

Excerpted from

Pakistan: Deep Inside the World's Most Frightening State

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Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden was born in 1957, the seventeenth of some twenty surviving sons of one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest and most preeminent families. (His father, Mohammed, sired more than fifty children, with a total of eleven wives—mainly Egyptians and Saudi Arabians—in part to consolidate strategic alliances through extended families.) Osama's mother, the patriarch's fourth and final official wife, was, by contrast, from Syria. Osama was her only son, and their relationship continues to be close.

The elder bin Laden had immigrated to the kingdom in the 1920s from the Hadhramaut, a poor and deeply conservative area in Yemen, and had built a construction company into a financial empire, based in large part on his friendship with King Abdul Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia. One of Osama's most vivid childhood memories, he has told friends, is of his father's early success in expanding the sacred Islamic shrines of Mecca and Medina. The young Osama lived a privileged and pampered life. As was customary in the kingdom's prominent families, tutors and nannies, bearers and butlers formed a large part of it.

And if it is a paradox for the son of a patrician family to be preaching terror and mass Islamist politics, then Osama bin Laden fails to grasp it. It is just one of the anomalies of his life. He is an Eastern fatalist by birth, a Western-educated management expert and high-tech engineer, who has carefully modeled himself on the legendary twelfth-century military hero Salah al-Din. He

is an introverted loner who relishes visibility. He is a man of more than average vanity, who reveals little about himself. It is actually quite hard to say who Osama bin Laden really is.

He is part puritanical Wahhabi, reared in the severe traditions of Wahhabi Islam, yet at one time he may have led a very liberated social life. He is part feudal Saudi, an aristocrat who from time to time would retreat with his austere father to the desert and live in a tent. And he is part of a Saudi generation that came of age during the rise of OPEC, with the extraordinary wealth that accompanied it: that same generation whose religious fervor or political zeal, complemented by government airline tickets, led thousands to a distant Muslim land to combat the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Bin Laden had shown no interest in politics before then. According to family members, he was bookish and withdrawn, spending much of his time alone. But after a trip to Pakistan in early 1980, he returned to Jidda transformed. Over the next four years, before he moved to Peshawar permanently, he traveled throughout Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf raising millions of dollars for the jihad. Some of the funding came directly from the Saudi government, some from official mosques, and some from the kingdom's financial and business elite—including members of his family.

Milt Bearden, the CIA's station chief in Pakistan, who ran the agency's side of the war in Afghanistan from 1986 to 1989, told me that bin Laden and other fund-raisers, largely from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, contributed as much as \$20 to \$25 million a month to underwrite the war—a total of \$200 million to \$300 million a year.

And, after Jadji, there were other battles for bin Laden, too. Most notably, the badly organized, bloody siege of Jalalabad, a pivotal military operation planned and directed by the ISI in March 1989, after the Soviets had withdrawn, in which the single largest number of Afghan Arabs fought together—under the direction of Pakistani Army officers—during the jihad. There was also the battle of Ali Khel—in which bin Laden led a Saudi contingent in an operation planned

by the CIA—an operation in Paktia Province, not far from Jadji and the area struck by U.S. cruise missiles in 1998 and by “bunker busters” and “daisy cutters” in the autumn and winter of 2001.

During (and also after) the jihad, bin Laden met frequently with Hassan al-Turabi, an erudite Islamist who would later effectively control the rigid Islamic government in the Sudan. He dined regularly with General Zia ul-Haq and the inner circle most responsible for conduiting the CIA arms. He cultivated generals from the ISI, as he befriended some of the most anti-Western of the Afghan resistance leaders fighting the jihad.

It remains unclear whether it was during those years or after 1996 (when bin Laden returned to Afghanistan) that he first met Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, one of Pakistan’s leading nuclear scientists. A radical Islamist with exceedingly unorthodox views, Mahmood— along with a fellow nuclear scientist, Chaudry Abdul Majid, and five members of a Mahmood-founded purported charity— was arrested in late October 2001 at the urging of Washington and interrogated about his links to bin Laden and the Taliban. Since his retirement in the late 1990s, he had been coming and going from Afghanistan regularly, as an ostensible philanthropist and the founder and chairman of Ummah Tameer-e-Nau—or Islamic Reconstruction—which U.S. officials suspected was a bin Laden front. Mahmood told American interrogators that he had met bin Laden only twice. What had they discussed? the investigators asked. “Flour mills,” Mahmood said.

So alarmed were officials in the Bush Administration by the possibility that bin Laden might have obtained nuclear technology from Mahmood that CIA Director George J. Tenet was hastily dispatched to Islamabad to discuss the matter with Musharraf personally. But four months of investigation failed to produce any significant results other than the fact, one Pakistani official told me, that Mahmood failed “six or seven” lie detector tests. By January 2002, all of the men had been released, although Mahmood was placed under a loose house arrest, and he remained on the U.S. list of designated terrorists.

For years, U.S. officials had been attempting to trace bin Laden's efforts to procure fissionable material that could be converted into a bomb. One such incident had been documented in a trial, in February 2001, in New York of four men who were convicted of having played roles in the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa. One government witness, Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl, a Sudanese who had previously been one of bin Laden's close aides, testified that, as early as 1993, he had attempted to buy one cylinder of South African uranium for al-Qaeda for \$1.5 million. And by 1993, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a thirty-eight-year veteran of Pakistan's nuclear program, had emerged as the country's most public and most prominent proponent of "Islamic science." His theories, even to many Islamists, seemed exceptionally odd. He argued that the energy of spirits, or jinn in the Koran, could be harnessed to solve the world's energy crisis, and in 1998 he published "Cosmology and Human Destiny," in which he wrote that sunspots had determined the course of world events, including World War II and revolutions against colonial powers. The fact that a man with such ideas had risen to such prominence in the Pakistani Atomic Energy Commission was worrisome enough. But for U.S. officials, his conversations with Osama bin Laden about "flour mills" were even more troublesome.

By the time bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia, in 1989, to assume his place in his late father's construction empire, the Bin Laden Group, the family's business interests had spread to three continents. (Before the September 11 attacks, fifteen of bin Laden's siblings were living in Europe, and four of his half brothers, along with seventeen nieces and nephews, in the United States.) And there were other areas in which bin Laden found his native Saudi Arabia changed: with the collapse of the oil boom the kingdom faced growing economic and social problems and, according to the State Department's annual human-rights reports, the Saudi royal family was also becoming increasingly repressive and

corrupt. Bin Laden began to criticize the kingdom's feudal regime openly and to support its opposition groups. His half brothers and some of his royal friends—including Prince Salman bin Abdul-Aziz, the governor of Riyadh, and Prince Turki bin Faisal, the chief of Saudi intelligence, with whom bin Laden had worked during the jihad—attempted to restrain him, and for a time he devoted himself to personal matters: expanding his holdings (which were based, in large part, on more than sixty companies, many of them in the West) and producing heirs. He now has four wives, carefully chosen for their political connections or their pedigrees, and some dozen children.

Bin Laden's quietude, however, did not last long. By the time he returned to Jidda he had already become somewhat of a hero for his role in the jihad. And now, as opposed to those earlier years, when he was standoffish, shy and soft-spoken, many said, he moved with calm assurance through the world of militants and mullahs, equally at home with Islamic scholars, the Afghan guerrilla leaders with whom he had fought, and generals abroad, including Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, and Pakistan's heirs to Zia ul-Haq. It was also during that time that bin Laden increasingly came under the sway of two of Saudi Arabia's most militant clerics, Sheikhs Safar Hawali and Salman Awdah—whose views are considered revolutionary by the Saudi regime, and whose fatwas bin Laden began to propagate. In 1991, the royal family expelled him from the kingdom for his political activities, and his family publicly renounced him. He sought refuge in the Sudan.

After that, bin Laden's political evolution accelerated. His departure from his homeland coincided with the arrival there of thousands of U.S. troops for the Persian Gulf War. When the Saudi regime permitted them not only to occupy its soil but to remain after the victory, bin Laden's antipathy to both the regime and the United States was inflamed.

In his eyes, the United States had become to Saudi Arabia what the Soviet Union had been to Afghanistan: an infidel occupation force propping up a corrupt, repressive, and un-Islamic government. When Saddam Hussein

invaded Kuwait and the Saudi dynasty welcomed U.S. troops onto its soil, near Islam's holiest shrines—of Mecca and Medina—the House of Saud, for bin Laden, lost its remaining legitimacy.

During five years of exile in the Sudan, from 1991 until the spring of 1996, bin Laden divided his time between Khartoum and London (where he owned large and opulent estates). He placed his wealth— a personal fortune estimated at more than \$250 million, largely in foreign bank accounts—at the disposal of militant Islamic groups around the world. Whether he retained access to his family's fortune, which is estimated to be worth some \$5 billion, is a matter of dispute. For although the family—whose American condos and designer clothes Osama disdained—has publicly renounced the activities of its prodigal son, there are many who believe that it remains a source of financial support. Bin Laden's relationship with some family members, including one of his brothers-in-law, a Saudi financier named Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, continues to be close. And in the spring of 2002, authorities in Switzerland, at the request of France, opened an investigation into the financial activities of one of bin Laden's half brothers—Yeslam Binladin (who spells his name differently, in part, to distance himself from Osama)—for possible money-laundering; and another half brother, Ghalib Mohammed Binladin, is being investigated for his connections to the Bahamas-registered Al-Taqwa Bank, which, according to U.S. Treasury officials, provided financial support to Osama before and after the September 11 attacks. Both the brothers and officials of the bank have strongly denied any links to bin Laden, or any financial impropriety.

Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, for his part, was a prime conduit for funding militant Islamic groups in the Philippines, Filipino officials assert. According to U.S. investigators, there is evidence that during the mid-1990s, when he was the head of the Islamic Relief Organization—a quasi-government Saudi charity—in the Philippines, Khalifa was “directly linked” to several of the men convicted for

their role in the first World Trade Center bombing in New York, including its mastermind, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, and, also, Wali Khan Amin Shah. Not only were the two veterans of the jihad involved in the Trade Center bombing, but they were later convicted in a Manhattan court of planning to blow up American jumbo jets—as many as twelve of them over the Pacific in what would have been a spectacular two-day spree. At their trial in 1996, it was revealed that another defendant, Abdul Hakim Murad (from Balochistan like Yousef and Shah), had been tasked with carrying out a kamikaze-style plane crash into the headquarters of the CIA—and that was seven years ago. Murad, like at least six of the hijackers in the September 11 attacks, had received flight training in the United States. His videotaped confession in 1995 was noted four years later in a U.S. intelligence report that suggested that al-Qaeda might hijack a U.S. plane with the intention of crashing it into a government building, like the Pentagon.

Not only did Murad confess but Wali Khan Amin Shah, who described himself as one of bin Laden's key operational aides, agreed during the trial to cooperate with federal authorities. U.S. investigators, who continue to suspect that wealthy businessmen in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf helped finance some of Yousef's activities, were hopeful that Shah would be able to provide a link between Ramzi Yousef, Osama bin Laden, and the first World Trade Center bomb.

In the years preceding his arrest in Pakistan and extradition to the United States, in February 1995, Yousef had largely divided his time among the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Peshawar—where he most often lived at the House of Martyrs (Bayt Ashuhada), a bin Laden-financed guesthouse. During that time, the paths of the two men must have crossed, since bin Laden, too, frequently traveled to all three places from his headquarters in Khartoum.

While bin Laden was based in the Sudan, the Saudi regime warned him more than once that it would countenance no actions directed against the Saudi throne. He ignored the warnings. In the early 1990s—during the first Bush Administration, and presumably with the knowledge of the United States—the

Saudis secretly dispatched hit teams to Khartoum with a contract on bin Laden's life.

Then inexplicably, in November 1996, or so bin Laden claimed, the Saudi royal family invited him to return home. His assets and properties, which the government had seized, would be returned to him, he said in an interview with *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, in exchange for his swearing an oath of allegiance to King Fahd. Bin Laden refused. Saudi officials would neither confirm nor deny that the offer was made; indeed, over the years they had consistently refused to comment on anything about bin Laden—a testament, perhaps, to their continuing bewilderment about how to cope with him.

The effort to contain the rise of militant Islam in Saudi Arabia—the repository of the world's largest oil reserves—requires extraordinary delicacy, both on America's part and on the part of the Saudi regime. Over the years, the regime's actions have been confused, contradictory, and frequently inexplicable.

The Saudis had, of course, been obsessed with driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan, and Washington's financial commitment to that war had been exceeded only by theirs. At the time the jihad was getting under way, there was no significant Islamist opposition movement in Saudi Arabia, and it apparently never occurred to the Saudi rulers, who feared the Soviets as much as Washington did, that the volunteers it sent might be converted by the jihad's ideology. But as September 11 showed, the next generation of the children of the jihad clearly were.

Thousands of Saudis fought in the jihad. Largely funded and supported by their government, they came from good families, some immensely wealthy ones. They trained and they bonded; they raised money and they fought. In the months following the September 11 attacks, some commentators expressed the view that the role of the Saudis and the other Afghan Arabs who fought in the jihad had been overstated. But this is not the point: the point is not what they

did for the jihad but, far more important, what the jihad did for them.

I asked a diplomat who had served in Peshawar during the war years what, in his view, made the Saudis different from the other Islamists who came to fight.

“Their government sent them,” he replied. “It was the patriotic thing to do. But when these guys got there, they met others and began to network; they found a whole new world out there. And despite their wealth, they were underemployed, frustrated, an accident waiting to happen—and it did. Also, unlike the others who went to Afghanistan as members of Islamic groups—Gama’a, al-Jihad, Hamas, and the like—there were no organized Saudi groups. That’s what makes these guys very different: they set up the networks when they came home.”

Other U.S. officials agree and warn that despite the Saudi government’s efforts to blame the usual regional suspects—Iran, Iraq, and Sudan—for the unrest in the kingdom, the Islamist discontent in Saudi Arabia is real, and the movement is basically homegrown. Perhaps as a result of this, and of an ill-advised attempt to buy protection for the throne, the kingdom’s princes and foundations and wealthy businessmen, who include a number of bin Laden’s friends, have long been the primary financiers of many of the world’s militant Islamist groups.

In September and October 2001, the Bush Administration—to the abiding discomfort of the House of Saud—publicly named ten of the movement’s members and financiers. The most prominent was Yasin al-Qadi, an immensely wealthy investor and businessman, who moved with ease in the elite of Saudi society. But in running the Muwafaq Foundation—along with trustees from some of the kingdom’s other most prominent families—he had transferred millions of dollars from Saudi businessmen to bin Laden over the years, the U.S. Treasury Department charged, and it placed him on a list of forty-five individuals (along with organizations) whose assets should be seized. Curiously, the charity itself was not placed on the list, ostensibly because, according to Treasury officials,

the U.S. government was unable to locate it.

Then in February of the following year, a French intelligence report published by *The Washington Post* highlighted the role of another of Muwafaq's prominent trustees, Khalid bin Mahfouz, in funneling millions of dollars to bin Laden– controlled charities. He did so as the director of the National Commercial Bank, one of Saudi Arabia's largest banks and the banker to the royal family. Prior to becoming the director of that bank—which his family controls—bin Mahfouz had served as director of BCCI, the Pakistani bank that had collapsed in the early 1990s following discoveries that it, too, among other things, had funneled money to the mujahideen for the CIA during the jihad and, after that, held accounts for Osama bin Laden. (In 1995, bin Mahfouz paid \$225 million, including a \$37 million fine, in a settlement with U.S. prosecutors to avoid possible charges in the United States for his role in the BCCI scandal.)

Yet in April 1999, when bin Mahfouz was placed under house arrest after Saudi officials, at the insistence of Washington, audited the National Commercial Bank, U.S. officials were never permitted to question him. Nor were they ever permitted to interrogate one of bin Laden's key financial aides—Sidi Tayyib, a man of considerable influence, whom Saudi intelligence officials had detained that same year at the strong urging of Washington. But following their own investigation, the Saudis bluntly told their CIA counterparts that there was no basis for treating Tayyib “like a criminal.” Tayyib, who is married to one of bin Laden's nieces, probably knows as much as anyone else about bin Laden's intricate financial empire.

The Saudis' vacillation over the years and their attempts to appease bin Laden—which are based, in large part, not only on their fear of him but also on their fear of further mythologizing him—is worrisome.

And the strains in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, as a consequence, have become even more pronounced since the American war against bin Laden began—a war that has affected U.S. policy throughout the Islamic world: not only in Pakistan and the Middle East but, as pronounced as anywhere else, in

the kingdom of Saudi Arabia itself. Although the House of Saud has continued to permit American troops to billet in the country, it has prohibited them from conducting air strikes against Iraq. It has also moved slowly in scrutinizing its Islamic charities and in instructing its banks to seize the assets, if any assets are found, of those groups or men on the Bush Administration's al-Qaeda financing lists—as it had moved slowly, in earlier years, in refusing to permit U.S. officials to question any Saudis with alleged ties to Osama bin Laden. Even before the United States was denied access to either Sidi Tayyib or Khalid bin Mahfouz, the royal family, in a barely disguised attempt not to further antagonize bin Laden and his followers, had not allowed the FBI to interrogate any of the suspects allegedly involved in the 1995 and 1996 bombings of American military installations in Riyadh and Dhahran—bombings that were clearly aimed at the Saudi dynasty as well as at the United States.

As bin Laden's international image and stature increased—along with his support, both financial and ideological, among some of the kingdom's elite and the elites of other states in the Persian Gulf—any Saudi hopes of quietly resolving its bin Laden problem by force became less tenable. And each time the U.S. administration raised the stakes and further enhanced bin Laden's prominence, more and more disaffected Saudis flocked to join the kingdom's militant Islamist underground, of which bin Laden—as September 11 showed—remained a central part.

Thus, when the U.S. government charged bin Laden with conspiracy in regard to the bombings of our military installations in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Minister of the Interior quickly announced that the kingdom had no information to substantiate accounts that bin Laden had ever engaged in any terrorist activities on its soil. And when President Clinton and Boris Yeltsin—who had discerned bin Laden's hand in Russia's own problems with Islamist militants in Chechnya—came together in a rare show of force at the United Nations in the autumn of 1999 to impose sanctions against the Taliban, the rulers of Saudi Arabia assiduously distanced themselves from both men.

For twenty years, Osama bin Laden had refashioned himself with extraordinary dexterity and skill, yet he never lost sight of his ultimate goal: the overthrow of the dynastic House of Saud. Likewise, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mohammed Atef, and all of the other al-Qaeda leaders from Egypt's Gama'a and al-Jihad, remained intent on toppling Hosni Mubarak's Army-backed government. In their eyes, at least at the time that al-Qaeda was born, the United States government—along with the other issues and causes they would later espouse—was of merely secondary concern. Indeed, of bin Laden's inner circle, only Abu Zubaydah, the Saudi-born Palestinian who had been arrested in Pakistan in March 2002, had been imbued with the Palestinian struggle against Israel. When the newest Palestinian Intifada erupted in September 2000 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it was Abu Zubaydah who convinced bin Laden to embrace it. And although the Palestinian cause had never been of more than passing interest to the al-Qaeda leader before, he now claimed it as his own, masterfully. For this was the key issue that captivated the Arab street and, partly as a result, the United States—Israel's most stolid ally and by now one of bin Laden's most formidable foes—had become the object of uniform, militant Islamic rage. The confluence of developments served bin Laden well.

So alarmed was the House of Saud, not only by bin Laden's rising profile in the kingdom itself but, ever fearful of the Islamist challenge to its throne, that it was now even more intent on a transformation of its own—to turn what had been an often complex battle of wills between the Saudi royal family and its errant son into a far simpler conflict, one that would pit bin Laden and his followers against the United States.

In the early months of 1999, when Nawaz Sharif was prime minister of Pakistan and General Pervez Musharraf was entering his fifth month as Chief of the Army Staff, Washington had pressed Islamabad to set up a special commando unit—to be trained by the CIA—that would be able to infiltrate Afghanistan, find bin

Laden, and capture or eliminate him. Although unenthusiastic, Musharraf agreed to establish such a group, and it was trained. But in the end, it never crossed over into Afghanistan. One U.S. intelligence official said that the project had been scuttled by the ISI, which by then was sharing a number of military training camps with al-Qaeda in the mountains of Afghanistan.

When I asked Musharraf about this late the following year, he thought for a moment and then replied, without answering, “Your government must deal with the Taliban direct. I’ve engaged with them endlessly about bin Laden, and I’ve told them that they must deal with him. But it’s such a touchy issue. Nevertheless, I’ve made it clear that it was in their interest to finally resolve it.” He then went on to say, “I think a middle way can be found on this whole issue of extraditing him [which was then being demanded by the United States]. He could be sent to a third country—as long as that country is not Pakistan.”

I learned later from a member of one of Pakistan’s militant Islamist groups that bin Laden was, in fact, visiting Peshawar at the very time that the general and I spoke.

The United States had not been the first country to have pressured Pakistan. In June 1998, Prince Turki, the Saudi chief of intelligence and once bin Laden’s friend, had sought the help of Islamabad to intervene with the Taliban and have bin Laden turned over to him. Musharraf, at the time, had not yet been elevated to the Army’s top post, but one of his fellow officers told me that he had opposed the Saudi move. And Saudi Arabia was a country that the general knew well, for as Zia ul-Haq, in 1970, had commanded a Pakistani brigade in Jordan charged with protecting King Hussein’s throne, Musharraf had served in 1984 with a Pakistani military contingent in Saudi Arabia, protecting the Saudi throne.

And, even before Prince Turki’s plea was rebuffed, officials in Cairo were furious with the Pakistani government. In 1995, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt had told me about a meeting he had had in Bonn in April 1993 with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. “It was a tough meeting,” he said. “And I couldn’t believe

my ears: this man was the leader of Pakistan and he told me, quite frankly, ‘We cannot control Peshawar. We cannot prevent these people from running loose.’ I asked him then if he wanted me to send the Egyptian Armed Forces to Peshawar to clean up the mess.”

Mubarak had demanded that all of the Egyptian jihadis—including Ayman al-Zawahiri—be extradited; Sharif demurred. Nevertheless, on Sharif’s return to Pakistan, he reluctantly instructed the even more reluctant ISI to “look into Peshawar.” I asked a Western diplomat based there what had happened then.

“It was absolute chaos,” he replied. “This town has become one huge storefront since the jihad: there are storefront presses, storefront arms dealers, storefront drug traffickers, storefront mosques. The government started to review all of the NGOs”—nongovernmental organizations—“and all the expatriate workers here. But when they got to the thirty-five or so marginal organizations of the Arabs, they couldn’t find the offices, the buildings, the people! Earlier that year, they actually conducted raids, and they were only able to find some two hundred Arabs, even though they had issued identity cards to more than five hundred the previous month. They set a deadline when all of the Arabs without proper papers had to leave. I think we’re on our sixth or seventh deadline now, and somewhat fewer than twenty have actually left.”

He turned more serious, and then he went on. “It’s an immense problem for Pakistan. The government doesn’t want to deport these people and send them back to trial or to their execution. And where can you expel them to from Pakistan? They’re clearly not going to take them to the Afghan border and set them loose.”

By October 1999, when Pervez Musharraf overthrew Nawaz Sharif, the lawlessness in Peshawar had become palpably worse, but the general, as his predecessors before him had done, seemed unable or unwilling to rein the Islamic militants in.

Now, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, he had gambled heavily in his attempt to restore his country’s badly bruised relationship with the

United States, confronting a growing array of critics, including skeptics in his own military constituency, who remember that Washington had walked away from Pakistan before, after the first U.S.-Afghan war.

By May of 2002, when officials of Musharraf's government conceded that a limited number of American troops would be permitted to operate from Pakistani soil, popular anger against the United States had turned to rage as a result of the civilian casualties suffered in Afghanistan due to the intense U.S. bombing there, and of the Bush Administration's stalwart support of Israel in its deadly standoff with the Palestinians. And the anger grew in the Army, too, as a consequence of both, and of the military sanctions still in place on Pakistan, the sanctions that had been imposed shortly after the end of the jihad.

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