

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEW AFGHANISTAN AND THE NEXT BATTLEFIELD?

“An agreement between the two [African rebels and al Qaeda] which aims at providing assistance in their sacred war [in the] west of Sudan in return for certain support and security arrangements for them and those [al Qaeda] members on the run.”

—SECRET SUDANESE INTELLIGENCE MEMO, JULY 2004

“We want to be preventative, so that we don’t have to put boots on the ground here in North Africa as we did in Afghanistan.”

—LT. COLONEL POWELL SMITH, CHIEF OF COUNTER-TERRORISM, U.S. ARMY EUROPEAN COMMAND

GARDEZ, AFGHANISTAN—By November 2001, al Qaeda’s strategic situation was desperate.

It had barely noticed the careful preparations of CIA paramilitary and U.S. Special Forces in September. Fewer than thirty days after September 11, on October 7, American and allied air forces appeared overhead, supporting Northern Alliance attacks coordinated by Special Forces. Neither al Qaeda nor the Taliban (nor indeed anyone else in Afghanistan) had ever experienced “close air support” before. The accurate and continual delivery of bombs to clear opposition for a fast-moving land assault was a shock and a surprise. The Soviets had used massive aerial bombardments and artillery barrages, which ended on a fixed schedule followed by a lull to allow the infantry to move in. This is how the Soviets, and everyone else, had fought World War II. In 1979, the Soviets

brought the same tactics to Afghanistan. No doubt al Qaeda expected more of the same.

Yet the Americans were trained and equipped to fight a new war in a new way. Air and ground efforts were synchronized and simultaneous. The bombs, even the dumb ones, were more precisely delivered than any other munitions in the history of warfare.

Al Qaeda was accustomed to the slow pace and low intensity of the Afghan warlord battles during the 1990s. The Islamist fighters were willing to die, and many did, but their commanders were expecting a contest of wills like the duels fought between mountain warlords—not the new face of war.

Operating out of a war room that looked a lot like NASA's mission control, American military commanders were able to use advance communications, aerial surveillance, and computer imaging to make decisions faster than their enemies could. As a result, the pace of the terrorists' retreat was mainly determined by the speed of Northern Alliance trucks.

Al Qaeda had to make a strategic decision—quickly.

Concentrating its forces now seemed unwise. There was no sanctuary from the American bombers. Even the forbidding terrain of Tora Bora offered little refuge. It guaranteed only that they would all die together.

New bases and rally points would have to be found. These new havens would have to be small, secret, and spread across the Muslim world from Morocco to Malaysia. Like a cancer, al Qaeda would have to metastasize.

What follows is my own surmise of the strategic picture, drawing on observations gleaned from sources in Southeast Asia and the Middle East as well as senior Bush administration officials. This analysis is not based on the account of any single source, but is a compilation. Even Bush administration officials who were willing to confirm many details refused to confirm or deny my view of the big picture. So consider it an informed surmise.

In November 2001, bin Laden's inner circle was composed almost exclusively of Egyptians, Saudis, and Chechens. No doubt Chechnya or elsewhere in Central Asia was considered as a new headquarters and staging area. While al Qaeda activity did seem to pick up in the region in December 2001, the Russians and the dictators who run the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have proved far too brutal to make the region an attractive refuge for al Qaeda.

Southeast Asia offered a number of advantages. Al Qaeda and its affiliates (including Jemaah Islamiya) already had an extensive network of camps and safe houses in the Philippines, Malaysia, and elsewhere. Southeast Asia is also conveniently littered with American and allied targets.

Over the next year, the bin Laden terror network killed hundreds in two night clubs in Bali and dozens in two hotels frequented by Westerners in Kuala Lumpur. Others died in al Qaeda attacks in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Al Qaeda also attempted many more attacks. It tried to bomb the U.S. embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the U.S. embassy in Singapore (including a plot to assassinate U.S. ambassador Frank Lavin), and a U.S. naval base in Singapore, among others. The unraveling of the Singapore plots is a dramatic tale of the quiet surveillance of several cells followed by lightning-fast arrests of nearly forty terrorists. All the while, Ambassador Lavin went about his daily routine, trying not to reveal to his staff, his children, or the outside world that he knew his life was in danger. Lavin and Singapore intelligence officials shared the story with me on a "background" basis. Suffice it to say that by the end of 2002 al Qaeda was in full retreat in Southeast Asia: Its major operatives were arrested (including Hambali, Southeast Asia's bin Laden, who was captured in Thailand), or killed, its camps destroyed, its network in disarray. Renewed attempts to restart activities in the three southernmost Muslim-majority provinces of Thailand have been crushed.

Denied sanctuary in both Central and Southeast Asia, bin Laden's forces began to rebuild in the vast collection of failed states known as North Africa.

NORTH AFRICA—The Sahara is the world's largest desert and its most lawless region. Its slowly shifting dunes and green flecks of oases stretch from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco to the Red Sea of Egypt, covering roughly 1.5 million square miles.¹ Below the Sahara lies a dry belt of scrub bush, butte, and sunburned rock known as the Sahel, Arabic for "margin."

These two inhospitable regions stretch over nine North African nations, which are too poor and too poorly equipped to patrol these furnace-hot wastelands. They are the home and hideout for legions of nomads, smugglers, gun runners, marauders, bandits, rebels—and now, al Qaeda terrorists.

In this desolate landscape, al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist groups have established more than a dozen training camps and safe havens, according to interviews with North African intelligence officials, intelligence documents, and U.S. Defense Department reports. The consensus of opinion among the sources I have consulted is that al Qaeda is in the Sahara and the Sahel to create a "new Afghanistan."

Al Qaeda and its affiliates need safe places to plan attacks and train fighters. Since 2002, it has established bases of varying sizes across the region, including a secret stronghold near where the borders of Algeria, Niger, and Mali meet.² Other reports indicate bases in northern Chad, Sudan, and Mali.³

Finding these bases is more difficult than a layman might believe. While there is little vegetation, the land is far from flat or featureless: It rises to more than eleven thousand feet and drops to more than one hundred feet below sea level, with many ravines, ridges, and revetments. The National Security Agency, which studies the output of spy satellites, is trained to look for telltale collec-

tions of buildings or sources of electric light at night. Yet the Sahara and the Sahel contain thousands of uncharted settlements; a terror encampment, viewed from an orbiting satellite, can easily be confused with a herding community or a base for smugglers, rebels, or other outlaws.

Even ground-level searches are difficult. The terrain is vast and unforgiving. The old African trick of “staking out the waterholes,” as one former African special forces operative told me, is also difficult. There are many small springs known only to locals, and many different groups frequent the bigger ones.⁴ Several thousand men, especially if they divide into groups of a dozen or so, can easily blend in.

Despite the difficulties, America is fighting back with special forces, new CIA posts, and a wide-ranging diplomatic initiative. America and its allies are using joint covert operations, P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft, and African ground troops to wage search-and-destroy missions against al Qaeda. The U.S. has established a clandestine listening post deep in the Algerian Sahara to monitor al Qaeda’s movements there.⁵

Bush administration officials convened a conference in October 2003 with senior intelligence officials from across North Africa. The so-called Bamako Conference led to the creation of a regional intelligence-sharing scheme and a counter-terrorism task force. U.S. officials later unveiled an unprecedented aid package, known as the “Pan-Sahel Initiative,” to Mali and other North African nations. The initiative includes both economic aid and military assistance.

Fought largely by forces from the U.S. Army’s European Command (which is responsible for North Africa), the CIA, French intelligence (many of the Saharan countries are former French colonies), and a panoply of African allies, the war on al Qaeda in North Africa has gone largely unnoticed in the American media. At the very least, this war shows that the Iraq War was not a distraction from President Bush’s War on Terror, only a distraction for the press.

Why did al Qaeda select North Africa as its staging ground? In short, opportunity and necessity.

The region is much like Afghanistan. It is mostly Muslim and largely undeveloped, with only a few hundred miles of paved roads in more than one million square miles of territory. In vast tracks of the Sahara and the Sahel, the only local authority is a warlord and his private army. Here guns outnumber people. The rugged and remote region is crisscrossed by roving bands of armed men. Irregular army units and some eighty Arab tribal militias patrol the landscape on camel and horseback. Add to them the wandering nomads with dirty white turbans, flowing robes, and camel trains who could easily be figures from millennia ago—but for the AK-47s slung over their shoulders. Then there are the gun-toting bandits who range over the desert, seeking women and loot.

Next there is the constellation of groups loosely known as “rebels,” including the professionally trained insurgents of the Justice and Equality Movement (backed by the now jailed former speaker of Sudan’s parliament, Hassan al-Turabi); the Sudan Liberation Army (a new name for the Darfur Liberation Front, believed to be trained by Eritrea and not to be confused with the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, which has waged war on behalf of the predominantly Christian and animist south of Sudan for some three decades); the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (whose armed cadres specialized in shooting policemen); the Polisario Front, a rebel group seeking independence for “Western Sahara” inside the present borders of Morocco; the rebels who seek to overthrow the central government of Chad; and half a dozen other rebel movements. Then there are the Janjaweed, Arabic-speaking raiders now infamous for their attacks on the “blacks” of Darfur. Next are the African tribal militias, one of which calls itself “Tora Bora” in homage to bin Laden’s fighters. “Outside the major market towns,” David Hoile told me, “men carry guns as casually as women in Chelmsford would carry handbags.”⁶

Nor does the region lack for Islamic militants. An exhaustive list would fill pages, so let's stick to the major ones. In Egypt—as well as in Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—is the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest of modern Islamic terror groups and the source of much of radical Islam's ideology. In Algeria there are two Muslim terror groups known as the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) and the GSPC (Group Salafi for Preaching and Combat) who have perhaps killed more people since 1992 than any other non-governmental organization.

Across North Africa, the rough terrain impedes allied forces and the collection of human intelligence. The reach of central governments is minimal and incapable of punishing terrorists. Rebels and warlords can make for useful al Qaeda allies, and local Muslim militants provide a recruiting base. Finally, the severe brand of Islam often practiced in this harsh climate provides al Qaeda with at least the sympathy and often the cooperation of the locals.

Al Qaeda thrives in cruel environments like these.

ALGIERS, ALGERIA—His real name was Amara Saifi but he was perhaps best known by his terrorist alias: Abderrezak al-Para.

He was born in the Algerian village of Kef el-Rih, which means “ravine of the wind.” Like many ambitious but unemployed young men in Algeria, he joined the army. He was accepted into Algeria's elite paratrooper training school in 1988. But before he could complete his training in 1989 he was dismissed as “physically unqualified.”⁷ He gravitated toward radical Islamic groups. Eventually, he ended up as a member of the Islamic Salvation Front, a radical religious party that had won the January 1991 elections but was denied power by Algerian military leaders. Ironically, the Algerian military coup might have saved hopes for a democratic Algeria. The Islamic Salvation Front had promised that if it came to power it would abolish the parliament and all elections because “after that God will be in charge.” Denied power, the Front mutated into a terrorist

organization. Saifi was put in charge of his home region of Aures. By the mid-1990s Saifi was linked to a series of massacres in Aures and was believed to be in touch with Abu Qatada, the head of al Qaeda in Europe. When al Qaeda issued a declaration condemning the GIA for slaughtering villagers instead of soldiers, the splinter group GSPC formed. In time, the GSPC would be largely funded by al Qaeda and Saifi would deal directly with Mohammed Atef, then the head of al Qaeda's military wing. In May 2001, Saifi met with Imad Alwan, an emissary from bin Laden sent to unite the North African Islamic group.

In February 2003, Saifi masterminded the kidnapping of thirty-two tourists in southern Algeria. The Algerian army immediately began tracking the terrorist kidnappers. Saifi divided the hostages into two groups. The first group was discovered by Algerian troops on May 13, 2003. Following a shootout, all seventeen hostages were safely rescued. The second group was force-marched into the deserts of northern Mali. On the march, a forty-six-year-old German mother of two died of sunstroke and dehydration. Saifi negotiated for ransom through the tribal chieftains of northern Mali. By some accounts, the German government paid some six million euros. (Sixteen of the hostages were German.) Other accounts suggest that the Libyans paid the ransom at the German government's behest.

When the hostages were released and Saifi had his money on August 18, 2003, he went on a buying spree—purchasing new trucks, automatic weapons, and satellite phones.

BAMAKO, MALI—Ever since 2000, Mali's intelligence service had been receiving reports that the Algerian-based GSPC had been filtering into remote villages in northern Mali. The terrorists had systematically married into local Muslim tribes, developing a network of allies who would not cooperate with the central government in arresting their new in-laws. Al Qaeda had used a similar strategy in Afghanistan.

In May 2004, Mali received detailed and timely intelligence that several high-ranking GSPC terrorists were in a particular village in northern Mali. Mali planned a joint special forces operation with neighboring Algeria, an increasingly important American ally in the War on Terror.

They arrived by truck and encircled the village. But the terrorists had been tipped off and had fled. In their hurry, the GSPC fighters left behind a cache of documents.

The elite Malian and Algerian troops seized several fake French passports, \$5,000 in cash, and line drawings of a truck bomb plot strikingly similar to the simultaneous East African embassy bombings that had killed 224 people on August 7, 1998. Yet the drawing was not about the past, but the future. Careful study by Malian intelligence of the drawing and other captured documents revealed a developing plot: to use trucks to bomb the U.S. embassy in Bamako, Mali's sandblasted capital.⁸

BAMAKO, MALI—The Paris–Dakar Rally is one of the world's most popular automobile races. Souped-up cars and motorcycles compete over tough terrain in a race broadcast around the globe.

French intelligence learned that Saifi had moved one hundred of his fighters into the Sokolo region of central Mali to kidnap leading French driver Stéphane Peterhansel and Spanish motorcyclist Nani Roma.⁹ French intelligence immediately warned Mali's intelligence service. U.S. intelligence confirmed that a large convoy of trucks and some one hundred men were seen heading toward Sokolo.

Hostage-taking had proved to be a lucrative business for Saifi, but this adventure would become a turning point in the War on Terror.

Two sections of the rally that passed through Sokolo were immediately cancelled, depriving Saifi of any hope of hostages. A U.S. Navy P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft, operating out of Algeria,

was deployed to track the terrorist band. Malian troops, newly trained by American specialists, moved in to attack. They pursued Saifi's forces into Niger, a landlocked Muslim nation that had recently joined President Bush's anti-terror alliance. Outnumbered, the GSPC continued to flee. It did not turn north to Algeria, as expected. Saifi probably assumed (correctly) that Algerian soldiers were waiting to intercept him.

Instead, Saifi and his men crossed into northern Chad in search of the Movement for Democracy and Justice, a rebel group known to infest the Tibesti Mountains.

Before he could reach the mountains, Chad's army found him. Guided by U.S. aircraft, Chadian soldiers zeroed in and attacked the terrorist convoy. Saifi's men made a desperate last stand. Forty-three out of the one hundred terrorists who had set out to kidnap the rally drivers were killed. All but a dozen of the remainder were rounded up.

Saifi was one of the few who got away.

NORTHERN CHAD—The reception was not what he expected.

The Chadian rebels first reported him dead—claiming that he had slipped off a cliff—and later decided to sell Saifi to the highest bidder.

For a time, the Bush administration, as well as its allies in Africa and Europe, was uninterested. Officials offered different rationales, from disputing that the rebels actually had Saifi to citing the complex calculus of African diplomacy. No one wanted to give the Chadian rebels the patina of respectability by negotiating with them, a group opposed to the government of an African ally.

Saifi had clearly miscalculated. Like his own terror group, the Movement for Democracy and Justice needed money and there is no honor among terrorists. He also did not realize that a seismic shift had rocked the Chadian organization, shaking loose the grip of the "Saudis"—a faction of Chadian rebels educated at Wahhabi

schools in the Arabian peninsula. The new ruling faction saw bin Laden as a rival who would shower support on the defeated “Saudis.” Why help one of his men?

Eventually, the Algerians paid the ransom for Saifi and took him into custody. We don’t know the price that was paid, but we do know that al Qaeda’s most effective operator in North Africa is now out of action. He will not be easy to replace.

NORTH DARFUR, SUDAN—For centuries, the dirty collection of mud-brick buildings and grass-roofed huts known as al-Fasher has been a way station for camel trains bound for Libya. Now it is a rest stop for al Qaeda.

Darfur, a collection of three Sudanese states on the edge of the Sahara, covering an area the size of California, is a center of African misery. Famine, drought, and disease are familiar visitors. But most of the hardship is man-made: abduction, rape, and war.

Al Qaeda appeared before the headline-making misery like the lightning bolt before the thunder.

This remote region of western Sudan is well known for its Spartan interpretation of Islam. It supplied the foot soldiers of the Mahdi, an Islamic “holy man” who killed British general Charles “Chinese” Gordon in Khartoum in 1885, and provided the legions who fought under the Mahdist banner against Lord Kitchener (and the young Winston Churchill) at Omdurman in 1898. Suicidal waves of camel cavalry charged British Maxim guns. They fell by the thousands, with the promise of a martyr’s paradise in their hearts.

Darfur made headlines in the spring of 2004 when two hundred thousand refugees poured over the border into Chad, desperate, hungry, sick, and fearful. An estimated thirty thousand were killed by machine gun, sword, or starvation. Another one million—almost one-quarter of the population of Darfur—fled to one of 132 makeshift camps scattered across Sudan. Charges of mass murder and mass rape, genocide and ethnic cleansing, as well as tales of

marauders looting and torching villages, abounded. The United Nations pronounced it the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

The crisis began when a surprisingly well-armed rebel movement launched a series of well-coordinated attacks and seized control of state capitals and market capitals across the three Darfur states. The revolt triggered a ferocious response from mainly Arab militias, backed by the government in Khartoum. Humanitarian groups and major newspapers, relying on the accounts of desperate refugees, quickly blamed the Janjaweed, which is an Arabic word meaning “demon on horseback.” There is no doubt that these demons have burned countless villages and hacked and shot thousands of men and boys while raping women or driving them into the desert to die. Nonprofit groups active in the region were quick to claim that these horsemen were backed by the government of Sudan and accusations of mass murder, mass rape, and even genocide on the scale of Rwanda soon followed.

While true in part, this account is too simple and utterly misses the role of other outside groups, including bin Laden’s network. Human rights activists, especially Human Rights Watch, seem to lump together all armed marauders—everything from bandits to tribal militias—as Janjaweed. Sudan, which has admitted arming the tribal militias, does not consider them to be Janjaweed. The Sudanese government sees the Janjaweed as a purely criminal force, including rebels and bandits, while it embraces the tribal militias as a semi-official law enforcement arm. There is some precedent for this view. Beginning in 1916, under British rule, the tribes did indeed carry out some law enforcement duties and this role has continued under all of Sudan’s independent governments. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that these Arab forces have committed many human rights abuses, including wholesale slaughter of African tribes.

The victims of Janjaweed and other forces are not hard to find in the internally displaced persons camp near the Chad border. At the Sayalabe camp, an hour outside of Nyala in South Darfur,

beside a village of mud huts, refugees tell a story that sounds a lot like ethnic cleansing. On May 22, 2004, Janjaweed attacked their village on foot. As a helicopter hovered nearby, one refugee woman told me, more than a dozen gunmen sought out the Africans for murder while sparing the Arabs.

How could the marauders tell the “Arabs” from the “Africans?” Both Arabs and Africans in the Darfur region are dark black and practice the same form of Islam. What makes one either “Arab” or “African” is simply tribal. “Arab is culture, not roots,” one explained. They were massacred on the basis of their tribal heritage, not their appearance. The killers needed the help of treacherous neighbors to point out the “Africans” among the “Arabs.”

To many, Darfur was on the verge of becoming another Rwanda, a hideous scene of death and destruction on a desolate African landscape. In reality, it is another Somalia, where tribal warfare and ideological hatred foster anarchy, murder, and starvation. And, as in Somalia in the early 1990s, al Qaeda plays a role.

While Sudan is listed as a state sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. State Department, and its government bears some responsibility for the massacre, Khartoum’s ability to enforce its will in Darfur is doubtful. Over the 196,404 square miles of Darfur, there are only 15 paved roads, many in poor repair. The rainy season turns them into mires. The Sudanese army arrived long after the misery began and, even by August 2004, it was only able to garrison the major cities.

Let’s go back to the beginning and examine the untold origins of the Darfur crisis. Meeting at an undisclosed location in Algeria, representatives of al Qaeda and the GSPC received a liaison officer from Sudan’s Popular Congress Party, an opposition group.

A secret Sudanese intelligence memo, which I obtained in Khartoum, details what happened next (see Appendix A). Citing Algerian intelligence reports, the memo describes a February 2003 meeting in Algeria between Hassan al-Turabi’s aides and bin

Laden's deputies. That meeting "resulted in an agreement between the two [African rebels and al Qaeda] which aims at providing assistance in their sacred war [in the] west of Sudan in return for certain support and security arrangements for them and those [al Qaeda] members on the run," the secret memo said.

The secret Sudanese memo details an alliance between al Qaeda, the GSPC, and the Popular Congress Party, which is headed by al-Turabi, the now jailed former speaker of Sudan's parliament.

This is the same al-Turabi who welcomed bin Laden into Africa's largest country in April 1991 and, reluctantly bowing to U.S. pressure, agreed to his departure in May 1996.¹⁰ A senior Sudanese intelligence official in Khartoum told me that the link between the fiery Islamist and bin Laden's network has strengthened in recent years.¹¹

Since 1999, al-Turabi has been a determined foe of the Khartoum government. He opposes the government's efforts to negotiate peace with the predominately Christian and animist South, prolonging a bloody civil war that has claimed an estimated two million lives since 1983.

Now, according to Sudanese intelligence, Darfur is providing the shock troops of al-Turabi's Justice and Equality Movement—a fierce rebel movement that touched off the conflagration in Darfur. These forces murdered some 550 policemen—one-third of the total constabulary body—and routed the rest, spreading anarchy across Darfur. They killed anyone who dared oppose them and conscripted men and boys to be their foot soldiers. This is the same strategy used by the Taliban to conquer Afghanistan.

Khartoum responded by arming the Arab tribal militias whose wanton slaughter made headlines.

Relying on intelligence reports from Algeria, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Pakistan as well as its own informants, the Sudanese intelligence document concludes that al Qaeda is operating in new training camps inside Chad, near its border with Sudan.

Following the pact made between al Qaeda and al-Turabi, the secret memo alleges, five al Qaeda trainers were dispatched to three training camps in northern Chad, where al-Turabi's militants trained for war against Sudan. Three of the al Qaeda operatives were specialists in guerrilla and urban warfare and two were "specialists in organizing logistical support in desert and mountainous areas similar to the territory of western Sudan." The report does not name the al Qaeda instructors.

The secret memo provides five additional sightings from other intelligence services, a pattern that suggests a continuing influx of al Qaeda terrorists into the troubled region. According to the memo, six terrorist instructors were seen travelling through Abache in April. In N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, three other terror instructors were identified, posing as businessmen who claimed to be "friends" of the older brother of Chad's president. The president and his brother hail from the Zhargawa tribe, a key combatant in the tribal warfare in Darfur.

A Sudanese intelligence official insisted that Chad's president is not in league with al Qaeda or the Sudanese rebels in the Darfur conflict and indeed has been a key anti-terror leader in the region.

Finally, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Islamabad's feared intelligence service, told Sudan that the physical descriptions of some of the al Qaeda operatives match those of jihadis who went missing from Pakistan in 2003.

The central government has been reluctant to publicly make the case that outside groups have participated in the Darfur tragedy, the official said, because the news might encourage al-Turabi's rebellion, entice the southern rebels to hold out for better terms in the peace process, and set the stage for United Nations or Western military intervention in Darfur—which Khartoum resolutely opposes.

While the details of the secret memo are impossible to verify independently, the Sudanese document dovetails with other reports

from North Africa. The desert wastes have become al Qaeda's latest battleground.

AL-FASHER, SUDAN—Through rough terrain reminiscent of Afghanistan, I went looking for a bandit king. I was hoping to verify Sudanese intelligence reports that the Janjaweed were not backed by the government and that some had received help from al Qaeda.

After passing through the Sudanese army cordon around al-Fasher in a rented Land Rover, I crossed over miles of sandy wasteland. After the Land Rover fishtailed across the trackless plain, it stopped before a steep wall of rock-strewn hills. I was obliged to continue on foot. After hiking over hills more than 150 feet high under a baking sun, a gun-wielding man in a white turban appeared on a ridge overhead. He was a Janjaweed lookout.

My translator and I were told to wait: A signal was obviously being passed.

From the steep lifeless hills I could see for miles. Eventually a truck emerged in the distance. As the white dot grew, I could see it was a pickup truck with a number of armed men in the back. It stopped somewhere out of sight and about twenty minutes later, I was given the signal to continue into the stony ravines.

There, in bug-infested scrubland, I found a tall black man who had rearranged his turban to cover all but his eyes and the crown of his head. He was very dark black and his hair was tightly curled. He said he was "an Arab." His name was Musa Khaber.

He was a bandit king, the head of a fearsome band of marauders, one of the Janjaweed.

Khaber's bodyguards, a contingent of hard men carrying AK-47s, FN-FAL rifles, and G3 assault weapons, took up fighting positions in the rocks above.

Musa's eyes glared menacingly, oblivious to the two flies crawling on his eyelids. He issued a warning to those who proposed to send an international peacekeeping force into Darfur. "We will

fight them, we hate them, and we will attack the foreigners just like we attacked the government. We refuse to be like Iraq, surrendered, confused, and occupied.”

He made his hand into the shape of a pistol. “We will fight them, more than the mujihideen in Afghanistan.”

In this rough terrain there are many similarities with Afghanistan: dry, boulder-strewn hills, a welter of independent, tough tribesmen, a tradition of Islamic extremism, and a multitude of weapons.

This Janjaweed leader is allied with no one—he is a pure force of anarchy. “We are not with the rebels, we are not with the government, we are in hell. But we look for our due.”

What does he consider his due? Development. When I point out that the number of schools has tripled in Darfur in the last ten years and there are three hospitals and one university when before there were none, he simply got angry. “I am from Krniui village. They have built nothing in my village.”

He is from the Berti tribe, but his band is a mixture of many African and Arab tribes, including the Mussalit, the Zhargawa, and the Rezeigat. All they have in common is the taste for war and loot.

Some, including Human Rights Watch, allege that the Janjaweed are funded and controlled by the national government. Khartoum has long denied the charges. Musa Khaber denies any government support. “We fight all governments in Sudan, we fight Nimeri’s, Sadik’s, Mahdi’s, and now we fight Omar Bashir [the president of Sudan]. We get nothing from the government,” he said, adding that he has some relatives in the local government who provide assistance from time to time.

The interview ended abruptly when the lookout sounded that the Sudanese army was approaching. Men with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and heavy machine guns climbed into the crags above, clearly preparing for a shootout. Musa stood up suddenly and ran to Dafalla Hajar, his number two man. They argued

urgently in Arabic. They were clearly outnumbered by the army. As the Janjaweed fled north into the high ground, I retraced my steps, hoping to avoid the army and arrest.

North Africa is only one important battlefield in the War on Terror, and it is far from the only one. The war extends far beyond the desert, to the sea lanes of the world.