuated wildly concerning how many Mujahedin actually entered Azerbaijan between 1993 and 1994. Numbers range from 1,000 to as high as 3,000. This divergence in numbers stems from a multitude of open sources, such as: 'about 1,000' according to the *Christian Science Monitor*; 'up to 1,500' from a testimony at the British House of Lords; 'between 1,000 and 1,500' according to an article in the *Washington Post* citing Western diplomats; '1,000' as stated by the *Daily Telegraph*;¹⁷ '2,500' according to the Armenian security service in Nagorno-Karabakh; and, finally, '1,500' as estimated by Uhlig.¹⁸

The various estimates offered are the result of a combination of factors. First of all, poor intelligence, propaganda efforts aimed at inflating or reducing the actual number for political purposes or the use or exclusion of other non-Afghan Mujahedin. Whatever the true number of Mujahedin, even the most conservative estimate of around 1,000 represents a considerable influx of foreign fighters. Unlike the parallel situations in Bosnia or Chechnya where individuals or smaller groups of foreign fighters made their way into the theatre of war, the scale of operations in Nagorno-Karabakh required a very different logistical setup, complete with a sizeable airlift capacity. The foreign Mujahedin were flown in on chartered civilian aircraft and this considerable traffic resulted in the joking reference to an unknown company called *Afghan Airlines*.

Once the Afghans had been recruited, primarily in Peshawar, they were flown to Baku, at times in transit through Iran. Their first stop upon arrival in Azerbaijan was the Aspheron Hotel in Baku which maintained an office that dealt with the logistical side of the new arrivals, such as accommodation and moving the fighters on to their designated units.¹⁹ An unknown number of the Mujahedin were trained within Azerbaijan, in particular at the former Soviet base of the 104th Airborne Division close to Gianja, the former Kirovabad.²⁰ This was verified through photographs taken from fallen Mujahedin. Their Armenian captors had themselves been trained at the facility years before the Soviet break-up and were intimately familiar with the training grounds. The Mujahedin were divided into combat groups, sometimes labelled as special forces, and they were formed in training camps in Doliburun, Jdanov oblast, Seifuli in Shamkor oblast and, finally, in Ali-Bairamli in Yevlakh oblast.

Unconfirmed reports have stated that the Afghans as well as Azeri commandos were trained by former members of the US Special Forces. The same source mentioned that the Afghans were paid a paltry US\$10 a month.²¹ The latter claim appears much more likely than the former, yet no evidence has materialised to support either claim, although it is known that some Afghans were promised a monthly salary of US\$500.

Interestingly, the Afghans were treated better than the regular soldiers serving in the Azeri armed forces. Their food was better and they were granted occasional leave in Baku or even back in Afghanistan. According to Bakhtiyar, who was captured in April 1994, the Afghans were living apart from their Azeri allies. Apparently the reason for keeping them apart was due to the Afghans being particularly upset by the blatant breaching of the Sharia by the local Azeris, who to some

¹⁶ <http://www.cilicia.com/Azeriterrorism.htm>.

¹⁷ Ahmed Rashid, 'Bitter Afghanistan Struggle Helps Fuel Asian Conflicts', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 November 1993.

¹⁸ Mark A. Uhlig, 'The Karabakh War', *World Policy Journal*, Winter 93/94, vol. 10, issue 4.

¹⁹ Statement by the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Serj Sargsyan, delivered at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 19 December 2001.

²⁰ Sneider, *op. cit.*

²¹ Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, Sharpe Publisher, 1999.

extent were despised for their un-Islamic behaviour. The Afghans were respected, though not necessarily loved, for their discipline and zeal and several accounts more than indicate the need to keep the Afghans at a distance. The link between the Mujaheddin in the field and Azeri headquarters was maintained by an Afghan named Vaidallah who was responsible for liaison and coordination.

Combat

Karabakh Armenian paramilitary units began intercepting radio transmission in Dari around September 1993, indicating a novel and distinctly foreign presence in the conflict. This was confirmed by the head of the National Security Department, Kamo Abrahamian, who as a former Soviet paratrooper with experience in Afghanistan had been trained in Dari. According to Abrahamian, the Afghans were deployed in several different locations, thus necessitating radio contact to maintain organisation.²²

A surprise attack was launched on 21 October 1993 by approximately 300 Afghan Mujahedin in Jevrail, thus breaking a longer cease-fire. However, within 48 hours the Armenians had mounted a counter-offensive and succeeded in repulsing the attack. According to Abrahamian, the Afghans were heavily armed with Russian infantry weapons. Their battlefield conduct was remarkable in the sense that they fought with far greater discipline than the Azeris. Further documents were recovered by the Armenians after the battle in Goradis and Zangelan, both near the Iranian border, thus providing further evidence of foreign fighters.

In late 1993 the combination of Azeri artillery, Turkish advisers and Afghan and Pakistani fighters did actually manage to achieve small victories on the battlefield for the hard-pressed Azeris. Yet the general levels of operational and tactical incompetence ensured that these minor successes would not last for long or have any lasting effect.²³

In spite of the official Azeri position that Afghan Mujahedin did not exist, such individuals were easily spotted in tea-shops in Baku because of their tribal dress and full beards. Apparently discipline broke down occasionally, even requiring young Azeri conscripts to be moved to other sectors of the front to avoid their killing by the Mujahedin. Insubordination became a problem, probably because of two characteristics specific to Afghan Mujahedin: fearlessness and the concept of loyalty. Apparently they cared little for their Azeri relations, who were considered inadequate paymasters and poor soldiers but also, and perhaps even worse, as only nominally Muslim.²⁴ They did, however, respect their adversaries, the local Armenian Karabakhis, who had an intimate knowledge of the terrain and the ability to exploit this advantage on a tactical level. Often the Mujahedin would find themselves outmanoeuvred or fired at from multiple directions, not even knowing where the enemy was placed.²⁵

The presence of Afghans did apparently cause some friction on religious grounds between the local Azeris and the Afghan Mujaheddin, based on religious practice and the feelings of some Azeris who themselves had fought against the Mujahedin in Afghanistan during the soviet war. Pragmatism would prevail, but at least some veterans were very sceptical of the prospect of fighting alongside their former enemies from Afghanistan.

Many atrocities were committed during the conflict, including decapitations and the ritual mutilation of civilians, although it is not known what role the Mujahedin played in this respect. However, their presence at the frontline and the style of fighting reminiscent of the Afghan theatre

²² Sneider, *op. cit.*

²³ John E. Sray, 'Turkish SOF train Azerbaijani Forces', January 1994, <http://leav-www.army.mil/fmso/documents/turkssof.htm>.

²⁴ Goltz, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Paul Harris, 'Nagorno-Karabakh', *Combat and Survival*, vol. 11, issue nr 5, August 1999.

increase the possibility of their involvement. Eyewitness reports have confirmed that villagers had had their heads sawn off by advancing Azeri troops, although no unit identification was presented.²⁶

Apparently the Mujahedin, both Afghans and Chechen, adapted quite well to their new environment. Employing guerrilla tactics in a mountainous terrain they were able to apply some of the lessons of the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, although this time with less success. While they were in part motivated by financial incentives, the opportunity to once again fight Russian soldiers, at least in their own perception, also played a role. Moreover, some Mujahedin saw beyond Nagorno-Karabakh and linked this particular battlefield to emerging conflicts in neighbouring Chechnya and Dagestan.

The Aftermath

What happened to the surviving Mujahedin? Did they settle in Azerbaijan, return to Afghanistan or Pakistan or did they move on to other conflicts? From the scant evidence available it would seem that the foreign Mujahedin fell into three main categories: (1) those who migrated to other conflicts in the Caucasus; (2) those who settled in Azerbaijan; and (3) those who were killed in action. The proportions between these three groups are not known, although sources indicate that the Mujahedin sustained very heavy losses. Their fearlessness in battle was no match for the superior tactics of the Karabakh Armenians. The actual number of prisoners captured alive is unknown, but it is believed to be very low indeed. Both sides boasted of a policy of 'no prisoners' and events more than suggest that some units took the expression very literally.

Activities in the Caucasus

It has been speculated that after the armistice in May 1994, the majority of foreign fighters migrated to nearby trouble spots in the Caucasus and the Balkans. There is some truth in this version, although it seems that the majority did not so much migrate as just return home. However, the effects of the spill-over into the Chechen war should not be underestimated.

There are strong and substantial links between the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Chechnya, especially at the senior field commander level. The best field commanders to emerge during the first Chechen war had front-line experience from Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia.²⁷ Some of the tactics used in Nagorno-Karabakh would later be applied in Chechnya.²⁸ The Saudi national Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Suweilem, known by his *nom de guerre* Ibn al-Khattab, joined Chechen Mujahedin fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh sometime between 1992 and 1993.²⁹ Khattab would later command the International Islamic Battalion in Chechnya as its commander, or Emir. As one of the Chechen's most prominent Jihadi warlords, Khattab enjoyed close relations with another field commander, Shamil Basayev, who was of Chechen origin.

Basayev arrived with a small group of fighters presumably in early 1992. This has been confirmed by Colonel Azer Rustamov of the Azeri army who in a 2005 interview said that hundreds of Chechen volunteers rendered invaluable help. Rustamov further said that the Chechen contingents were led by Shamil Basayev and Salman Raduyev.³⁰ Interestingly, Basayev apparently became disillusioned with the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In his eyes the fighting had little to do with a proper Jihad and was much more about nationalistic sentiments. On 8 May 1992, during the battle for Shusha, a picturesque medieval town situated on a hilltop, one of the last Mujahedin to leave the

²⁶ Speech in by Baroness Cox on 17 March 1999, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk>.

²⁷ Carlotta Gall & Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya. A Small Victorious War*, Pan Books, London, 1997.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Konul Khalilova, 'Chechen Fighter's Death Reveals Conflicted Feelings in Azerbaijan', *Eurasia Insight*, 14 May, 2002, www.eurasianet.org.

³⁰ M. Khatchig, 'Terror in Karabakh. Chechen Warlord Shamil Basayev's Tenure in Azerbaijan', <http://ermeni.org/english/chechen-terrorists-azerbijan.htm>.

city was no other than Shamil Basayev who would eventually return to his native Chechnya and lead a relentless insurgency against Russian troops and achieve infamy for his role in several mass hostage takings. In an interview with an Azeri television station, ANS, in 2000, Basayev reminisced about the fall of Shusha: ‘Shusha was just abandoned. About 700 Armenians launched an offensive and it was just a veneer. With such a strong garrison and so many weapons, especially as Shusha itself is in a strategically significant position, one hundred men can hold it for a year easily. There was no organisation.No one was responsible for anything’.³¹

Nagorno-Karabakh is interesting in the sense that this was where Khattab and Basayev met and the formation of an early alliance was founded. Both of them would later travel together to Afghanistan and become acquainted with yet more international Mujahedin. Afghan and Chechen Mujahedin would continue to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh until the ceasefire in 1994. Yet at some point the frequent flights between Kabul and Baku would not only import Afghan Mujahedin into the conflict but also take Chechens back on the return flight. The Chechens who went to Afghanistan went for training purposes at the camps in Kunduz and Taloqan.³²

Activities in Azerbaijan

Other Mujahedin settled in Azerbaijan, and a few began using Baku as a staging area and liaison point for future militant Islamist action. Apparently this happened with the blessing of the Azeri government, or at the very least with its tacit approval. A sanctuary was granted on condition that the Mujahedin would support the Azeri side if hostilities were to resume. Very little is known about events in Azerbaijan in the first year after the armistice, yet it appears possible that militant Islamists had acquired more than a passing interest in Transcaucasia.

While al-Qaeda was based in the Sudan it opened a satellite office in Baku.³³ The office was up and running in August 1995, with a significant liaison office having been established. This was headed by an Egyptian operative by the name of Ibrahim Eidarous. He would be responsible for the Baku station for two important years between 1995 and 1997 until he was replaced by Ahmed Salam Mabrouk. It would seem that Eidarous did a good job at whatever he was doing as he was subsequently promoted to head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad cell in London in September 1997.³⁴

It would seem that the Afghan Hezb-e-Islami had acquired an interest in Azerbaijan since it established an office in Baku in 1995 which was run by its representative Gul Mohammed. The office, using the BIF (Benevolence International Foundation) as a cover, was active in supporting the Chechen rebels, primarily through a senior al-Qaeda operative, Saif ul-Islam al-Masri –alias Abu Islam al-Masri–. The latter was a member of al-Qaeda’s military committee and apparently had a range of tasks to carry out while he was based in Baku. Among them was regular contact with Wadih el-Hage, the leader of the al-Qaeda cell in Nairobi that would later destroy the US embassy with a car bomb in 1998. It was the responsibility of el-Hage to relay communications between Saif ul-Islam and the al-Qaeda military committee in Afghanistan, especially with Mohammed Atef and Osama bin Laden.³⁵

Very few paid any attention to activities emanating out of Baku at the time –that came in retrospect–. After the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Africa, international pressure centred on Baku, accusing the Azeri government of harbouring terrorists. Azerbaijan refused to extradite suspects and instead chose to repatriate them. Apparently, the Azeri concern was not a diplomatic

³¹ De Waal, *op. cit.*

³² Sanobar Shermatova, ‘Khattab and Central Asia’, *Moscow News*, 13 September 2000.

³³ Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, Phoenix, London, 2001.

³⁴ ‘Government’s Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-Conspirator Statements’, United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnaout, United States District Court Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, Case nr 02 CR 892, 31 January 2003.

³⁵ ‘Governments Evidentiary Proffer...’, *op. cit.*

crisis with the US but the fear of a backlash from Mujahedin who would see extradition as a betrayal. By 1999 the US State Department noted in its annual report on global terrorism that Azerbaijan served as a logistic hub for international Mujahedin with ties to terrorist groups, some of which were actively supporting the Chechens.³⁶

Azerbaijan and Jihadism

In an interesting turn of events Azerbaijan, which imported a very large contingent of foreign Mujahedin to assist in the battle for Nagorno-Karabakh, has been very active in eliminating Islamist militancy on the domestic scene. Whatever the political and religious lessons learned during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh the Azeri government has since 2001 been determined that Jihadism does not strike root in Transcaucasia.

Is Jihadism a current threat to Azerbaijan? The answer to this question differs considerably, depending on who is asked. According to the Azeri government there is a grave danger from al-Qaeda and local Jihadis, and claims have been made that several terrorist cells have been broken up and plots thwarted. For instance, in March 2006 the Minister of National Security announced that an al-Qaeda terrorist cell located in the Caucasus was planning to recruit Azeri women for suicide missions. Minister Mahmudov stated that this was the worst case in the government's experience in fighting extremist groups.³⁷ Although dozens of foreigners have been arrested or extradited to their respective countries of origin, the Azeri governmental insistence on a direct link to al-Qaeda requires closer scrutiny. The hostile climate to any form of religious extremism, or even conservatism, makes Azerbaijan an unlikely area of operation for global Jihadis. Even neighbouring Chechens have found themselves unwanted and harassed, so the sympathy is minimal. A haven it is certainly not.

More problematic is the government's habit of connecting local movements and radicals to a wider global conspiracy, which indeed exists, but seems to have bypassed Azerbaijan. Some observers have speculated that this preoccupation with the al-Qaeda connection is a deliberate attempt to divert attention from more mundane yet real socio-economic problems.³⁸ There is a fear of infiltration of Islamist militants in the armed forces and there have been isolated incidents, enough to cause concern but insufficient for a witch hunt. A massive crackdown on suspected militants took place in October 2007, yet many details regarding the identity or even the number of detainees have yet to be revealed. Government officials have claimed that disrupted plots were organised from abroad without providing actual details of these purported external links.

However, it is indisputable that Salafism has made inroads in Azeri society mainly due to an influx of foreign missionaries. A sizeable influx of Muslim missionaries from Iran, Chechnya, Dagestan and the Persian Gulf countries entered Azerbaijan from the mid-1990s onwards. Among this diverse group of missionaries there were adherents of the Salafi and Wahabi branches of Sunni Islam. Their particular interpretation of Islam was quite alien to the vast majority of Azeris and their presence created considerable tension. Since the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999 many Salafi-oriented individuals have sought refuge in Azerbaijan.³⁹ These individuals were considered undesirable by the government and numerous Azeris have received prison sentences for aiding the Chechen Mujahedin, clearly testifying to Azerbaijan's desire to stay clear of the conflict in Chechnya.

³⁶ US State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999*,
<http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/1999report/eurasia.html#Azerbaijan>.

³⁷ Anar Valiyev, 'Al Qaeda in Azerbaijan: Myths and Realities', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, issue nr 10, 18 May 2006.

³⁸ Valiyev, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Anar Valiyev, 'Terror Attacks against US and British Embassies Thwarted in Azerbaijan', *Terrorism Focus*, vol 4 , issue nr 36, 6 November 2007.

The hostile atmosphere to Salafism was in part created and sustained by the official Shi'a clergy in Azerbaijan and the government as well. A steady stream of reporting depicted Salafis as heretics or terrorists, or a combination of both.⁴⁰ In spite of this campaign it has been estimated that in Baku alone there are now around 15,000 Salafi adherents, predominant Azeri youths. The rise of Salafism is in part a reaction to the growing influence of Iran and thus acts as a counterbalance. The general disillusionment caused by the government's inability to provide the population's basic needs has been shrewdly utilised in Salafi propaganda in the quest for social justice. In this context it is interesting to note that the Salafis have used the Azeri defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh in their effort to portray the government as inept and, moreover, has made their political aspirations clear.⁴¹

Salafism, and its derivative Jihadism even more so, is highly unlikely to gain popularity in Azerbaijan, except for the purpose of channelling socio-economic and political discontent. However, the relatively weak traces of militant Islamism may be strengthened indirectly as a consequence of the government's no-tolerance policy. Radicalisation is on the rise among a minority of Azeri youth and the current political line may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴² The Azeri government and the Salafi-oriented groups are certainly on a collision course and it is quite possible that the pressure applied on the Salafis could in turn result in violent action by smaller groups, thus setting the stage for a spiralling of violence and retribution.

Conclusions

The Mujahedin who fought in Nagorno-Karabakh represent a small but overlooked fragment of the mosaic that constitutes the larger global Jihad as it has developed over the past decades. This particular case illustrates that forgotten or ignored incidents might still entail some analytical relevance in piecing together the trajectory of the wider Jihad. There are still more questions than answers concerning the events between 1993 and 1994, and much will probably never be revealed. Yet the study of this as well as similar incidents reveals the level of linkage between seemingly disparate militant Islamist groups. While the significance of Baku has generally been overlooked, the few examples presented here specifically point to links with Jihadis in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Kenya.

This more or less forgotten case entails a few but quite interesting lessons. The Azeri government chose to hire the Afghan contingent on what appeared to be a strictly mercenary basis based on a need to bolster its own inadequate forces. Yet by introducing a foreign element into the conflict a new dimension emerged that would give a much more religious cast to the situation, something which was not present in the primarily nationalistic ideology expounded by both sides. This development raises the issue of a possible connection to the global Jihad. By studying events as they unfolded in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict it seems that this connection was not present at the beginning, but that over time the local conflict would morph into a more international phenomenon. Al-Qaeda did in fact establish a foothold in Azerbaijan during the mid-1990s as a direct consequence of the conflict and this may not have been a welcome development as far as the Azeri authorities were concerned.

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⁴⁰ Aner Valiyev, 'The Rise of Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 3, issue nr 13, 1 July 2005.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² 'Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State', *Europe Report* nr 191, International Crisis Group, Brussels, 25 March 2008.