

The Saudi businessman who recruited mujahedin now uses them for large-scale building projects in Sudan. Robert Fisk met him in Almatig

Anti-Soviet warrior puts his army on the road to peace

OSAMA Bin Laden set to his gold-plated robes, guarded by his loyal Arab bodyguards who fought along with him in Afghanistan. Smiling, his eyes bright, he seemed, for a moment, to be a man who had made them proud. Then he turned to the men who had recruited them to join the "jihad" army — the villages of Khartoum lined up in front of him. Bin Laden, who is about to complete the high-speed road from Khartoum to Khartoum for the first time in history.

With his high-collared, narrow-eyed and long-nosed face, Bin Laden looks every inch the mountain warrior of mountainous legend. Children cluster around in front of him, reaching out to touch his beard. "We have been waiting for this road through all the mountains in Sudan," a child said. "We wanted to see the road that we had seen on TV and in the newspapers."

Osama Bin Laden looks strong. Osama Bin Laden looks strong. Osama Bin Laden is not regarded with quite such high esteem. The Egyptian press claims he brought hundreds of Soviet Arab fighters back to Sudan from Afghanistan, while the Western press claims that Bin Laden has recruited the Saudi entrepreneur Bin Laden to Sudan to help financing for his anti-war in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. Mr Bin Laden is well aware of this. "The myth of the media and the politicians," he calls it. "I am a construction engineer and an agriculturalist. If I had training camps here in Sudan, I couldn't possibly do this job."

And "this job" is certainly an ambitious one: a hard-core highway stretching all the way from Khartoum to Port Sudan, a distance of 1,000km (743 miles) on the old road, now planned to 100km by the new Bin Laden route that will turn the coastal port from the capital into a

new city's gateway. Into a country that is despised by Saudi Arabia for its support of Islamic extremists in the Gulf was almost to be a revolution by the United States. Mr Bin Laden has brought the very same mujahedin who he recruited into five years ago to build the coastal roads of Afghanistan.

He is a shy man. After making a point in Khartoum and only a small apartment in his home city of Jeddah, he is quiet — with few words — but every of the press. His first interview with the Independent was the first he has ever done in a Western newspaper, and he usually refused to talk about Afghanistan, sitting simply on a stool at the back of a makeshift tent, looking his neck in the Arab fashion with a stick of smoked meat. But he eventually did about a war which he

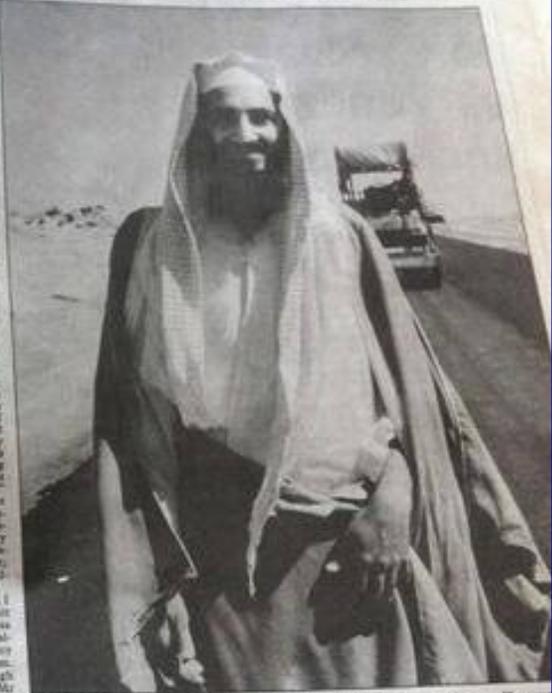
Laden was leading Arab fighters — Egyptians, Algerians, Lebanese, Kuwaitis, Tunisians and Syrians — into Afghanistan. "I am proud of my achievements," he said. The report that Bin Laden had recruited them with weapons and his own transportation, equipment. Along with his long, elegant, Mohamed band — who is now building the Port Sudan road — Mr Bin Laden himself seems to have been the first mujahedin to be recruited for guerrilla warfare and arms dumps, there are a number of men who are in a similar position to Bin Laden.

"No, I was never afraid of death. As Muslims, we believe that when we die, we go to heaven. Before a battle, God sends us signs, inspiration."

"Osama I was only 19 years from the Russians and they were trying

to capture me. I was under bombardment but I was so peaceful in my heart that I fell asleep. This experience has been written about in our various books. I saw a 10km mortar shell land in front of me, but it did not blow up. Four more bombs were dropped from a Russian plane on our headquarters but they did not explode. We lost the Soviet Union. The Russians fled."

But what of the Arab mujahedin whom he took to Afghanistan — members of a guerrilla army who were also encouraged and aided by the United States — and who were forgotten when their war was over? "Personally neither I nor my brothers saw evidence of American help. When my mujahedin were victorious and the Russians were driven out, differences started [between



Osama Bin Laden surveys the 100km road he is building in northern Sudan. Photograph

'What I lived in two years in Afghanistan, I could not have lived in a hundred years elsewhere,' said Osama Bin Laden

helped to win for the Afghan mujahedin. "What I lived in two years there, I could not have lived in a hundred years elsewhere," he said. "When the history of the Afghan resistance movement is written, Mr Bin Laden's own contributions to the mujahedin — and the indirect result of his training and assistance — may turn out to be a turning-point in the recent history of military fundamentalism; even if, today, he tries to minimize his role. "When the invasion of Afghanistan started, I was recruited and went there at once — I arrived within days, before the end of 1979," he said. "Yes, I fought there, but my fellow Muslims did much more than I. Many of them died and I am still alive."

Within months, however, Mr Bin

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A lesson in the langu

Flashback: The Independent's glowing 1993 interview with Osama Bin Laden

By [Keyser Söze](#) on [Saudi Arabia](#)

1993. 8 years before he would orchestrate the 9/11 attacks which killed close to 3,000 people, Osama Bin Laden sat down for an interview with the UK Independent newspaper which portrayed him as an edgy anti-hero relinquishing his untold Saudi fortune to wage a heroic 'jihad' against the evil soviet invasion. Like a brown Che Guevara.

It was a simpler time.

The word 'jihad' was not really part of the popular lexicon back then. Before ISIS, before Al-Qaeda, before French troops were deployed on the streets of Paris, it's not difficult to comprehend the author's romantic notions of Bin Laden's 'Jihad'.

For instance, Bin Laden strokes his own ego as he recalls coming face-to-face with a bomb during his struggle against Soviet forces:

‘Once I was only 30 metres from the Russians and they were trying to capture me. I was under bombardment but I was so peaceful in my heart that I fell asleep.’

It’s like something out of Rambo.

The Mujahideen forces which beckoned Muslims from Bosnia, all over the Middle-East, Sudan (where Bin Laden was living at the time of the interview) and elsewhere derive their name from the Arabic word ‘mujahid’, a term for an individual ongoing the jihad, or struggle.

The difference, of course, was the fact that prior to the mid-nineties these terrorists in question were ‘our terrorists’. One man’s ‘terrorist’ is another man’s ‘freedom-fighter’ or ‘rebel’.

Because, really, how hard would it be to write the same glowing tribute as this article for a modern Al-Nusra fighter in Syria, or a Houthi rebel in Yemen?

The reverence in which Bin Laden is held in Sudan, a ‘mountain warrior of mujahedin legend’, could easily be written about Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi in Yemen. Conceivably, at some point ‘chadored children danced in front of him, preachers acknowledged his wisdom’ in a similar fashion to Bin Laden. Popularity amongst the local populace means nothing in foreign policy terms, until it suits the narrative you’re trying to broadcast.

Likewise, the way Bin Laden dismisses critics of his interpretation of militant Islamism as ‘rubbish of the media and the embassies’ has surely been used as an excuse by every tyrant since modern mass media began. The only difference was that his message ran parallel to the aims of the West at the time, and thus he found a media outlet willing to oblige him.

The reason this archived article interests me is because it is an extreme example of how much the word ‘terrorist’ has been skewed from its dictionary meaning of ‘committing political or religious violence’ to simply meaning ‘someone who stands in the way of the West’s interests’.

If you can write an article portraying Osama Bin Laden as a Saudi Napoleon, you can conceivably portray any player in the nuanced minefield of Middle-Eastern conflict anyway you choose.

If you are American or European, these wars are not happening in your back garden. They are seemingly happening on another planet, a world we can barely even comprehend. Therefore we rely on the media to drip-feed us a narrative that we have no way of challenging.

This perhaps represents the biggest difference that social media has made to our lives. If you filter through the ‘fake news’ and vitriol, it is now genuinely possible to obtain news about Yemen from Yemenis, rather than Murdoch papers or CNN. A crazy thought, I know.

I’m not necessarily saying that The Independent is a bad newspaper. Before it went online and became the Mecca of clickbait it had some great journalists. Nor am I saying that most reporters are trying to deceive anyone.

I just want to point-out how easy it was to portray a figure as ostensibly evil as Osama Bin Laden as a humble martyr trying his hardest to liberate his fellow muslims. If you can spin this, you can spin anything.

Take nothing at face-value.

Here is the full 1993 article:

OSAMA Bin Laden sat in his gold- fringed robe, guarded by the loyal Arab mujahedin who fought alongside him in Afghanistan. Bearded, taciturn figures – unarmed, but never more than a few yards from the man who recruited them, trained them and then dispatched them to destroy the Soviet army – they watched unsmiling as the Sudanese villagers of Almatig lined up to thank the Saudi businessman who is about to complete the highway linking their homes to Khartoum for the first time in history.

With his high cheekbones, narrow eyes and long brown robe, Mr Bin Laden looks every inch the mountain warrior of mujahedin legend. Chadored children danced in front of him, preachers acknowledged his wisdom. ‘We have been waiting for this road through all the revolutions in Sudan,’ a sheikh said. ‘We waited until we had given up on everybody – and then Osama Bin Laden came along.’

Outside Sudan, Mr Bin Laden is not regarded with quite such high esteem. The Egyptian press claims he brought hundreds of former Arab fighters back to Sudan from Afghanistan, while the Western embassy circuit in Khartoum has suggested that some of the ‘Afghans’ whom this Saudi entrepreneur flew to Sudan are now busy training for further jihad wars in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. Mr Bin Laden is well aware of this. ‘The rubbish of the media and the embassies,’ he calls it. ‘I am a construction engineer and an agriculturalist. If I had training camps here in Sudan, I couldn’t possibly do this job.’

And ‘this job’ is certainly an ambitious one: a brand-new highway stretching all the way from Khartoum to Port Sudan, a distance of 1,200km (745 miles) on the old road, now shortened to 800km by the new Bin Laden route that will turn the coastal run from the capital into a mere day’s journey. Into a country that is despised by Saudi Arabia for its support of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war almost as much as it is condemned by the United States, Mr Bin Laden has brought the very construction equipment that he used only five years ago to build the guerrilla trails of Afghanistan.

He is a shy man. Maintaining a home in Khartoum and only a small apartment in his home city of Jeddah, he is married – with four wives – but wary of the press. His interview with the Independent was the first he has ever given to a Western journalist, and he initially refused to talk about Afghanistan, sitting silently on a chair at the back of a makeshift tent, brushing his teeth in the Arab fashion with a stick of miswak wood. But talk he eventually did about a war which he helped to win for the Afghan mujahedin: ‘What I lived in two years there, I could not have lived in a hundred years elsewhere,’ he said.

When the history of the Afghan resistance movement is written, Mr Bin Laden’s own contribution to the mujahedin – and the indirect result of his training and assistance – may turn out to be a turning- point in the recent history of militant fundamentalism; even if, today, he tries to minimise his role. ‘When the invasion of Afghanistan started, I was

enraged and went there at once – I arrived within days, before the end of 1979,’ he said. ‘Yes, I fought there, but my fellow Muslims did much more than I. Many of them died and I am still alive.’

Within months, however, Mr Bin Laden was sending Arab fighters – Egyptians, Algerians, Lebanese, Kuwaitis, Turks and Tunisians – into Afghanistan; ‘not hundreds but thousands,’ he said. He supported them with weapons and his own construction equipment. Along with his Iraqi engineer, Mohamed Saad – who is now building the Port Sudan road – Mr Bin Laden blasted massive tunnels into the Zazi mountains of Bakhtiar province for guerrilla hospitals and arms dumps, then cut a mujahedin trail across the country to within 15 miles of Kabul.

‘No, I was never afraid of death. As Muslims, we believe that when we die, we go to heaven. Before a battle, God sends us seqina, tranquillity.

‘Once I was only 30 metres from the Russians and they were trying to capture me. I was under bombardment but I was so peaceful in my heart that I fell asleep. This experience has been written about in our earliest books. I saw a 120mm mortar shell land in front of me, but it did not blow up. Four more bombs were dropped from a Russian plane on our headquarters but they did not explode. We beat the Soviet Union. The Russians fled.’

But what of the Arab mujahedin whom he took to Afghanistan – members of a guerrilla army who were also encouraged and armed by the United States – and who were forgotten when that war was over? ‘Personally neither I nor my brothers saw evidence of American help. When my mujahedin were victorious and the Russians were driven out, differences started (between the guerrilla movements) so I returned to road construction in Taif and Abha. I brought back the equipment I had used to build tunnels and roads for the mujahedin in Afghanistan. Yes, I helped some of my comrades to come here to Sudan after the war.’

How many? Osama Bin Laden shakes his head. ‘I don’t want to say. But they are here now with me, they are working right here, building this road to Port Sudan.’ I told him that Bosnian Muslim fighters in the Bosnian town of Travnik had mentioned his name to me. ‘I feel the same about Bosnia,’ he said. ‘But the situation there does not provide the same opportunities as Afghanistan. A small number of mujahedin have gone to fight in Bosnia-Herzegovina but the Croats won’t allow the mujahedin in through Croatia as the Pakistanis did with Afghanistan.’

Thus did Mr Bin Laden reflect upon jihad while his former fellow combatants looked on. Was it not a little bit anti-climactic for them, I asked, to fight the Russians and end up road-building in Sudan? ‘They like this work and so do I. This is a great plan which we are achieving for the people here, it helps the Muslims and improves their lives.’

His Bin Laden company – not to be confused with the larger construction business run by his cousins – is paid in Sudanese currency which is then used to purchase sesame and other products for export; profits are clearly not Mr Bin Laden’s top priority.

How did he feel about Algeria, I asked? But a man in a green suit calling himself Mohamed Moussa – he claimed to be Nigerian although he was a Sudanese security officer – tapped

me on the arm. ‘You have asked more than enough questions,’ he said. At which Mr Bin Laden went off to inspect his new road.

Leak of Nations | Osama Bin Laden

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Keaton always said, “I don’t believe in God, but I’m afraid of him.” Well I believe in God, and the only thing that scares me is Keyser Soze.