

# Somalian Link Seen to Al Qaeda

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A Pakistani terrorist who Indian police say admitted to aiding the 1993 street war against U.S. forces in Somalia may be the long-suspected link between Osama bin Laden and the killing of 18 U.S. soldiers in Mogadishu.

Evidence of the Al Qaeda connection to the fighting in the Somalian capital has been sitting in an Indian police file in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir since 1994, when Indian police arrested Maulana Masood Azhar. His supporters have been accused of kidnapping and killing Americans in India and Pakistan during at least the past seven years.

Azhar, leader of the banned militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed, also is the mentor of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, whom Pakistani authorities arrested as the lead suspect in the kidnapping and killing of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

In a prison diary on file in an Indian court, Sheikh also admitted to kidnapping Californian Bela Josef Nuss and three British backpackers in October 1994 in a failed bid to spring Azhar from jail. And FBI agents questioned Azhar in connection with the 1995 kidnapping in Kashmir of an American hiker, who is presumed to have been killed.

Azhar told Indian police after his arrest in Kashmir that he traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, in 1993 to meet with leaders of the Somalian group Al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, which the U.S. accuses of receiving Al Qaeda's help to train Somalian fighters for attacks on U.S. forces.

Azhar said the Somalis asked for assistance and got recruits and money from the ranks of a Pakistani militant group that Washington later named as part of Bin Laden's terrorist network.

According to the confession, Azhar was dispatched to meet with the Somalis by another Pakistani militant, Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil.

## U.S. Suspected Somalis Were Al Qaeda-Trained

The Somalian group surfaced again after the Sept. 11 attacks, when U.S. officials identified it as a possible target for airstrikes.

U.S. officials have long suspected an Al Qaeda connection to the 1993 Somalian conflict. The alleged link was central to the prosecutors' case in the trial of four men convicted last year of the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The attacks killed 224 people, including 12 Americans.

Prosecutors argued that members of the same Kenya-based cell that helped train Somalis to kill U.S. soldiers in 1993 went on to carry out the 1998 embassy bombings, which have been blamed on Bin Laden. At least one of the four men convicted in the embassy bombings was a member of the Somalian group, FBI special agent John Anticev testified.

Indian intelligence officials claim Azhar not only traveled to Kenya but made as many as three journeys to Somalia and was a key player in the Al Qaeda operation there.

Azhar told Indian police that in his meetings, Al-Ittihad leaders complained that Pakistan's army, which was taking part in the international mission in Somalia, "is working in favor of America and America is trying to establish its rule in Somalia."

Al-Ittihad benefited from Pakistan's decision in 1993, under international pressure, to expel between 400 and 500 foreign veterans of the Afghan war, according to Azhar's confession.

Most did not go home, either because they weren't allowed to or because they feared persecution, Azhar said. Instead, the majority went to Sudan, where Bin Laden was then based, and from there to Somalia, Azhar said. The "militants continued the correspondence with us from Somalia," he said.

Senior Indian intelligence sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the clandestine nature of their work, say they also believe Azhar helped bring mercenaries from Yemen to Somalia with the help of Yemeni militant leader Tariq Nasr Fadhli.

Tariq is said to have fought under Bin Laden's command in Afghanistan's guerrilla war against Soviet troops in the 1980s. Tariq, reportedly at Bin Laden's bidding, then led a guerrilla war against the Marxist government of South Yemen, which collapsed in 1994 and once again became part of Yemen.

Yemeni authorities identified Tariq as a suspect in two December 1992 hotel bombings in Yemen that targeted U.S. Marines headed for Somalia. The explosions killed a tourist and a hotel worker.

Indian authorities arrested Azhar in Kashmir in February 1994, after he arrived from Karachi, Pakistan, on a fake Portuguese passport. They say he was headed to Kashmir on a mission to unite militants fighting Indian rule in the Himalayan region.

But during interrogation, Azhar also provided information on the Somalian operation, which just four months earlier had inflicted the heaviest casualties U.S. forces had suffered in a single battle since Vietnam.

The apparent Somalian link takes up less than two typed pages in a confession of more than a dozen pages. Azhar also spoke about his interest in the Somalian conflict as a magazine editor, fund-raiser and traveling spokesman for Harkat Ansar, one of Pakistan's most ruthless terrorist groups.

India freed Azhar, Sheikh and another jailed terror suspect in December 1999 to win the release of passengers on an Indian Airlines flight hijacked to Afghanistan.

Azhar then founded the Jaish-e-Mohammed militia. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf banned the organization in his January crackdown on militants, when Azhar was accused of making inflammatory speeches and Pakistani police detained him. India says he has clear ties to both Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency and Al Qaeda, and that his fighters continue to launch attacks in Jammu and Kashmir state.

### **FBI Had Questioned Azhar on Kidnappings**

The FBI also has had a long interest in Azhar.

It questioned him in Indian jails during an investigation into the July 4, 1995, kidnapping of Donald Hutchings, a neuropsychologist from Spokane, Wash. He was abducted along with two Britons, a German and another American, John Childs, who managed to escape.

The decapitated body of a Norwegian kidnapped after Childs fled was dropped on a mountain path, and police recovered the body of a British hostage two years ago. None of the other captives was ever found.

Officials at New Delhi's Tihar jail say the FBI interviewed Azhar there in 1996. On April 27, 1998, the U.S. Embassy asked permission for two FBI agents to interview Azhar again, along with three of his jailed supporters. Indian authorities said it appeared that the 1998 request was granted.

The embassy letter, signed by charge d'affaires E. Ashley Wills, said FBI agents were still investigating the Kashmir kidnappings, which Indian police blamed on a breakaway faction of Harkat Ansar.

Khalil, Harkat's supreme leader, added his signature to Bin Laden's February 1998 fatwa declaring it a Muslim's duty to kill Americans, including civilians.

Bin Laden claimed credit for the clashes that drove U.S. troops out of Somalia, but some experts dismissed his claims as idle boasting, saying Somalian gunmen had enough expertise and anti-American fervor to fight without outside help. However, federal prosecutors argued in the embassy bombing trial that Bin Laden's 1998 edict, issued under the banner "International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders," had its roots in the 1993 attacks on U.S. troops in Somalia.

Months after entering Somalia in 1992 to help end its famine, U.S. troops were seeking to arrest warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed, whose militia was blamed for a June 5, 1993, ambush that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.

During frequent attempts to grab Aideed or his lieutenants, the Americans used UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters armored to withstand 23-millimeter anti-aircraft shells.

On Sept. 25, 1993, Aideed's gunmen managed to bring down their first Black Hawk with a rocket-propelled grenade, a weapon normally used against ground targets. Three U.S. soldiers died in the crash.

Eight days later, rocket-propelled grenades brought down two more Black Hawks in the Oct. 3 battle that left 18 U.S. soldiers dead and about 75 wounded. At least 500 Somalis died in the 16-hour fight. The incident was portrayed in the movie "Black Hawk Down."

A theory emerged that someone had taught Aideed's gunmen how to alter the fuses on the rocket-propelled grenades, or RPGs, so that they exploded in midair. Afghan fighters learned from U.S. and British military advisors in the 1980s that a helicopter's weak spot is the tail rotor.

It is hard to hit a tail rotor with ordnance designed to explode on contact, but a grenade exploding in midair could spray it with shrapnel. That is how a man hiding in a tree shot down the first Black Hawk on Oct. 3, setting off a catastrophe that Bin Laden cited five years later as proof of American weakness.

Bin Laden told a CNN interviewer that the Somalis had cooperated with Arab veterans of the Afghan war.

"After a little resistance, the American troops left after achieving nothing," Bin Laden said.

During the embassy bombing trial, federal prosecutors argued that Al Qaeda was involved in the Somalian conflict.

"One of the principal goals of Al Qaeda was to drive the United States armed forces out of Saudi Arabia (and elsewhere on the Saudi Arabian peninsula) and Somalia by violence," prosecutors charged in an indictment that named Bin Laden and other defendants.

### **Army Pilot Testified in Embassy Bombing Trial**

The prosecution's last witness at the embassy bombings trial was James Yacone, a platoon commander who piloted one of the two Black Hawks that dropped troops near Mogadishu's Olympic Hotel.

Yacone said he watched as a rocket-propelled grenade exploded near the tail rotor of the second chopper, piloted by Clifton Wolcott and Donovan Briley. The aircraft spun out of control and crashed, killing them.

Yacone told the jury that he saw more than 100 RPGs fired at helicopters that day, and each exploded about 500 yards in the air.

"I wasn't able to see all the RPGs being shot but, you know, every thirty seconds or so we'd see the streak of smoke and then the puff of where the thing would detonate in the air," Yacone said.

Within minutes after flying in to help, a second Black Hawk was hit by an RPG in the tail boom section and crashed when "their tail rotor just came apart," Yacone said.

An RPG round also hit his Black Hawk, blowing off the door gunner's leg and spraying shrapnel into Yacone's left arm. With the cockpit full of smoke and one of his two engines disabled, Yacone managed to reach the Somalian coast and crash-landed in friendlier territory.

District Court Judge Leonard B. Sand ordered the jury to disregard Yacone's testimony, since Al Qaeda fighters apparently were not directly involved in the incident.

Prosecutor Kenneth Karas continued to press the Al Qaeda connection in Somalia. In his closing argument, he told the jury that testimony had shown Somalia was "a magnet for Al Qaeda people."

Bin Laden issued an edict "to the members of Al Qaeda to do what they can to stop the Americans, to drive them from Somalia," Karas said.

"The specific words that Bin Laden used were, 'We have to cut off the head of the snake,' " Karas said. "As far back as 1993, this is what is on Al Qaeda's mind: the United States presence in Somalia."

Because of its importance to the events of September 11, 2001, this article has been archived by [the 911 Reading Room](#)

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