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When Tunisians Fired the Start Gun for 9/11

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Brief Analysis

A footnote in one decade of jihadist history can become a major mobilizer for terrorists and foreign fighters in subsequent years, and few cases illustrate this problem better than the Tunisian operatives involved in the 2001 murder of an Afghan rebel leader.

Twenty years ago today, Tunisians helped carry out the assassination of Afghan Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before the 9/11 attacks. In the late 1990s, Massoud had been a key U.S. ally against the Taliban's advances, and although his fortunes had changed significantly by 2001, Washington would no doubt have relied on him heavily during the post-9/11 invasion were he still alive. Flash forward to this week, and the Taliban has just declared victory over resistance forces led by Massoud's son Ahmad in the Panjshir Valley—a sobering bookend to a battle the group has been waging against the Northern Alliance for two decades.

Yet the heavy Tunisian involvement and other circumstances of the 2001 assassination merit a closer look, not only for their impact on subsequent developments in the global jihadist movement, but also because of the implications they hold now that Afghanistan is **once again under Taliban control**. Massoud's death served multiple purposes, some of which were not entirely evident until after the fact: his killing was a gift that the Tunisian Combat Group (TCG) and al-Qaeda gave the Taliban for fighting their local enemy, as well as a public signal to launch the 9/11 attacks and an important part of al-Qaeda's preparations for the eventual coalition invasion of Afghanistan. This is the story of the assassination, who was behind it, and why it still matters for individuals attempting to understand

how jihadist networks change over time—and what types of operatives may now return to Afghanistan.

The Evolution of Tunisian Links with al-Qaeda

The TCG was founded in June 2000 by Abu Iyad al-Tunisi and Tarek Maroufi, two key cogs in the Arab diaspora machinery created to assist the global jihadist movement in Europe. Tunisian jihadists were mainly based in Milan, Paris, Brussels, and London and were best known for document forgery. Many had also previously seen combat as foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, and, to a lesser extent, Chechnya.

During the 1980s, jihadist theorist Abu Musab al-Suri described Tunisians in Afghanistan as “a scattered group with a less-than-perfect image” due to their frequent infighting, disorganization, and lack of cohesion. By the 1990s, however, Tunisian operatives were primarily working as middlemen in jihadist facilitation networks, with enough experience to avoid internal squabbling and cooperate effectively with multiple groups. By 2001, the nascent TCG was ready to help al-Qaeda with Massoud’s assassination and other plots, as well as plan external operations in Europe.

The TCG, Massoud’s Killing, and 9/11

Abu Iyad arrived in Afghanistan in early 2000 after being based in London since 1994 and studying under jihadist ideologue Abu Qatada al-Filistini. When he founded the TCG that June, the group had at least twenty members total. Abu Iyad was in charge of the Tunisian guest house in Jalalabad, while cofounder Maroufi was based in Brussels and focused mainly on plotting terrorist operations and overseeing facilitation and logistical networks abroad.

At least three other members served on the TCG’s advisory council: Lutfi bin Ali, Adil bin Ahmad bin Ibrahim Hakimi, and Muhammad bin Riyadh Nasri. Hakimi was Abu Iyad’s deputy in Afghanistan and oversaw communication and recruitment efforts. He also commanded the “Tunisia Cave” during the Battle of Tora Bora in December 2001, while Nasri was the TCG’s top military commander for operations inside Afghanistan. Other senior members included Abd al-bin Muhammad bin Abis Awrji, the group’s head of finance

In Europe, Sami bin Khamis bin Salih Essid served as a member of Maroufi’s network in Milan, while Kamal bin Musa filled a similar role in London. This network was involved in several failed terrorist plots on the continent, targeting the Strasbourg Christmas Market in December 2000, the European Parliament in February 2001, the U.S. embassy in Paris in July 2001, Belgium’s Kleine-Brogel Air Base in September 2001, and the Philips Tower in Brussels in February 2003.

By the time 9/11 came about, Abu Iyad had become one of Osama bin Laden’s top lieutenants. According to a 2016 interview, when Maroufi met bin Laden and eventual al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan in 2000, he saw the encounter as “the perfect opportunity to gain a foothold in the organization.” The fact that bin Laden assigned the Massoud assassination to the TCG around this time likely reflected Abu Iyad’s importance.

The operation was executed jointly with al-Qaeda military chief Muhammad Atef. According to Mustafa Hamid, an insider with the foreign fighter networks collectively dubbed the “Afghan Arabs,” the TCG had been planning the assassination with al-Qaeda for more than a year. Posing as journalists interested in interviewing Massoud, Tunisian operatives Dahmane Abd al-Sattar and Bouraoui al-Ouaer planted a bomb in a camera they had stolen from a French television network and then exploded it near him—reportedly right after asking him, “Commander, what are you going to do with Osama bin Laden when you have conquered Afghanistan?”

In her memoir *Les soldats de lumière*, Sattar’s second wife, Malika al-Aroud, encapsulated the nexus between TCG components in Afghanistan and Europe. She explained that before her husband traveled to Afghanistan from Brussels, he studied *manhaj* (Islamic methodology) with Abu Qatada in London in May-August 2000. While in

Britain, he obtained a letter of introduction to interview Massoud from Yasir al-Siri, an exiled member of the Egyptian jihadist group al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah. Later, when applying for journalist visas in Pakistan, Sattar and Ouaer received stolen passports from Maroufi, who had procured them from Milan-based operative Fadhl Saadi (part of Sami bin Khamis bin Salih Essid's aforementioned network).

Furthermore, although Tunisian operatives were not among the 9/11 hijackers, several of them were reportedly involved in or had knowledge of the plot. According to Nasri and other figures, Massoud's assassination was intended as a deliberate signal for the hijackers to set the U.S. attack in motion. Elsewhere, Spanish courts have ruled that Tunisian operative Hedi bin Yusuf Budhiba provided logistical/financial assistance and counterfeit documentation to 9/11 hijackers while they were in Spain and Germany. He later left Hamburg for Istanbul just days before the attacks, likely linking up with the Turkey-based al-Qaeda networks that became an important logistics and facilitation hub for Tunisian jihadists in subsequent years.

One related 9/11 case is still open—that of Abderraouf Jdey, a Tunisian Canadian who was initially among the twenty-nine “finalists” for carrying out the plot. He even prepared a martyrdom video message and trained on a PlayStation flight simulator while staying with Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, Muhammad Atta, and other al-Qaeda figures in Karachi, Pakistan, that summer. He is believed to have dropped out of the operation upon traveling to Canada sometime before the attacks; according to the 9/11 Commission, al-Qaeda assigned him to the “second wave” of similar attacks it hoped to carry out later on. Jdey remains on the FBI's Most Wanted List for further questioning, and little is publicly known about what happened to him after he left Afghanistan.

Policy Implications

At the time of Massoud's assassination, the fact that a Tunisian network was involved did not receive much notice. Yet Abu Iyad's activities before—and, crucially, after—9/11 show why such details merit close, long-term scrutiny.

In the weeks following the attack on America, Abu Iyad fought against the Northern Alliance before escaping to Pakistan and on to Turkey. There, while the world was focused on the war against Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, he and other operatives helped plan the deadly 2003 Casablanca bombings and the initial stages of the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Even after he was arrested in Turkey in March 2003 and extradited to Tunisia, he continued to build jihadist networks from his jail cell. Once he and other prisoners were freed after the 2011 revolution, he founded the jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and helped incubate his country's disproportionately large foreign fighter mobilization to conflict zones in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

Such is the nature of jihadist networks: Abu Iyad is a little-known footnote in 9/11 history and was even in custody for years at one point, but he went on to play a major role in high-profile terrorist attacks and mobilizations in subsequent decades. This is why Washington and its allies must continue developing a deeper understanding of jihadist networks, individual groups, and plots, since identifying, tracking, and blunting key operatives like Abu Iyad can help hinder future attacks and foreign fighter flows. Otherwise, individuals and networks that seemed ancillary in one decade could later become important local influencers who exacerbate conflicts in multiple countries.

Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups will assuredly try to exploit Afghanistan just as they did twenty years ago. Whether they can succeed again remains to be seen, but their chances will only increase if individual jihadist “entrepreneurs” are able to operate effectively and build transnational networks under the radar.

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