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How Southern Arizona became home base for terror

Flight schools, hot climate, visa availability cited

By Barrett Marson

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Southern Arizona became the home to numerous radical Islamists in the early 1980s when they moved here and began raising money for Afghan freedom fighters, some experts say.

Their anger and fund-raising efforts were redirected against the United States after America ended its financial and political efforts in Afghanistan as the Cold War with the Soviet Union began to thaw.

People such as Wadi el-Hage, a personal assistant to Osama bin Laden who raised money in Tucson for the Afghan effort, did not cease raising cash because the United States withdrew its support of the Afghan mujahedeen, or holy warriors, said Harry Ellen, a Phoenix businessman and an FBI informant in the 1990s.

"That helped radicalize them not only for their cause but against us, too," said Ellen, who met el-Hage several times. "We became a host that slapped their guest."

El-Hage is now in federal prison for life after his conviction for conspiring to bomb two U.S. embassies in Africa.

With the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. government took notice of the radical leanings held by some Arizona Muslims.

A joint FBI-CIA analysis titled, "Arizona: Long Range Nexus for Islamic Extremists," likely explores the history of Tucson's rise to prominence among Muslim radicals but remains classified. Its existence was revealed in the bipartisan 9/11 commission's final report released Thursday.

That leaves others to explore the reasons why Tucson and Arizona became a destination for Islamic fundamentalists.

FBI spokeswoman Susan Herskovits would not talk specifically about the analysis but said Arizona offers numerous attractions that make it a destination for many Arabs, including legitimate scholars and law-abiding residents.

Arizona's ties to 9/11

- People named in the 9/11 report with ties to the state:

The Tucson connection

- Hani Hanjour: Piloted American Airlines Flight 77 that crashed into the Pentagon. He attended the UA, studying English in 1991. He also lived in Mesa and took aviation classes in Scottsdale.

I Mubarak al Duri: A native of Iraq who lived in Tucson in the late 1980s. He procured weapons of mass destruction for Osama bin Laden.

- Muhammad Bayazid: Lived in Tucson at one time. He was an arms procurer and trainer for al-Qaida.

- Wadi el-Hage: Was believed to be bin Laden's personal assistant. Federal officials say there was evidence el-Hage helped a man who was conducting surveillance on Muslim Sheik Rashad Khalifa, who was assassinated in Tucson in 1990. He is serving a life prison term for his part in the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

- Wa'el Jelaidan: Co-founded al-Qaida with bin Laden in the late '80s. State records show he was president of the Islamic Center of Tucson from 1984 to '85. He left Tucson in 1986 and was believed

The University of Arizona recruited Middle Easterners for its science programs, and Arizona's weather makes flight training schools popular.

The desert climate reminds Middle Easterners of home. And Tucson's popularity spread through word of mouth, she said.

"Once people from another culture end up in a place like Tucson, other people hear about it and want to be there," Herskovits said.

In addition to el-Hage, Tucson and the Phoenix area have been home to numerous al-Qaida operatives, including:

- Hani Hanjour, who attended the UA and a flight school in the Phoenix area before piloting American Airlines 77 into the Pentagon on Sept. 11.
- Mubarak al Duri, who lived in Tucson and, according to the 9/11 commission's report, served as bin Laden's principal procurement agent for weapons of mass destruction.
- Wa'el Jelaidan, who was president of the Tucson Islamic Center in 1984-'85 and helped found al-Qaida later that decade.

Most known or suspected terrorists seem to have been drawn to Tucson and Arizona by two lures - the availability of flight schools and student visas, said David D. Van Fleet, a professor and terrorism expert in the School of Management at Arizona State University.

He said that may also explain why fund-raising organizations linked to bin Laden branched into certain U.S. cities with "little clusters" of Muslim extremists. The 9/11 commission reported that the al Khifa organization, which had branches in Tucson, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh and New York City, recruited American Muslims to fight in Afghanistan - including some who later took part in terrorist actions in the United States and against U.S. embassies in East Africa.

That doesn't mean the UA or the state was "somehow fostering or festering these kinds of folks," Van Fleet said. "It's simply the convenience of where to get into a flight school or get into a country through a student visa."

Activities of Muslim extremists have been detailed in two reports stemming from the Sept. 11 terror attacks - one by a joint congressional committee that released its report last year and another by the bipartisan commission that released its findings this week.

Tucson and Arizona played prominent roles in both reports.

Each contained high-profile sections related to a memo written in July 2001 by an FBI agent warning of Islamic extremists taking flight training classes in Arizona. And each detailed the prominent al-Qaida figures who had moved in and out of Arizona in the two

to have gone to Afghanistan to help repel the Soviet Union's invasion.

- Muhammad Al-Qudhai'een: Was a UA student before 9/11. He was handcuffed and removed from an America West Airlines jet in Columbus, Ohio, after jiggling the cockpit door in 1999. He later sued the airline, but the lawsuit was dismissed. He was deported to Saudi Arabia.

The Arizona connection

- Nawaf Al-Hazmi: A 9/11 hijacker on the plane that hit the Pentagon. He lived with Hanjour in Mesa in 2000 and 2001.

- Salem al-Hazmi: May be Nawaf Al-Hazmi's brother, but that isn't certain.

- Abdullah Rayed Abdullah or Rayed Mohammed Abdullah: A former roommate of Hanjour's. He attended flight school in Arizona and was a leader at the Islamic Cultural Center of Phoenix.

- Bandar al-Hazmi: Lived with Hanjour in Mesa and attended language school with him in Florida. Also, al-Hazmi trained at Arizona Aviation with Hanjour.

- Faisal Al-Salmi: Was convicted in February 2002 of lying to the FBI when he denied knowing Hanjour. He and Hanjour were registered at the same time to use a flight simulator at a Phoenix flight school.

- Ghassen al Sharbi: Studied at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott. He was captured in March 2002 in Pakistan with a senior al-Qaida official.

- Hamdan Alshalawi or Hamdan Al-Shalawi: An ASU student, he was with Muhammad Al-Qudhai'een when they were removed from an America West jet

previous decades.

Ellen, a Muslim convert in the 1980s who lived in Ajo between 1975 and 1991, often visited the Islamic Center of Tucson to learn more about his adopted religion and culture to help in planned business dealings in Egypt, he said. He said he later gave information to the FBI on trips he made to meet with Palestinian leaders, including Yasser Arafat.

While at the Islamic Center, Ellen gained a vast amount of knowledge about the Islamic community in Tucson, where he said he met el-Hage, al Duri and others who have played a part in al-Qaida or aroused the suspicion of the FBI.

El-Hage and others rarely voiced extremist views, Ellen said. But they sometimes took exception to the political tones set in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

"When you did talk to them, they were angry about the politics of Egypt, they were angry about the politics of Saudi Arabia," he said.

Bin Laden has often cited the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia as a reason for his war against America.

Ellen fell out of favor with the FBI, however, in 1999. A U.S. Justice Department inspector general's investigation of how the Phoenix FBI office handled Ellen is continuing and is being run from the Tucson office, he said. Herskovits would not comment on the Ellen case.

Ellen said Arabs are not only attracted to the Tucson area because of the hot weather and the UA, but also because of its low-key, out-of-the-way location. Los Angeles or New York, while big cities that have lots of amenities, don't provide the cover that Tucson offers.

"They are not here to have fun," Ellen said. "In Tucson, clearly, they weren't being looked at."

Karl Delaguerra, who runs an anti-terrorism training and threat-assessment firm in Tucson called the Palladium Group, said Tucson is very accepting of people with diverse backgrounds. That allows Muslim extremists and others to fly under the radar and not raise suspicion.

"That is the kind of environment that radicalized individuals would be drawn to be able to operate quite freely," said Delaguerra, who has worked with the government on terrorism issues and studied Tucson's connections to terror.

But Stuart Marsh, a professor at the UA's Arid Lands Resource Sciences program, scoffed at the notion that the university attracts a large number of radicals.

"We have never had a student who was considered any kind of problem," Marsh said. "It's a bad rap."

Whether Islamic extremists would continue to use Tucson as a base is unknown. But Ellen would not discount it.

"No one would expect lightning," he said, "to come from the same source twice."

in 1999 after touching the cockpit door.

- Hamed al-Sulami: Lived in Tempe in 1999 and 2000. He was an associate of Hanjour's in Arizona, and the FBI said he had telephone contact with Sulayman al Alwan, a radical Saudi cleric from Qassim province who may have had a role in recruiting hijackers.

- Malek Seif: Knew Hanjour from a mosque in Tempe and practiced piloting on a flight simulator in Phoenix. He has been convicted in Phoenix of fraud and using a false identity.

I Zakaria Soubra: A former Prescott aviation student. He was an Arizona recruiter for a militant Islamic group and was named in a pre-Sept. 11 FBI memo written by an FBI agent. He was arrested on a visa violation and deported to Lebanon in May 2003, after testifying to a federal grand jury in Virginia.

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- *Reporter Enric Volante contributed to this story.*

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