

Credit Card Armies— Firearms and Training For Terror in the United States



Violence Policy Center

The Violence Policy Center is a national non-profit educational organization that conducts research and public education on firearms violence and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, grassroots advocates, and the general public. The Center examines the role of firearms in America, analyzes trends and patterns in firearms violence, and works to develop policies to reduce gun-related death and injury.

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- *Kids in the Line of Fire: Children, Handguns, and Homicide* (November 2001)
- *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 1999 Homicide Data* (October 2001)
- *Voting from the Rooftops: How the Gun Industry Armed Osama bin Laden, Other Foreign and Domestic Terrorists, and Common Criminals with 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles* (October 2001)
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- *Hispanics and Firearms Violence* (May 2001)
- *Poisonous Pastime: The Health Risks of Target Ranges and Lead to Children, Families, and the Environment* (May 2001)
- *Where'd They Get Their Guns?—An Analysis of the Firearms Used in High-Profile Shootings, 1963 to 2001* (April 2001)
- *Every Handgun Is Aimed at You: The Case for Banning Handguns* (March 2001)
- *From Gun Games to Gun Stores: Why the Firearms Industry Wants Their Video Games on Your Child's Wish List* (December 2000)
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- *Guns For Felons: How the NRA Works to Rearm Criminals* (March 2000)
- *Where Did You Get That Statistic?—A Bibliography and Resource Guide For Advocates Working To Reduce Gun Death and Injury* (January 2000)
- *One Shot, One Kill: Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles* (May 1999)
- *Start 'Em Young—Recruitment of Kids to the Gun Culture* (April 1999)
- *Making a Killing: The Business of Guns in America* (January 1999)
- *Joe Camel with Feathers: How the NRA with Gun and Tobacco Industry Dollars Uses Its Eddie Eagle Program to Market Guns to Kids* (November 1997)
- *Cease Fire: A Comprehensive Strategy to Reduce Firearms Violence* (Revised, October 1997)

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Those who would emulate international terrorists like Abu Sabaya—pictured on the front cover—have been urged to take advantage of lax firearm laws in the United States to obtain guns and firearm training.

INTRODUCTION

America's gun laws are wide open compared to the rest of the developed world. Foreign groups promoting various forms of armed conflict, including "jihad," have advised would-be warriors that, because of its lax gun laws, the United States is the ideal place to get guns and firearms training to prepare for armed conflict.

These overseas groups understand that, with little more than a credit card and a driver's license, terrorists can outfit themselves with military grade firepower—including 50 caliber sniper rifles, assault weapons, and exotic ammunition—get advanced combat training from a plethora of civilian schools, and then find plenty of ammunition and firing ranges to hone their shooting skills. The American gun culture has so pervaded the al Qaeda terror network that it used National Rifle Association targets for marksmanship training in terror training camps in Afghanistan.¹

It is not surprising that international terrorists discovered the United States as a one stop firearms bazaar: they've had the role model of radical domestic groups openly arming and training themselves with weapons of war over the last several decades.

This situation has not escaped the notice of our friends and allies. No less an authority on fighting terrorism than former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu cites tightening gun control laws as an essential element of combating terror. In his book *Fighting Terrorism*, Netanyahu notes that although firearms ownership is widespread in Israel—a democracy under constant threat of terror attack—access to handguns is carefully screened and ownership of certain "powerful weapons" is prohibited. He adds this trenchant observation:

Forbidding the ownership of machine guns is not a denial of the right to own a weapon for self-defense; it is a denial of the right to organize private armies—a right which no society can grant without eventually having to fight those armies. The continued existence in the United States of heavily armed anti-government militias numbering thousands of members is a grotesque distortion of the idea of civil freedom, which should be brought to a speedy end.²

President George W. Bush might be thought to agree with the thrust of this sentiment. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on November 10, 2001, in New York, Mr. Bush said, "We have a responsibility to deny weapons to terrorists—and to actively prevent private citizens from providing them."³ However, doubt remains about the President's commitment to realizing this goal, inasmuch as the Department of Justice has forbidden the FBI to take even the fundamental step

of comparing names of suspected terrorists against federal gun purchase records.⁴

This study is an expanded version of the earlier VPC report *Firearms Training for Jihad in America* (November 2001).

- ! Section One documents how foreign groups have specifically targeted the United States as a place for would-be warriors to acquire firearms and train with them, precisely because it is easier than almost anywhere else in the world.
- ! Section Two documents examples of international terrorists who have put that advice into practice and either obtained guns, firearms training, or both in America.
- ! Section Three lists earlier VPC reports relevant to the issues raised in this report.

SECTION ONE:
Foreign Groups Cite Lax U.S. Gun Laws:
Ideal Environment for Combat Training

The “Ultimate Jihad Challenge”

An earlier Violence Policy Center report, *Voting From the Rooftops: How the Gun Industry Armed Osama bin Laden, Other Foreign and Domestic Terrorists, and Common Criminals With 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles*^a (October 2001), detailed how Islamic fundamentalists were reported by the British press to have been given training in firearms and explosives at secret locations in the United States, including sniper training.⁵ A British Member of Parliament demanded that the results of a Scotland Yard police investigation into the alleged secret training be made public.⁶

Reports are mixed as to how extensive the training offered by Sakina Security Services, the organization said to be under investigation, has actually been. U.S. law enforcement officials reportedly have not been able to find the described camp.⁷ But Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed, described as a leading fundamentalist and an “Islamic militant,” was reported to have told the Scottish *Sunday Mail* that 400 youths have been sent annually to the program.⁸ British authorities eventually arrested Sulayman Balal Zainulabidin, who they said admitted to running Sakina, and reportedly charged him with “providing instructional training in the making or use of firearms, explosives or chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.”⁹ The company’s Internet web site was also shut down.¹⁰

While Sakina’s Internet web site was up, it indeed offered a course entitled “The Ultimate Jihad Challenge.” The site described the training as “a two-week course in our 1,000-acre state of the art shooting range in the United States,” where the “course emphasis is on practical live fire training. You will fire between 2,000 to 3,000 rounds of mixed caliber ammunition.” The site advised that “due to the firearms law of the UK all serious firearms training must be done overseas,” i.e., in the U.S. where gun laws are more permissive.¹¹

The “Ultimate Jihad Challenge” curriculum included, among other things, such live-fire topics as “tactical ambush,” “sniper/counter sniper,” “shooting at, thru & from vehicle,” and “understanding ammunition capabilities.”¹² It is not clear whether

^a Fifty caliber heavy sniper rifles are powerful weapons of war that present a new order of terrorist threat by their ability to knock down aircraft, including helicopters, and punch through concrete block, armored vehicles, fuel and toxic chemical storage tanks, and materials that may be relied upon for executive protection. These devastating features are exactly why Barrett 50 caliber heavy sniper rifles, for example, are in the armories of U.S. Marine Corps snipers and at least 17 other armies around the world.

training in the heavy 50 caliber sniper rifles was included in the instruction. But even if it were not, the sniper training would be useful for potential 50 caliber shooters. In the words of one expert author on sniping, current 50 caliber sniper rifles are "simple to operate and require little training time for trained snipers."¹³

Sakina's web site also included a section of "Jihad Links." Among those links was that of *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen*, one of the organizations covered by President George W. Bush's order of September 24, 2001, freezing assets of terrorist organizations and front groups.¹⁴ That group is reported to operate terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, and its former leader, Fazlur Rehman Khalil, is said to have been a co-signer of Osama bin Laden's *fatwa* calling for attacks on the United States and Americans.¹⁵

Training for Jihad in America

The VPC also obtained a copy of a six-page pamphlet titled *How Can I Train Myself for Jihad* which also was reported to have been found in terrorist safe houses in Kabul, Afghanistan. The document advises that "military training is an obligation in Islam upon every sane, male, mature Muslim, whether rich or poor, whether studying or working and whether living in a Muslim or non-Muslim country."¹⁶ It offers tips on various ways to make "suitable preparations for battle," including physical training, martial arts, survival and outdoors training, firearms training, and military training. This report focuses on the firearms and military training aspects of the pamphlet.

Origins of the Pamphlet. The pamphlet appears to have been originally posted on Azzam.com, run by the British company Azzam Publications, and on qoqaz.net, an affiliate of Azzam.¹⁷ Azzam was founded in late 1996 and is named after Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Osama bin Laden.¹⁸ Azzam has operated a site dedicated to worldwide jihad, from which funds have been steered to the Taliban in Afghanistan and to guerillas fighting the Russians in Chechnya.¹⁹ Azzam sites reportedly published explicit photographs of laughing mujahedeen warriors brandishing the body parts of Russian soldiers,²⁰ and praised suicide bombers as "martyrs."²¹ Some of those sites have been shut down, but archived sites contain duplicate information such as *How Can I Train Myself for Jihad*. The Violence Policy Center obtained its copy from one of those sites.

Links to Al Qaeda Terrorists. In addition to the general support for worldwide jihad described above, the training pamphlet was posted on one of the Azzam-affiliated web sites, www.qoqaz.de in Germany.²² After a hacker cracked the Azzam site, posted a list of subscribers to Azzam newsletters offered through the site, and turned the list over to authorities, it was discovered that Said Bahaji was apparently one of the subscribers.²³ Authorities investigating the September 11, 2001, terror

attacks on the United States have described Bahaji as the “brains” behind a key support cell that the investigation uncovered in Germany.²⁴ German investigators say that Bahaji was responsible for logistics, including helping the suicide pilots who crashed jetliners into the World Trade Center obtain their visas to enter the United States.²⁵

Firearms and Military Training Urged in Pamphlet. In addition to urging would-be holy warriors to prepare themselves for jihad physically and through martial arts, the pamphlet notes the advantages the United States offers for firearms training and advises readers on how to exploit them:

- ! “Firearms training differs from country to country....In some countries of the World, especially the USA, firearms training is available to the general public. One should try to join a shooting club if possible and make regular visits to the firing range. There are many firearms courses available to the public in USA, ranging from one day to two weeks or more. These courses are good but expensive. Some of them are only meant for security personnel but generally they will teach anyone. It is also better to attend these courses in pairs or by yourself, no more. Do not make public announcements when going on such a course. Find one, book your place, go there, learn, come back home and keep it [to] yourself. Whilst on the course, keep your opinions to yourself, do not argue or debate with anyone, do not preach about Islam....You are going there to train for Jihad, not call people to Islam.”
- ! “Useful courses to learn are sniping, general shooting and other rifle courses. Handgun courses are useful but only after you have mastered rifles.”
- ! “In other countries, e.g. some states of USA, South Africa, it is perfectly legal for members of the public to own certain types of firearms. If you live in such a country, obtain an assault rifle legally, preferably AK-47 or variations, learn how to use it properly and go and practice in the areas allowed for such training.”
- ! “Respect the laws of the country you are in and avoid dealing in illegal firearms. One can learn to operate many arms legally, so there is no need to spend years in prison for dealing in small, illegal firearms. Learn the most you can according to your circumstances and leave the rest to when you actually go for Jihad.”

SECTION TWO:

Foreign Terrorists Who Got Guns or Firearms Training in the United States

Acquisition of 25 Barrett 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles by Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden's terrorist support network—Al Qaeda—has become a household word since the September 11 terrorist attack. In addition to the catastrophic attacks that day on the World Trade Center complex and the Pentagon, Al Qaeda's previous attacks include:²⁶

- ! Bombing the World Trade Center in 1993, leaving six dead and hundreds wounded.
- ! Bombing American military quarters in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in 1996, killing 19 U.S. soldiers.
- ! Bombing American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, killing 253 and wounding 5,500.
- ! Bombing the USS Cole in October 2000 at a port in Yemen, killing 17 U.S. sailors.

Evidence that Al Qaeda bought 25 Barrett 50 caliber sniper rifles in 1988 or 1989 came to light during the 2001 trial of terrorists charged with the American embassy bombings in Africa. A government witness, Essam al Ridi, testified that he had shipped 25 Barrett 50 caliber sniper rifles to Al Qaeda. The testimony is ambiguous as to the exact date of the transaction, but it appears to have been in either 1988 or 1989.²⁷ (Al Ridi, an Egyptian who became a naturalized U.S. citizen,²⁸ also learned to fly and taught flying in Arlington, Texas, at the now-defunct Ed Boardman Aviation School.²⁹)

There is no other documentary evidence yet available about the precise details of this transaction. The manufacturer, Barrett Firearms Manufacturing, Inc., has posted an ambiguous statement on its Internet web site implying that the sale of the rifles was conducted through the United States government as part of the support the United States provided Mujahedeen forces fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Analogizing its rifles to Stinger missiles also provided to the Mujahedeen, Barrett states: "Officials of the US government either sent them missiles from their own stock or arranged the sale through the current manufacturer. The latter was the case for the Barrett rifles....If cognizant U.S. Government officials request the support of an arms manufacturer in such cases, should we to [sic] dispute their judgment?"³⁰

In the absence of supporting documents, it remains unclear whether the guns

in question were sold directly from the factory or bought through licensed dealers, or whether Ronnie G. Barrett—in whose name the Barrett federal firearms manufacturing license was held until 1993, when it was switched to Barrett Firearms Manufacturing, Inc.³¹—knew that the 25 guns were sold to bin Laden’s Al Qaeda. Jane’s *International Defense Review* reported in 1989 that “Barrett will not identify its weapon’s purchasers.”³² What is clear, however, is the overriding point that as early as 1988, al Qaeda operatives recognized the value of the 50 caliber sniper rifle as the weapon of war that it is.

Other 50 Caliber Terrorist Sales. At least two Barrett 50 caliber sniper rifles were acquired in the United States by another terrorist organization, the IRA, whose snipers murdered a total of 11 soldiers and policemen in five years.³³ According to journalist and author Toby Harnden, two Barretts sold by the company to a firearms dealer on January 27, 1995, were bought by a 37-year-old Cuban living in Cleveland, who passed them on to an unknown Irish man, who shipped them to Ireland. One of those guns was used on February 12, 1997, when British Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick—the last of the IRA sniping victims—was killed instantly at a traffic checkpoint by a single shot fired by a sniper, firing the Barrett from a Mazda 626 hatchback. The round, fired from 120 yards, smashed into Restorick’s rifle, broke into three pieces, and perforated blood vessels, causing massive internal bleeding.³⁴

Other Apparent Firearms Sales to Suspected Terrorists. According to news reports, before the Justice Department barred use of gun sale records for investigating suspected terrorists, the FBI found that at least two persons detained as suspected terrorists had been cleared to buy guns through the Brady Law background check system.³⁵ Common practice would strongly indicate that the suspected terrorists actually did buy the guns in question. Using another database listing guns recovered in crimes, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms also was able to determine that 34 firearms used in crimes had at some point been bought by persons on the list of suspects.³⁶

Documented Training by Convicted Terrorists. El Sayyid Nosair—the man who by all accounts assassinated Rabbi Meir Kahane and who is now in prison for his part in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—was observed by federal agents as early as 1989 taking training with AK-47 rifles at a public range on Long Island with four other men later convicted in the 1993 bombing.³⁷ Nosair was coached by Egyptian-born Ali Mohamed, whose peregrinations included a tour in the U.S. Army, and who last year conspired to blow up U.S. embassies in East Africa.³⁸

SECTION THREE:
Related VPC Publications

The Violence Policy Center has published a number of reports describing specific dangers highlighted by terrorist exploitation of America's weak gun laws. These include, among others:

- *Voting from the Rooftops: How the Gun Industry Armed Osama bin Laden, Other Foreign and Domestic Terrorists, and Common Criminals with 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles* (October 2001).
- *Cashing in on the New Millenium: How the Firearms Industry Exploits Y2K Fears to Sell More Guns* (December 1999).
- *One Shot, One Kill: Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles* (May 1999).
- *Gun Shows in America: Tupperware® Parties for Criminals* (July 1996).

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