

Prologue

JUST OUTSIDE the Old City of Sana, a maze of densely packed, intricately adorned stone houses and centuries-old shops that rise like drip castles from narrow cobblestone streets, sits the modern Martyrs' Mosque. If the Old City evokes Yemen's cosmopolitan days at the center of the world's spice trade in 1000 B.C., the scene outside the Martyrs' Mosque, an imposing ash-colored monolith built to honor the country's holy warriors, speaks to its more recent history as the poorest of the Arabian Peninsula states. The big open square that fronts the mosque is a gathering place for the dispossessed. Homeless people lie on flattened cardboard boxes with gasoline cans repurposed as water jugs beside them. Yemeni music issues from loudspeakers fastened to the handlebars of three-wheeled cycles pedaled by cassette vendors. *Dababs*—minivans stuffed with passengers that career around Sana's crowded streets—jockey for fares. The smells of grilling meat and corn on the cob commingle with perfumed oil, urine, and exhaust.

There are no women here, only young men and boys. And while roughly 40 percent of Yemeni men are unemployed, everyone seems to be in a big hurry, hustling around, often holding hands, always in standard Yemeni dress: sandals, white robes, and Western-style blazers with the labels showing just above the left cuff. Long curved daggers known as jambiyas, reminders of the country's enduring tribal culture, hang from belts. Cheeks bulge with khat, a narcotic plant that brightens the mood and sends the mind in every direction, a mental

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state reflected in the combination of aimlessness and restlessness on display here.

In 1996, Salim Hamdan, a twenty-six-year-old Yemeni with a thick mustache and kinky black hair, was one of these men.

He was born hundreds of miles from Sana in the Wadi Hadramawt, a primitive tribal region in the mountainous desert of southeastern Yemen that has been inhabited since 1000 B.C. Physically, the Hadramawt is breathtaking: its small villages are improbably perched atop soaring cliffs overlooking a valley carved up by intersecting watercourses—or wadis—that centuries ago represented a marvel of irrigation, exploiting fitful, seasonal rains to create thousands of acres of arable land. The Hadramawt's most valued crop was an indigenous tree, *Boswellia sacra*, the source of frankincense, which was in high demand in pharaonic Egypt and ancient Rome. But the rise of Christianity—the early leaders of the Christian church considered incense burning a pagan ritual—and the decline of the overland camel trade put an end to the region's long era of prosperity. Today the landscape of the Hadramawt is mostly barren; the scarce supply of water is used to irrigate the khat crops.

Hamdan's father was a farmer and shopkeeper, and the family lived modestly in a small mud-brick home on a mountainside terrace. Both of Hamdan's parents died from illnesses that were poorly treated—his mother when he was seven, his father when he was eleven. With no other family nearby, Hamdan went to live with relatives in Mukalla, a bleak port city of about one hundred thousand people on Yemen's southern coast. By that point he had already quit school, not unusual in the Hadramawt, where the imperatives of helping one's family earn money far outweigh the comparatively abstract virtues of an education.

Within a few years Hamdan was on his own, living on the streets of Mukalla and working odd jobs. Then, in 1990, when he was twenty, he joined a mass migration north. Yemen, which had long been divided into two separate nations, the Islamic North Yemen and the Marxist South Yemen, had just become officially unified as the Republic of Yemen, and there was a widespread sense that Sana, the nation's new capital, would soon be booming. As it turned out, the job prospects

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were not very promising, particularly for someone with Hamdan's limited qualifications. Like thousands of others, he found his way to the Martyrs' Mosque, where he worked part-time as a *dabab* driver, dividing his paltry income between the mattress he rented in a crowded boardinghouse in Sana and his daily supply of khat, which he chewed by the fistful.

Then one day the low-hanging horizon of Hamdan's life lifted. He was recruited for jihad.

Jihad has an almost mythic appeal in Yemen, its roots running all the way back to the seventh century, when the Prophet Muhammad is said to have declared, "Allah, give me fighters from behind me," his back turned conspicuously to Yemen.

In its more modern incarnation, jihad can be traced to 1967, when a civil war broke out between the Islamic North and the Marxist South Yemen. It didn't take long for North Yemen's rulers to exploit the conflict's religious undertones. By the time the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, many young Yemenis already accepted that it was their duty as Muslims to confront unbelievers. Over the next several years, scores of young Yemeni men answered their clerics' calls for jihad. Afghanistan's mujahedeen received support from many Arab countries, as well as from the United States, but the Yemenis were among the fiercest of the so-called Afghan-Arab fighters. Unlike the jihadis from the wealthier states in the Persian Gulf, they were accustomed to hard living, and the rugged, mountainous terrain of Afghanistan was similar to that of their homeland.

After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, many of these Yemeni jihadis returned home heroes. Their exalted stature was further cemented in 1994, when the still-simmering tensions between the country's Islamists and Marxists erupted anew into a full-fledged civil war and they played a critical role in defeating the Communists.

Though Hamdan was not especially religious, he enthusiastically embraced the idea of jihad, with its promise of paid and meaningful work. His recruiter, one of the leaders of the group, was a self-assured young man named Nasser al-Bahri. Although two years his junior, al-Bahri, who was born in Yemen but grew up in an upper-middle-class

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family in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, was far more worldly and sophisticated than Hamdan and was without question the most educated person he had ever met. Al-Bahri had studied business in college, but he was also deeply steeped in the Koran, having become a devout Muslim as a teenager in rebellion against his bourgeois upbringing. He spoke comfortably and forcefully about the plight of Muslims all over the world, and he had traveled extensively to places as far as Bosnia and Somalia to defend his oppressed Islamic brethren.

In 1996, Hamdan, al-Bahri, and a group of about thirty-five other Muslims, mostly Yemenis with a smattering of Saudis, convened in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, with the intention of going to Tajikistan to fight alongside the country's small Islamic insurgency against its Russian-backed government. They started out in jeeps and then, when the roads were impassable, on foot. For six months they traversed Afghanistan's mountainous, often snow-covered terrain. But to cross the Tajik border, they needed the permission of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the legendary anti-Soviet guerrilla commander who controlled the northeast quadrant of Afghanistan and was himself Tajik. Massoud refused to grant it. He had just forged a precarious alliance with his former enemy, Russia, and was relying on the Russians to defeat their common enemy in Afghanistan, a rising militia of Islamic radicals known as the Taliban.

At loose ends and casting about for a cause, one of the jihadis suggested that they go see a man named Osama bin Laden, at the time a well-known sheikh who led a militant group of itinerant Muslim holy warriors called al Qaeda. As luck would have it, bin Laden had recently been expelled from Sudan at the urging of the American government and relocated to Afghanistan, where he had earned his reputation fighting the Soviets during the 1980s. Word was that he was now enlisting soldiers for a new crusade to drive the United States from the Arabian Peninsula.

Soon al-Bahri, Hamdan, and the rest of the jihadis were making their way back through Afghanistan toward Jalalabad, near the base of the Hindu Kush Mountains, where bin Laden had set up camp in the caves of Tora Bora.

The group arrived in late 1996, days before Ramadan, the holiest

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time of year. They were demoralized, exhausted, and far from home, and in bin Laden they found a leader who saw strength and virtue in their suffering. He too had endured hardships: the Sudanese had stripped him of his fortune; his homeland of Saudi Arabia had stripped him of his citizenship; and his close friend and military chief, Abu Ubaydah, had just been killed in a ferry accident. He understood what the jihadis had been through and the purpose they were seeking. "On the existential plane, bin Laden was marginalized, out of play, but inside the chrysalis of myth that he spun about himself he was becoming a representative of all persecuted and humiliated Muslims," wrote Lawrence Wright in *The Looming Tower*, a history of al Qaeda.

The Yemeni jihadis held a special appeal to bin Laden. His father had been born in the Hadramawt, and as a radical sheikh in Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s he had taken it upon himself to end his ancestral homeland's flirtation with communism and purge it of nonbelievers by inciting and bankrolling attacks on its socialist leaders. What's more, only a smattering of Egyptians and Algerians had followed bin Laden to Afghanistan. To sell his new crusade to young Muslims, he was going to need support from the Arabian Peninsula, on whose behalf the campaign was being waged. "Bin Laden had just declared war on America, but no one cared because the young people from the Arabian Peninsula were not there," al-Bahri later recalled. "He urgently needed men from the Arabian Peninsula."

For three days bin Laden preached to his prospective recruits about the religious imperative of reversing America's presence in the Persian Gulf. He quoted the Prophet Muhammad's injunction, uttered on his deathbed: "Let there be no two religions in the Arabian Peninsula." Bin Laden spoke too about the need to change the nature of the fight against Islam's enemies. New kinds of training camps would be required. Conventional skills such as map reading and weapons training were no longer enough. They would also need to focus on fighting in cities and preparing for martyrdom operations, which meant learning how to blend in with civilian populations and attack civilian targets. Jihadis would be trained in bomb making, hijacking, assassination, even suicide bombing.

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And bin Laden always kept broader war strategies in mind. “He said we must carry out painful attacks on the United States until it becomes like an agitated bull,” al-Bahri recalled, “and when the bull comes to our region, he won’t be familiar with the land, but we will.”

SEVENTEEN OF THE ORIGINAL thirty-five jihadis decided to stay with bin Laden in Afghanistan; Hamdan, along with al-Bahri, was among them. For the next several years he worked for bin Laden mostly as a driver and bodyguard, first in Jalalabad, then, when bin Laden relocated for security reasons, at Tarnak Farms, a walled al Qaeda compound thirty minutes outside Kandahar. Hamdan had a Taliban-issued permit to carry a Russian-made pistol. His al Qaeda alias was Saqr al-Jedawi—“the hawk.” As for al-Bahri—or Abu Jandal, as he was known inside the organization—he rose quickly through al Qaeda’s ranks, becoming one of bin Laden’s personal bodyguards after he subdued a Sudanese man who had assumed a hostile tone with the sheikh.

Tucked into a vast expanse of treeless desert and sagebrush, Tarnak Farms was a bleak and isolating place. But while those inside the compound existed in a world outside of time, bin Laden was busy raising his international profile. In 1998 he and a handful of other radical Islamic leaders—the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, they called themselves—issued a fatwa: “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.” Shortly after, in August 1998, al Qaeda carried out its first major strike, the simultaneous bombing of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya.

In 1999, at bin Laden’s urging and with his financial help, al-Bahri and Hamdan became brothers-in-law, a development that took al-Bahri completely by surprise. He had been in a mountain town in Yemen, delivering a five-thousand-dollar dowry for bin Laden’s fourth wife, when Hamdan tracked him down and told him that the sheikh had sent him with money and instructions for them to marry a pair of Yemeni sisters.

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After the wedding, Hamdan and al-Bahri returned to Afghanistan with their brides. Hamdan's wife, Um Fatima, was reluctant to go and shocked at the primitive conditions in which she was expected to live and raise a family. The house they were to live in was made of mud, its floors were dirt, and there was no running water. Um Fatima soon had a daughter to look after; the two would spend most of their days alone inside while Hamdan drove bin Laden around Afghanistan to rally the troops. When her husband *was* around, he usually wouldn't return until early evening, often with his clothes stained with grease from fixing the various cars and trucks on the compound. Um Fatima periodically complained about their life in Afghanistan. Hamdan told her to be patient, that one day they would move back to Yemen.

Al-Bahri moved around a lot as well. In the wake of the 1998 embassy attacks, bin Laden put him in charge of al Qaeda's guesthouses in Kabul and Kandahar. With his natural charisma, religious knowledge, and military expertise, he seemed an obvious choice to inspire and train the new generation of jihadis who were now pouring into Afghanistan. He and Hamdan did what they could to look after each other's families. When al-Bahri's first son was born, it was Hamdan who carried him to bin Laden so the sheikh could feed him bits of a masticated date from his own mouth and then bless him, according to the Islamic custom.

In the summer of 2000, Hamdan and al-Bahri returned to Sana with their wives for a family wedding. Within weeks of their arrival, a boat filled with explosives rammed into an American naval destroyer, the USS *Cole*, on a refueling stop in the Yemeni port of Aden. Al Qaeda was quickly identified as the culprit, and Yemeni intelligence started rounding up suspected extremists. Trying to flee to Afghanistan, al-Bahri got as far as the airport before being arrested.

The police came to Hamdan's in-laws' house looking for him too, but he and Um Fatima had already taken her family on a religious pilgrimage to Mecca. From Saudi Arabia, Hamdan and his wife returned to Afghanistan and bin Laden.

Months later, in the days leading up to September 11, Hamdan was part of a small motorcade of al Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden and his top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who drove into the moun-

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tains above Khost in order to watch the planes crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on satellite TV. Unable to get a signal, they followed the news of 9/11 on the radio. After each strike, bin Laden held up another finger for his joyful, incredulous followers, promising yet another one.

For the next several weeks, the motorcade moved from one guesthouse to the next as bin Laden and Zawahiri celebrated the success of the operation and readied their remaining fighters for America's imminent invasion. On October 7, with the ruins of the Twin Towers still burning, Al Jazeera broadcast bin Laden's prerecorded message to the world. "There is America, hit by God in one of its softest spots," he said. "Its greatest buildings were destroyed. Thank God for that. There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that. These events have divided the whole world into two sides—the side of the believers and the side of the infidels . . . Every Muslim has to rush to make his religion victorious. The winds of faith have come."

In late November, with U.S.-backed Northern Alliance forces sweeping across Afghanistan, bin Laden ordered his men to evacuate their families from Tarnak Farms. On November 24, 2001, Hamdan returned to Kandahar, the last Taliban stronghold, for his young daughter and his wife, who was eight months pregnant at the time. With American B-52s circling the skies overhead, they made their way east in a silver Japanese hatchback through the Maruf mountains, alongside the throng of refugees heading toward Pakistan in the bitter cold, their backs laden with belongings. As they closed in on the border, Hamdan let his wife and daughter out of the car and then turned around.

Over the course of the next several weeks, Um Fatima traveled deeper into Pakistan in the back of a pickup truck with a group of Afghan refugees. Entering her ninth month of pregnancy, she became so hysterical that some sympathetic strangers in Karachi bought her and her daughter a plane ticket home. Upon arriving in Sana she was interrogated for five hours about her husband's whereabouts. Um Fatima said she assumed he was dead.

Two and a half months later, she received a letter from Hamdan on

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International Committee of the Red Cross stationery. “My sweetheart, peace and blessings be upon you,” it began. “I did not die. Allah prescribed a new life for me. Now I am a detainee with the Americans.”

Within hours of leaving his family at the border, Hamdan had been captured by Northern Alliance soldiers who found two surface-to-air missiles in the trunk of his car. They hogtied him with electrical wire, placed a hood over his head, and soon turned him over to the American forces for a five-thousand-dollar bounty. During his early interrogations Hamdan gave the same story that other detainees were giving: that he was in Afghanistan working for a Muslim charity. After about a month had passed, though, another detainee identified him as bin Laden’s driver, Saqr al-Jedawi. Hamdan acknowledged that he had worked for bin Laden and attended al Qaeda training camps.

For the next six months Hamdan was held at Bagram Air Base and at a U.S. prison camp in Kandahar. In early May 2002 he was transferred to the newly built American detention facility, Camp Delta, on Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. For a year and a half, Hamdan lived in one of Delta’s main cellblocks, forty-eight six-by-eight-foot cells divided by wire mesh walls. In December 2003, he was moved out of Guantánamo’s general population and into pretrial solitary confinement. Of the thousands of detainees in U.S. custody, President Bush had chosen him to be the first Arab defendant in America’s first war crimes trials in more than fifty years.