

BOOK REVIEW

***The Arabs at War in Afghanistan.* Hamid Mustafa and Leah Farrall. London: Hurst & Co, 2015. Pp.355**

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The book offers an eyewitness account of jihadi movements in Afghanistan. It is co-authored by Mustafa Hamid, commonly known as Walid al Masri, with Leah Farrall. Hamid was among the first foreigners who came to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and fled to Iran after the United States' invasion of Afghanistan where he was placed under house arrest till his release in 2011. Leah Farrall was a counter-terrorism analyst turned academician. Farrall claims that the book is based on "unified narratives" written in the form of a dialogue between the two. In their communication, while they disagree on many issues, both agree that "mutual understanding is important to respecting differences and achieving peace" (p. 18).

Spanning over twelve chapters, the book starts with a list and explanation of important people, widely known and unknown training camps, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, religious terminology, important locations, militant organisations and major battles fought, making it interesting for a diverse audience. Farrall, by comparing her book with other books written earlier, for example Basil Muhammad's work, *The Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, Abu Musab al Suri's *The Global Call* and Aymen al Zawahri's autobiographical reflections and information of Arab-Afghans, claims that that this book brings a new insight to its readers. Starting with the early history of jihad, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* also details the global Salafi jihad that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The book identifies key characteristics, legacy, and the history of Arabs and Afghans, and how this legacy in the form of jihadist movements continues to manifest itself in present day conflicts in the Arab world. These include the Salafi-Wahabi jihad emerging from Afghan jihad and the conflicts in which the jihadists subsequently participated in Asia,

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North Africa and Middle East with the objective to fight the infidel influences.

Hamid narrates the Arabs' influx into Afghanistan due to frustration with their despotic regimes, the Arab states' defeat in wars with Israel and influence of foreign interventions. Afghanistan sheltered the leaders of Islamic movements from Egypt and Syria who were prisoners in their own countries in the later period of 1986 and 1992. The term 'Arab-Afghan,' first used in 1989, Hamid recounts, was considered derogatory, back then. The Arabs looked down upon Afghans who followed Sufi or Hanafi school of thought but the Afghans tolerated the Arabs mainly because they were financiers of jihad.

There are several interesting accounts in the book, such as the one about wide differences between Osama Bin Laden (OBL) and Mullah Muhammad Omar as the former would not abide by the latter's instructions. Since Hamid was a known and well-respected name among Afghan commanders for being close to both Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership, he would often mediate between the two. He claims never to have joined al-Qaeda but admits that he took an oath of allegiance to Omar since both shared similar views about jihad.

He details how the defeat in the 1983 battle of Urgon led to the idea of formation of Maktab al-Khadamat, the Peshawar-based Arab organisation, for the provision of supplies and assistance to Afghan Mujahidin. The enormous inflow of foreign funds stimulated corruption due to which OBL parted ways with Maktab and established al-Qaeda after the victory in Jaji on Pak-Afghan border. According to Hamid, the original reasoning of jihad ended with the Soviet withdrawal. One reason cited for the weakening of that reasoning was the rampant corruption in the distribution of aid and weapons. After the Soviet withdrawal, many Arabs stayed in Afghanistan to continue the fight, realising they could not return to their countries.

As a result of competition between different groups, a new school of thought, inspired by Jalalabad School, emerged after 1989 which focused more on violence than political strategy. The new groups were led by new

and inexperienced youth who received funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Unfortunately, these views and methods of Salafi jihad are presently seen in the thinking and practices of ISIS. This school, at present, appeals greatly to the youth with extreme views of jihad, because of its focus on action without consequence. Much of the passion to fight came from media propaganda through magazines like “Al Jihad.”

Hamid also highlights that the internal struggle within Taliban and between Taliban and al-Qaeda was based on the differences over the tactics and ideas. He explains, “the Arabs follow a leader not an idea” (p.62). Both Afghans and Arabs were trained in the Qais camp, initiated by Mawlawi Mansur, with the objective to initiate a political jihadi movement to enforce Sharia in Afghanistan, but afterwards the Arabs followed their leader and Afghan Mujahidin followed the idea they believed in. The Afghan jihadists eventually opted for the Taliban, a choice that enormously affected the history of the world. The book also shows how OBL’s global agenda of jihad got momentum after the 1998 bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In a bid to establish himself, OBL agreed to finance the 9/11 plot because after the forced closure of Khaldan camp in Khost, which was part of Jalalabad school of thought, many fighters and potential recruits had joined al-Qaeda.

Before 9/11, Mullah Omar once again warned OBL against making pronouncements against the United States, which was ignored by the former. According to Hamid, most of the older members of al-Qaeda disagreed with 9/11 attacks, except OBL, al-Zawahri and many of those who belonged to Jalalabad school of thought. Perhaps they miscalculated that the war would be like the war against the Soviets. Hamid compares Taliban’s role with that of Mujahidin who knew how to face and defeat the Soviets, whereas Taliban could not withstand the US air power.

A point he has overlooked is that the US and its allies supported the previous jihad while the latter war was supported and backed by international community against Taliban, which they could not win. The Salafi Wahabi cover and the blessings of scholars were given to Arab-Afghans and the Jalalabad School during the first jihad against Soviets but

not to the second jihad against Americans. An irony is that the same scholars are now blessing the Salafi jihadists in Syria in their sectarian fighting and before that they did the same in Iraq.

Throughout the book, Hamid's inclination and partiality towards Taliban, particularly Mullah Omar, despite him being close to al-Qaeda leadership, leaves many questions unanswered. Moreover, instead of projecting her viewpoint, the book appears to be more of an autobiography than a dialogue between the two, as claimed by Farrall.

The Arabs at War in Afghanistan should be an essential reading for policy makers and academia to understand the current wave of the so-called jihad, which is dominated by *takfiris* as well as the patterns of the power politics of the major powers that define the yesterday's freedom fighters as the present day terrorists for their vested interest. It can also be an insightful read for those who focus on the so-called clash of civilizations theory that fashioned Islamophobia, and which is widening the gap between the West and Islam.