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BUSINESS DISAPPEARS AT AFGHANI RESTAURANTS Owners fearing bitter backlash

BY PASCALE LE DRAOULEC DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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Shah Rohni yanked the \$1,500 gold leaf "Afghan Restaurant" sign from the front window of his Manhattan establishment late last week.

The owner of Bamiyan, on Third Ave. at 26th St., also has covered up all references to his native country on the awning with American flags.

"I saw people on the street pointing to the sign and I knew I had to take it away," said Rohni, whose restaurant has been barren, completely devoid of customers for seven days.

Like other Afghani restaurateurs, Rohni, an Afghani national turned U.S. citizen, fears a bitter backlash from last week's tragedy.

With good reason.

The Afghan Kebab House on Ninth Ave., between 51st and 52nd Sts., fielded a number of angry phone calls - and some death threats - immediately after the kamikaze attacks on the twin towers.

"Some said they wanted to kill us," said owner Shafi Rouzy. "Others just cursed and called us terrorists. We were very scared and went to the police."

To make their allegiances clear and perhaps as a preemptive strike, Rouzy family members hung a large American flag in their window. Rouzy also penned an open letter explaining his family's pro-American stance, which he taped to the restaurant window.

"We feel very angry and very bad about what happened and that our country is somehow involved with this," Rouzy said. "But not all Afghans are bad people. The people who did this are insane. They were professionals who committed suicide."

Like Rohni, Rouzy stressed that his restaurant's cuisine is Afghani, but his passport says U.S.A.

"We are American citizens now," he said. "We came to this country over 20 years ago. We have children who were born here. We are New Yorkers. We all live here. We share our schools, our parks, everything."

Rouzy said some of his loyal American customers have been extremely supportive. Some have dropped by with flowers and words of support. But precious few are sitting down to eat aushak or mantoo dumplings.

Meanwhile, Rouzy said, his relatives back in Afghanistan fear for their lives as the U.S. plots retaliatory action, but they told him this week "they would rather die at the hands of Americans than under the torture of the Taliban."

At Khyber Pass, an Afghani restaurant on St. Mark's Place where rugs adorn the walls and canopies drape chandeliers, owner Mohammed Popal said he had not received death threats, but he added that the emotional and political repercussions of Tuesday's attacks are killing his business.

"Some days we never had more than three customers all day. Saturday, only 20 people came in," Popal said. He has been manning the restaurant alone, having given his staff time off until business resumes.

Popal's partner, Ahmed Noor, 31, of Woodside, Queens, stressed that the Taliban "aren't Afghans. They're Pakistani, most of them. They want to destroy Afghanistan. It's a long story between Pakistan and Afghanistan."

In the past few days, Rohni said, dazed strangers and regulars have been wandering into Bamiyan with questions. Instead of food, he's been dishing up a bit of diplomacy.

"I tell everyone the same thing," he said. "The Afghans are a pure people who would never hurt anyone. They are victims of the Taliban, which has very deep, diseased roots in Afghanistan."

"I tell them that if Americans bombed the Taliban, I would support it," he added. "Someone needs to destroy these roots."

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