

9/11 in Historical Perspective: Flawed Assumptions

Deep Politics: Drugs, Oil, Covert Operations and Terrorism, A briefing for Congressional staff

By [Prof Peter Dale Scott](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

Global Research, July 29, 2005

[pdscott](#) 22 July 2005

The American people have been seriously misled about the origins of the al Qaeda movement blamed for the 9/11 attacks, just as they have been seriously misled about the reasons for America's invasion of Iraq.

The truth is that for at least two decades the United States has engaged in energetic covert programs to secure U.S. control over the Persian Gulf, and also to open up Central Asia for development by U.S. oil companies. Americans were eager to gain access to the petroleum reserves of the Caspian Basin, which at that time were still estimated to be "the largest known reserves of unexploited fuel in the planet."[\[1\]](#)

To this end, time after time, U.S. covert operations in the region have used so-called "Arab Afghan" warriors as assets, the jihadis whom we loosely link with the name and leadership of al Qaeda.[\[2\]](#) In country after country these "Arab Afghans" have been involved in trafficking Afghan heroin.

America's sponsorship of drug-trafficking Muslim warriors, including those now in Al Qaeda, dates back to the Afghan War of 1979-89, sponsored in part by the CIA's links to the drug-laundering Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI).[\[3\]](#) It was part of CIA Director Casey's strategy for launching covert operations over and above those approved and financed by a Democratic-controlled Congress.

The most conspicuous example of this alliance with drug-traffickers in the 1980s was the Contra support operation. Here again foreign money and drug profits filled the gap after Congress denied funds through the so-called Boland amendments; in this case government funds were used to lie about the Contras to the American people.[\[4\]](#) This was followed by a massive cover-up, in which a dubious role was played by then-Congressman Lee Hamilton, later of the 9/11 Commission.[\[5\]](#)

The lying continues. The 9/11 Commission Report assures Americans that "Bin Ladin and his comrades had their own sources of support and training, and they received little or no assistance from the United States."[\[6\]](#) This misleading statement fails to consider that:

1) Al Qaeda elements received considerable *indirect* U.S. Government assistance, first in Afghanistan until 1992, and thereafter in other countries such as Azerbaijan (1992-95). Before 1992, for example, the Afghan leader Jallaladin Haqqani organized and hosted the Arab Afghan volunteers known later as al Qaeda; and Haqqani "received bags of money each month from the [CIA] station in Islamabad."[\[7\]](#) The Arab Afghans were also trained in

urban terrorism, including car bombings, by Pakistani ISI operatives who were in turn trained by the CIA.[8]

2) Key members of the network which became al Qaeda, such as Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, Ali Mohamed, Mohamed Jamal Khalifa, and lead hijacker Mohammed Atta, were granted visas to enter the United States, despite being suspected of terrorism.[9] Al Qaeda foot soldiers were also admitted to the United States for training under a special visa program.[10]

3) At Fort Belvoir, Virginia, an al Qaeda operative was given a list of Muslim candidates for al Qaeda's jihad.[11]

4) When al Qaeda personnel were trained in the United States by a key al Qaeda operative, Sergeant Ali Mohamed of the U.S. Army Special Forces, Mohamed was still *on the U.S. Army payroll*. [12]

5) Repeatedly al Qaeda terrorists were protected by FBI officials from investigation and prosecution.[13]

In part America's limited covert assistance to al Qaeda after 1989 was in order not to offend al Qaeda's two primary supporters which America needed as allies: the intelligence networks of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. But unquestionably the entry of United States oil companies into oil-rich Azerbaijan was achieved with the assistance of a U.S.-organized covert program using "Arab Afghan" operatives associated with bin Laden. Oil was the driving force of U.S. involvement in Central and South Asia, and oil led to U.S. coexistence with both al Qaeda and the world-dominating Afghan heroin trade.

This brings us to another extraordinary distortion in the 9/11 Report:

While the drug trade was a source of income for the Taliban, it did not serve the same purpose for al Qaeda, and there is no reliable evidence that Bin Ladin was involved in or made his money through drug trafficking.[14]

That drug-trafficking *does* support al Qaeda-connected operations has been energetically asserted by the governments of Great Britain and many other European countries, as well as the head of the U.S. Congressional Task Force on Terrorism. Heroin-trafficking has been a source of income in particular for al Qaeda-related warriors in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, and Kosovo. Most recently it has supported terrorist attacks in the Netherlands and Spain.

U.S. support for al Qaeda elements, particularly in Azerbaijan and Kosovo, has increased dramatically the flow of heroin to Western Europe and the United States.

The Example of Azerbaijan

In the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, Arab Afghans clearly assisted this effort of U.S. oil companies to penetrate the region. In 1991-92, Richard Secord, Heinie Aderholt, and Ed Dearborn, three veterans of U.S. operations in Laos and Iran-Contra, turned up in Baku under the cover of an oil company, MEGA Oil.[15] MEGA never did find oil, but did contribute materially to the removal of Azerbaijan from the sphere of post-Soviet Russian influence.

As MEGA operatives in Azerbaijan, Secord, Aderholt, Dearborn, and their men engaged in

military training, passed “brown bags filled with cash” to members of the government, and above all set up an airline on the model of Air America which soon was picking up hundreds of Mujahideen mercenaries in Afghanistan.[\[16\]](#) (Secord and Aderholt claim to have left Baku before the Mujahideen arrived.) Meanwhile, Mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Afghanistan, who at the time was still allied with bin Laden, was “observed recruiting Afghan mercenaries [i.e. Arab Afghans] to fight in Azerbaijan against Armenia and its Russian allies.”[\[17\]](#) At this time, heroin flooded from Afghanistan through Baku into Chechnya, Russia, and even North America.[\[18\]](#) It is difficult to believe that MEGA’s airline (so much like Air America) did not become involved.[\[19\]](#)

The triple pattern of drugs, oil, and al Qaeda was seen again in Kosovo in 1998, where the Al-Qaeda-backed Islamist jihadis of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) received overt American assistance from the U.S. Government.[\[20\]](#) Though unmentioned in mainstream books on the war, both the al Qaeda and drug backgrounds of the KLA are recognized by experts and to my knowledge never contested by them.[\[21\]](#)

Though the origins of the Kosovo tragedy were rooted in local enmities, oil and drugs were prominent in the outcome. At the time critics charged that US oil interests were interested in building a trans-Balkan pipeline with US Army protection; although initially ridiculed, these critics were eventually proven correct.[\[22\]](#) BBC News announced in December 2004 that a \$1.2 billion pipeline, south of a huge new U.S. Army base in Kosovo, has been given a go-ahead by the governments of Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia.[\[23\]](#) Meanwhile by 2000, according to DEA statistics, Afghan heroin accounted for almost 20 percent of the heroin seized in the United States — nearly double the percentage taken four years earlier. Much of it is now distributed by Kosovar Albanians.[\[24\]](#)

Sergeant Ali Mohamed and U.S. Intelligence Links to the Al Qaeda Leadership

The Report describes Ali Mohamed as “a former Egyptian army officer who had moved to the United States in the mid-1980s, enlisted in the U.S. Army, and become an instructor at Fort Bragg,” as well as helping to plan the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya (68). In fact Ali Mohamed was an important al Qaeda agent who, as the 9/11 Commission was told, “trained most of al Qaeda’s top leadership,” including “persons who would later carry out the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.”[\[25\]](#) But the person telling the 9/11 Commission this, U.S. Attorney Patrick J. Fitzgerald, misrepresented Ali Mohamed’s FBI relationship. He told the Commission that, “From 1994 until his arrest in 1998, [Mohamed] lived as an American citizen in California, *applying for jobs as an FBI translator* and working as a security guard for a defense contractor.”[\[26\]](#)

Ali Mohamed was not just an FBI job applicant. Unquestionably he was an FBI informant, from at least 1993 and maybe 1989.[\[27\]](#) And almost certainly he was something more. A veteran of the CIA-trained bodyguards of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, he was able, despite being on a State Department Watch List, to come to America around 1984, on what an FBI consultant has called “a visa program controlled by the CIA”, and obtain a job, first as a security officer, then with U.S. Special Forces.[\[28\]](#) In 1988 he took a lengthy leave of absence from the U.S. Army and went to fight in Afghanistan, where he met with Ayman al-Zawahiri (later bin Laden’s chief deputy in al Qaeda) and the “Arab Afghan” leadership.[\[29\]](#) Despite this, he was able to receive an Honorable Discharge one year later, at which point he established close contact with bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Ali Mohamed clearly enjoyed U.S. protection: in 1993, when detained by the RCMP in Canada, a single phone call to the U.S. secured his release. This enabled him to play a role, in the same year, in planning the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya in 1998.[\[30\]](#)

Congress should determine the true relationship of the U.S. Government to Ali Mohamed, who was close to bin Laden and above all Zawahiri, who has been called the “main player” in 9/11.[\[31\]](#) (Al-Zawahiri is often described as the more sophisticated mentor of the younger bin Laden.)[\[32\]](#) In particular Congress should determine why Patrick Fitzgerald chose to mislead the American people about Mohamed’s FBI status.

In short, the al Qaeda terror network accused of the 9/11 attacks was supported and expanded by U.S. intelligence programs and covert operations, both during and after the Soviet Afghan War. Congress should rethink their decision to grant still greater powers and budget to the agencies responsible for fostering this enemy in the first place.

Sane voices clamor from the Muslim world that the best answer to terrorism is not war but justice. We should listen to them. By using its energies to reduce the injustices tormenting Islam, the United States will do more to diminish terrorism than by creating any number of new directorates in Washington.

Notes

[1] Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 115. Exploration in the 1990s has considerably downgraded these estimates.

[\[2\]](#) Western governments and media apply the term “al Qaeda” to the whole “network of co-opted groups” who have at some point accepted leadership, training and financing from bin Laden (Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* [London: I.B. Tauris, 2004], 7-8). From a Muslim perspective, the term “Al Qaeda” is clumsy, and has led to the targeting of a number of Islamist groups opposed to bin Laden’s tactics. See Montasser al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Lāden’s Right-Hand Man* [London: Pluto Press, 2004], 100, etc.).

[\[3\]](#) Peter Truell and Larry Gurwin, *False Profits: The Inside Story of BCCI, the World’s Most Corrupt Financial Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 132; Peter Dale Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 42.

[\[4\]](#) Robert Parry, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* (Arlington, VA: Media Consortium, 2004), 213-28, 235-39, 245-47.

[\[5\]](#) For Hamilton’s role on the conspiratorial whitewashing of contra drug activities, see Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott, and Jane Hunter, *The Iran-Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era* (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 179-81. At least eight men in the current Bush Administration were criticized for their roles in Iran-Contra, including two (Poindexter and Abrams) who were convicted.

[\[6\]](#) *9/11 Commission Report*, 56.

[\[7\]](#) Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 157 (hosted);

George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 521 (bags).

[8] George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 335 (car bombings); Steve Coll, *Washington Post*, 7/19/92 (ISI/CIA).

[9] Rahman was issued two visas, one of them "by a CIA officer working undercover in the consular section of the American embassy in Sudan" (Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* [New York: Free Press, 2001], 67; cf. 218 (Khalifa). FBI consultant Paul Williams writes that Mohamed "settled in America on a visa program controlled by the CIA" ((Paul L. Williams, *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror* [[Upper Saddle River, NJ]: Alpha/ Pearson Education, 2002], 117). Others allegedly admitted despite being on the State Department watch list include Mohammed Atta and possibly Ayman al-Zawahiri (Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* [Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005], 205, 46).

[10] Former State Department officer Michael Springmann, BBC 2, 11/6/01; Ahmed, *War on Truth*, 10.

[11] *US v. Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman et al*, Federal Court, SDNY, Testimony of Rodney Hampton-El, 8/3/95.

[12] Peter Lance, *Cover Up: What the Government Is Still Hiding about the War on Terror* [New York: Regan Books/ HarperCollins, 2004], 25); Andrew Marshall, *Independent*, 11/1/98, <http://billstclair.com/911timeline/1990s/independent110198.html>: "Mr. Mohamed, it is clear from his record, was working for the U.S. government at the time he provided the training: he was a Green Beret, part of America's Special Forces.... A confidential CIA internal survey concluded that it was 'partly culpable' for the World Trade Centre bomb, according to reports at the time." Williams writes that Mohamed's "primary task as a U.S. soldier was to train Muslims to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan" (Williams, *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror*. 117). Cf. *9/11 Commission Report*, 68.

[13] The most prominent example was the blocking by David Frasca at FBI HQ of the investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). Frasca also failed to act on the July 2001 request from the Phoenix FBI office urging a systematic review of Muslim students at U.S. flight schools (Ahmed, *War on Truth*, 251-57).

[14] *9/11 Commission Report*, 171. This statement is one-sided and misleading. But so is the opposite claim of Yossef Bodansky: "The annual income of the Taliban from the drug trade is estimated at \$8 billion. Bin Laden administers and manages these funds - laundering them through the Russian mafia..." (Bodansky, *Bin Laden*, 315).

[15] Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 272-75. A fourth operative in MEGA Oil, Gary Best, was also a veteran of North's Contra support effort. For more on General Secord's and Major Aderholt's role as part of Ted Shackley's team of off-loaded CIA assets and capabilities, see Marshall, Scott, and Hunter, *The Iran-Contra Connection*, 26-30, 36-42, 197-98.

[16] Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 272-75; Peter Dale Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 7. As part of the airline operation, Azeri pilots were trained in

Texas. Dearborn had previously helped Secord advise and train the fledgling Contra air force (Marshall, Scott, and Hunter, *The Iran-Contra Connection*, 197). Richard Secord was allegedly attempting also to sell Israeli arms, with the assistance of Israeli agent David Kimche, another associate of Oliver North. See Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War*, 7, 8, 20. Whether the Americans were aware of it or not, the al Qaeda presence in Baku soon expanded to include assistance for moving jihadis onwards into Dagestan and Chechnya.

[17] Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, 180; Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War*, 7. These important developments were barely noticed in the U.S. press, but a *Washington Post* article did belatedly note that a group of American men who wore “big cowboy hats and big cowboy boots” had arrived in Azerbaijan as military trainers for its army, followed in 1993 by “more than 1,000 guerrilla fighters from Afghanistan’s radical prime minister, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.” (*Washington Post*, 4/21/94). The Azeri “Afghan Brigade” was formally dissolved in 1994, after which it focused more on sabotage and terrorism (Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, 181).

[18] Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, 176.

[19] As the *9/11 Commission Report* notes (58), the bin Laden organization established an NGO in Baku, which became a base for terrorism elsewhere. It also became a transshipment point for Afghan heroin to the Chechen mafia, whose branches “extended not only to the London arms market, but also throughout continental Europe and North America (Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, 176).

[20] See Lewis Mackenzie (former UN commander in Bosnia), “We Bombed the Wrong Side?” *National Post*, 4/6/04: “Those of us who warned that the West was being sucked in on the side of an extremist, militant, Kosovo-Albanian independence movement were dismissed as appeasers. The fact that the lead organization spearheading the fight for independence, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was universally designated a terrorist organization and known to be receiving support from Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda was conveniently ignored....The Kosovar Albanians played us like a Stradivarius violin. We have subsidized and indirectly supported their violent campaign for an ethnically pure Kosovo. We have never blamed them for being the perpetrators of the violence in the early 1990s, and we continue to portray them as the designated victim today, in spite of evidence to the contrary. When they achieve independence with the help of our tax dollars combined with those of bin Laden and al-Qaeda, just consider the message of encouragement this sends to other terrorist-supported independence movements around the world.” Cf. John Pilger, *New Statesman*, 12/13/04.

[21] “‘Many members of the Kosovo Liberation Army were sent for training in terrorist camps in Afghanistan,’ said James Bissett, former Canadian ambassador to Yugoslavia and an expert on the Balkans. ‘Milosevic is right. There is no question of their participation in conflicts in the Balkans. It is very well documented’” (*National Post*, 3/15/02, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/world/story.html?f=/stories/20020315/344843.html>). Cf. Frank Ciluffo of the Globalized Organized Crime Program, in testimony presented to the House of Representatives Judicial Committee (12/13/00): “What was largely hidden from public view was the fact that the KLA raise part of their funds from the sale of narcotics.” Contrast e.g. Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War : Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt, 2000), 13: “the KLA, at first a small band of poorly trained and amateurish gunmen.” For the al Qaeda background to the UCK and its involvement in heroin-trafficking, see also Marcia Christoff Kurop, “Al Qaeda’s Balkan Links,” *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 11/1/01. “According to Michel Koutouzis, the DEA’s website once contained a section

detailing Kosovar trafficking, but a week before the U.S.-led bombings began, the section disappeared" (Peter Klebnikov, "Heroin Heroes," *Mother Jones*, January/February 2000, <http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2000/01/heroin.html>).

[22] George Monbiot, *Guardian*, 2/15/01.

[23] BBC News, 12/28/04. Those who charged that such a pipeline was projected were initially mocked but gradually vindicated (*Guardian*, 2/15/01; Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War*, 34). See also Marjorie Cohn, "Nato Bombing of Kosovo: Humanitarian Intervention or Crime against Humanity?" *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, March 2002, 79-106.

[24] Klebnikov, "Heroin Heroes," *Mother Jones*, January/February 2000.

[25] Cf. *9/11 Commission Report*, 68.

[26] Patrick Fitzgerald, Testimony before 9/11 Commission, June 16, 2004, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/hearings/hearing12.htm>, emphasis added.

[27] Fitzgerald must have known he was dissembling. Even the mainstream account by Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon (*The Age of Sacred Terror* [New York: Random House, 2002], 236) records that "When Mohamed was summoned back from Africa in 1993 [sic, Mohamed in his confession says 1994] to be interviewed by the FBI in connection with the case against Sheikh Rahman and his coconspirators, he convinced the agents that he could be useful to them as an informant." Cf. Lawrence Wright, *New Yorker*, 9/16/02: "In 1989...Mohamed talked to an F.B.I. agent in California and provided American intelligence with its first inside look at Al Qaeda." Larry C. Johnson, a former State Department and CIA official, faulted the FBI publicly for using Mohamed as an informant, when it should have recognized that the man was a high-ranking terrorist plotting against the United States. In Johnson's words, "It's possible that the FBI thought they had control of him and were trying to use him, but what's clear is that they did not have control" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 11/04/01).

[28] Lance, *1000 Years*, 30 (Watch List); Williams, *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror*, 117 (visa program); Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, 128 (security officer).

[29] Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York: Random House/Prima, 2001), 106; cf. Richard H. Shultz, Jr. and Ruth Margolies Beitler, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, June 2004, <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2004/issue2/jv8n2a6.html>. In 1995 Mohamed accompanied Ayman al-Zawahiri of Islamic Jihad, already effectively merged with al-Qaeda, on a secret fund-raising trip through America (Bodansky, *Bin Laden*, 105; Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.* [New York: Free Press, 2001], 201).

[30] Cf. *9/11 Commission Report*, 68. The *Globe and Mail* later concluded that Mohamed "was working with U.S. counter-terrorist agents, playing a double or triple game, when he was questioned in 1993" (*Globe and Mail*, 11/22/01, <http://www.mail-archive.com/hydro@topica.com/msg00224.html>).

[31] al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda*, 98: "I am convinced that [Zawahiri] and not bin Laden is the main player in these events." In contrast the *9/11 Commission Report* (151) assigns no role to Zawahiri in the 9/11 plot. Was Mohamed in touch with Zawahiri at this time? The *San Francisco Chronicle* has written that "until his arrest in 1998 [by which time the 9/11

plot was already under way], Mohamed shuttled between California, Afghanistan, Kenya, Somalia and at least a dozen other countries" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 10/21/01).

[32] Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 150.

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