

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ABDULLAH AZZAM

Jed Lea-Henry

Mr. Lea-Henry is an assistant professor at Vignan University, India.

In 2010, while transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, a 260,000-ton Japanese super-tanker was hit by an explosion. Residue extracted from the hull showed that the vessel had been struck by a speed boat as part of an audacious suicide mission to interrupt the movement of the 40 percent of the world's oil traffic that passes through the strait annually.

Seven years later, Tom Holland is walking nervously through the shelled-out Iraqi town of Sinjar. The historian — filming a scene for the BBC documentary *ISIS: The Origins of Violence* — quickly becomes physically ill as he tries to recount the scene that forced itself upon the town in August 2014. Sinjar is the site of the worst single atrocity caused by ISIS (Islamic State) to date. It wasn't so much the violence — the ritual decapitations, crucifixions and public burnings; the sex slavery, mass rapes and forced conversions of newly orphaned sons into the ideology and organization that had killed their parents moments earlier. This wasn't new, nor was the high-definition broadcast of the violence as an international recruiting call. When Islamic State came to Sinjar, the expansion of the caliphate — for once — was not their animating mission. The population of Sinjar belonged to the Yazidi faith — devil-worshippers according to Islamic tradition — and for anyone paying

attention and taking the Islamic State at its word, the glee of the fighters as they felt themselves completing a long-overdue scriptural retribution should not have been a surprise. They felt they were cleansing an insult to Islam and doing the work of history. This was more than violence, domination and sadism; it was the continuation of a thousand-year-old war.

Looking back on our shock, Tom Holland is angry. The Yazidis were overlooked because we just weren't taking ISIS seriously — not in their intentions, but in their motivations. As Holland inches his way forward through Sinjar, his mind is on unseen bombs. The fighting in the area has been ongoing, and the rubble-laden path before him has not been properly cleared; he is concerned about what might lie beneath the debris. Trying to narrate the violence that came through Sinjar, he begins: "They're like ghosts, risen up from the past."¹ But he can't continue. He slumps to the ground, saying he "needs to sit down,"² his body seemingly caught between panic and nausea. Regaining his strength, he readdresses the audience:

There are things in the past that are like unexploded bombs that just lie in wait in the rubble, and then something happens to trigger them. And there are clearly verses in the Koran and stories

that are told about Mohammed that are very like mines waiting to go off: Improvised Explosive Devices. And they can lie there maybe for centuries, and then something happens to trigger them and you get this.³

Before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared caliph, and before Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi got things moving with al-Qaeda in Iraq, the bombs of IS were already set, waiting for someone to light the fuse. That man — today responsible for so much harm — had his name literally emblazoned across the early violence of Zarqawi's organisation, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and countless other Islamic terrorist movements. And it was there, used as it always is, as a cover-name taking responsibility for the 2010 bombing of the Japanese oil tanker: The Abdullah Azzam Brigades.

It is a narrative that needs grandiosity; it needs myth. In the early years of the Afghan jihad — before America fully understood the violence and terror that was coming its way, biding its time until the Soviets were defeated in order to turn their guns on the remaining superpower — an elderly Palestinian was touring America trying to inspire a new generation of violent extremists. This was before September 11, before the towers came down, when terrorists could walk the streets of their enemies, unnoticed by those they were plotting to kill. This delicate-looking man in well-worn grey afghan fatigues and the black and white Palestinian headscarf (*keffiyeh*) that seemed to define his outlook and his weakness, was Abdullah Azzam.

Azzam made annual trips to America, lecturing in major cities and raising considerable funds for the Afghan cause, but also for Hamas in the Palestinian territo-

ries, and the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East. Azzam was playing a Machiavellian game. He was conscious that America was using Afghan mujahedeen as a marriage of convenience in its fight against the Soviet Union (though he would occasionally accuse the Americans of working with the Soviets to fight the Muslims), just as he was using them to free the Afghan homeland, and using the Soviet Union to help fight Israel and stake an independent *judenrein* (free of Jews) Palestinian state. But for Azzam this apparent double dealing wasn't easy; he needed — just as he did for all the choices in his life — solid Islamic justification for his behavior. He had “sold himself to God”⁴ and through his numerous lectures, books, magazines, essays and pamphlets was always trying to meld scripture, Islamic tradition, Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic just-war theory into a modern Muslim consciousness that would recapture the glory of the past. The legal opinion he formed on this double dealing with America and the Soviet Union amounted to “true Muslims can make pacts of convenience of this sort with non-Muslims if, and only if, (1) how both parties benefit is publically known, (2) the deceptions and underhanded behavior of the non-Muslim party is fully understood by the Muslim party, and (3) the Muslim party is in control of the relationship. Azzam played this game many more times, building a groundswell of legal theory to help marry the puritanical nature of violent jihad with the everyday practical decisions that were necessary to keep the movement alive. But he needed more if he was going to capture Islamic consciousness and inspire young men to travel and die for the cause.

He needed to modernize the idea of Islamic struggle and make it fashionable

to a new generation without diluting the message.

Beyond the attraction of adventure and violence, Azzam dug deep into Islam's past, trying to link the Afghan jihad to the early days of the faith, to the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the time of miracles. He spoke of Islam's losing its way and described the modern standing of Muslims as a "humiliation" when describing how far the faith had fallen from its earlier heights. Believing that the end of the world was imminent, Azzam saw Islam as needing to

regain what it once held in order to be properly prepared for the final battle, so that what he devel-

oped wouldn't be a bold new expression of the faith, but rather a very old call to history. In order to orchestrate a rebirth of the faith, Azzam linked the present to the past, trying constantly to touch upon already widely taught ideas of heroism and sacrifice from Islamic history. To do this he wove fanciful tales of miracles into his lectures and writing, creating a modern-day mythology around the Afghan jihad that echoed the past and lionized modern jihadists.

These stories include angels helping fighters with impossible shots and physical feats: scorpions refusing to strike Muslims while other animals such as birds would offer air cover from bombs and honor dead soldiers, enemy helicopters being caught mid-flight and brought down by ropes, bullets bouncing off fighters, enemy shells refusing to explode, single mujahedeen fighters defeating entire mechanised Soviet

battalions, people emerging unharmed after being run over by tanks, the Afghan weather changing on cue to help fighters, victory being achieved in some cases by prayer alone, the whole battlefield remaining beautiful and pristine with corpses not decaying — and always smelling of an alluring musk — even months after their death and, importantly, martyrs always smiling on the way to their deaths. Having fought on the frontline in Afghanistan, Azzam must have known that his stories weren't true. But he believed in the nar-

rative. What was important was that the myths were always tales of devotion and that they worked. And they did,

inspiring new fighters to join — 330,000 in total, according to Azzam's own count (undoubtedly another of his propaganda embellishments). Although the new recruits were problematic, always pushing to see the battlefield and engage in combat in the hope of witnessing or starring in a miracle of their own, Abdullah Azzam and modern jihad had momentum.

Abdullah Azzam is now often defined by what he achieved in Afghanistan, but it was, for him personally, always about home, announcing that "Palestine precedes Afghanistan" and that he never "stopped dreaming about Palestine."⁵ Born in Jenin in 1941, in an innocuous farming town of only 1,800 people called Silat al-Harithiyya, or Sila, Azzam grew up in the shade of political activism. Sila had a history of resistance dating back to the Ottoman Empire, when the residents refused to pay taxation, and it was here that he experienced the 1948 war

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with Israel. Despite the absence of reports of direct fighting in Sila at this time, Azzam later claimed that Jewish soldiers had committed atrocities upon Palestinians who, by way of peaceful protest, simply ignored changes in land ownership. As unlikely as this was, he did witness the flood of refugees through the region, and the scar he claimed to have suffered is certainly visible in his work and actions later in life, as was the betrayal he saw in neighboring Jordan's failing to come to the aid of fellow Muslims across the border.

Azzam would spend his early life in the West Bank until, at the age of 25, the Six-Day War forced him and his family into Jordan as refugees (though once again there was no direct fighting in Sila, with Israeli soldiers only briefly passing through on their way to Jenin). With a newly enlarged population, the outer regions of Jordan were desperate for teachers, a profession the young Azzam, who had been increasingly interested in the study of Islamic jurisprudence, took up to support his family. As uninspiring as the job was, and as meager the comforts it afforded, Azzam was effectively a mid-level government employee and commanded unshakable job security. Therefore, his decision to leave it all behind in 1969 to join the Fedayeen in their fight against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) represented a significant sacrifice for himself, but even more for his wife and children. They had to transition from urban life to a tough nomadic existence, hiking across inaccessible mountains. His wife would later say, "Jihad for him was like water for a fish,"⁶ and certainly this willingness to enter the trenches directly elevated him above other Palestinian ideologues, such as Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi (the man who would go on to become the chief mentor to the founding

father of ISIS, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi), who theorized but never fought.

The same year that Azzam got this first taste of conflict, he also joined the Jordanian faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. Buying into the ideas of the Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna (1905-49), Azzam began to re-contextualize his struggle in Palestine as a smaller though integral part of a global Islamic revival. Where al-Banna saw Egypt and the broader Nile Valley as the center of this expansion, a signal fire from which the faith would re-establish its global dominance, Azzam had a more proactive vision in mind. He wanted global Islamic unity. His idea of what this would look like mirrored the Salafist tradition, which saw this project as a religious duty that all Muslims held to the past — a past that was destroyed by Ataturk in 1924. Azzam wanted to realize the unfinished project of a caliphate, but he wasn't willing to take the long, tedious, literature-based, surreptitious path of social expansion that the Brotherhood was committed to. And he wanted Palestine at the center of things. He needed new companions.

Hamas set itself apart from the many other resistance movements in Palestine at the time by consciously presenting themselves as the most aggressive and, significantly, puritanical of the anti-Zionist militias. Its members were originally followers of the Muslim Brotherhood, and from its founding in December 1987 during the first Intifada, Azzam was linked to the organization. It was a natural blending, with Hamas also finding a home in Azzam. Circulating his books and selected writing after the Intifada to help justify the uprising, Hamas also presented Azzam with the prominence and political standing that he always desired. As they pushed into the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon in Opera-

tion Defensive Shield in response to the uprising, the Israeli forces started reporting discoveries of Abdullah Azzam in print, audio and video, stacked in the mosques, schools, youth clubs, institutions and militant properties that they raided. The Hamas Charter (published August 18, 1988) remains a near plagiarism of Azzam's work, with a much more globalist vision of its struggle than other Palestinian organizations. Hamas actually sent Azzam a draft of their constitution for review, prior to its enactment. Calling itself a "global Islamic movement,"⁷ Hamas was immediately looking beyond its "near enemy" of Israel, viewing it as just a part of an overwhelming global Muslim obligation to history that required the retaking of *Dar al-Islam* (the lands/home of Islam). Conceding or surrendering such territory is the same as conceding or surrendering Islam itself. This is a permanent, and mostly unfulfilled, land-rights claim dating back 1,400 years. It was an issue that could not be compromised in any way; hence all peace negotiations are, by definition, also betrayals of Islam. The occupation of Palestine and the control of the al-Asqa mosque would be permanent humiliations to all true Muslims. The only solution could be violent jihad. In all this, Hamas was consciously parroting Azzam — his vision had become the guiding force and reason for their very existence.

As Hamas began to seize public attention by orchestrating bloody suicide bombings in Israeli cafés and buses, Azzam began to dig deeper into his support for the organisation, once referring to Ahmed Yassin (one of the four key martyrs of Hamas, along with Izz al-Din al-Qasim, Hasam al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood and Azzam himself) as "the symbol of the form position of the Islamic movement."⁸

Azzam would also later write the definitive book on the organisation, *Hamas: The Historical Roots and the Charters*, while Hamas would go on to name its al-Nusseirat (Gaza)-based military academy after Azzam, as well as naming their West Bank-based military wing the Abdullah Azzam Martyrs Brigades. Today, the leadership of Hamas, as well as that of Hezbollah, openly justify their existence by the words of Abdullah Azzam.

The cofounder of Hamas and chairman of the Islamic League in Britain, Muhammad Kathim Sawalhah, has said,

There is an entire generation of young propagandists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on whom the Palestinian Intifada relied, an entire generation influenced by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam and his ideas. His influence on the generation as a whole, not just on individuals, was indelible.⁹

Before carrying out a suicide attack at the Tel Aviv dolphinarium, Said Hassan al-Hutari wrote,

I say to the world, which supports the Zionists with money and weapons, what the Shahid Abdullah Azzam said before me: "If the preparation (Idad) is considered terrorism, we are terrorists. If defending our dignity is considered extreme, we are extremists. And if fighting the holy war (jihad) against our enemies is fundamentalism, we are fundamentalists."¹⁰

The level of Jew-hatred in Azzam's theology — above and beyond his animus toward Israel — was never too far from the surface, something that also bled into the worldview of Hamas. In a well-worn cliché of anti-Semitism, Azzam and Hamas imagined a world manipulated and steered

deliberately toward disaster by an ancestral line of Jewish plots. The Jews were blamed for starting both of the world wars, the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution and were the controlling influence behind the Balfour Declaration. Referring to Jews as “merchants of war”¹¹ and natural imperialists, Hamas and Azzam shamelessly cite the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. But Azzam operationalized this ancient hatred in a new way, using it to fuel his world view of Islamic history and Muslim obligation, by claiming that Israel’s comparative strength was not just a result of Jewish treachery; it was because the Jews took their religion seriously. Muslims had failed to match the conviction of the Prophet Muhammad.

This fed into his hatred for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Azzam dedicated an entire book, *The Red Cancer*, to a similarly conspiratorial and Jewish-linked criticism of communism: “The Bolshevik revolution was Jewish in ideology, planning, funding and execution.”¹² And Azzam’s marriage to Hamas was pushed heavily by the socialist/communist orientation of the PLO at that time. He saw the help of Marxist groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) as dishonor to Islam and further proof of the disunity of the faith. At one point in these early years, Azzam was dragged before a PLO tribunal and charged with publically insulting Che Guevara. Azzam responded, “My religion is Islam, and Guevara is under my foot”¹³; the panel replied that “Guevara is a noble freedom fighter and Fatah does not have a religion.”¹⁴ After the Black September conflict between the PLO under Yasser Arafat and the Jordanian military, Azzam

abandoned the fight with Israel — what he considered the “foremost Islamic problem”¹⁵ — for the reason that it had become functionally impossible to fight Israel from the West Bank under anything other than a PLO faction.

Disillusioned, Azzam returned to academia and earned a PhD from al-Azhar University in Cairo, on “The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence.” He then worked at the University of Jordan until being fired in 1980 for his overt Palestinian activism. A year later, he moved to Saudi Arabia to teach at King Abdalaziz University in Jeddah, where he became a part of a much larger community of highly radicalized Muslims who had been steadily moving to the kingdom since the 1950s after running afoul of their own governments. Feeling at home amid the religious conservatism, Azzam was nonetheless critical of those around him for what he considered their lack of striving for jihad. The Afghan jihad was increasingly capturing Azzam’s mind, so much so that he orchestrated an academic transfer to the newly established International Islamic University of Islamabad in Pakistan, to be close to the action (his salary was paid by the Muslim World League). He would never stop looking back at Palestine, but he was beginning to see the Afghan battlefield as the more pressing need. During a lecture stop in Oklahoma City in 1988, Azzam called for others to follow his example: “Sons of Palestine, you have an opportunity to train on every type of weapon [in Afghanistan], this is a golden opportunity, do not miss it.”¹⁶

From his new home in Islamabad, Azzam began leaving his family behind on weekends and traveling to the mountain town of Peshawar, the gateway to the jihad across the border.

As Cambodia became the hub that sustained the Indochina War in the 1960s and 1970s, Peshawar was the transit site for the arms, money and mujahedeen heading to the Afghan theater. Azzam, prefiguring the formation of al-Qaeda (the Base), began referring to Peshawar and its theoretical importance as al-Qaeda al-Sulbah (the Solid Base).

During his early visits, Azzam spent most of his time walk-

ing through refugee camps, witnessing the poor conditions of his fellow Muslims, and internalizing the suffering they described across the border.

Afghanistan became the pure example that Azzam was looking for: a real battlefield for his jihad, from which he could grow and justify his burgeoning theocratic outlook. The shift in Azzam's language was immediate; the fight to reclaim the "lost lands"¹⁷ of Islam suddenly included an elevation of Afghanistan to near-equal importance with Palestine: "We must focus our efforts on Palestine and Afghanistan because these are central issues in the Muslim world (of the 1980s)."¹⁸ As he noted, Afghanistan has advantages Palestine lacked, with "3,000 kilometres of open borders, and it has no political nation-state control in large sections of the country."¹⁹ Still, as Azzam went to work recruiting for, and publicizing, the Afghan jihad, he was criticized heavily for what many of his fellow extremists saw as his abandoning Palestine for Afghanistan, for taking young fighters away with him and weakening one jihad for another. But for Azzam, Afghanistan was as obligatory as Palestine; they were both just parts of a global battle for Islamic dominance. Earlier Azzam had

created, without explanation, an 88-kilometer principle of individual obligation for jihad: that regardless of borders, the plight of Islam is the responsibility of all Muslims inside this radius. Then Azzam dropped the idea, once again with no explanation, claiming instead that Islamic responsibility was global, and that the first jihad should

always be the most pressing. This is what Afghanistan represented for Azzam,

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describing his first visit across the border: "I felt as if I had been reborn... I found the true Islam here," Azzam said in a 1989 speech. "The obligation to fight is an obligation incumbent on every Muslim who can carry a weapon. If we cannot serve God in this land, we must immigrate to another land where we can serve him."²⁰

Azzam began actively organizing the Afghan jihad; he began foreign lecture tours and set himself up as the prime conduit for supplies and people entering the battle. To do this, Azzam once again reached into history. Afghanistan was primed for a new religious fundamentalism: its poverty, low levels of education, and a lifestyle dominated by tribal codes offered a unique opportunity. Islam would be the unifier. As he traveled through the country — always by foot or on a donkey — Azzam believed he was witnessing the experiment that proved his theory explaining Islamic failure in Palestine: a lack of Muslim unity. Naturally, trying to mediate between rival warlords became an overwhelming preoccupation for Azzam, particularly the ill-feeling between Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud: "Muslims cannot be defeated by others. We Muslims are not defeated by

our enemies, but instead, we are defeated by our own selves.”²¹

But, as Azzam already knew, unity alone wouldn’t do it. Ideas of martyrdom, jihad and infidels had become clichés to many young Muslims, mentioned casually at mosques around the globe. The firm base for this new revivalist Islam would once again, paradoxically, come from the earliest days of Islam. Azzam began selling the Afghan jihad as a direct parallel with the Prophet Muhammad’s 13 years of “preparation” in Mecca — the springboard that launched the faith. Blending various schools of Sunni jurisprudence, he constructed a detailed tapestry of radical elements, creating the mindset of modern jihadist terrorism. As he pieced his way through centuries of Islamic warfare, he focused particular attention on the life of Ibn Taymiyyah (1258 AD), to help strengthen Azzam’s vision of Islam: “If the enemy enters Islamic lands, the entire Islamic empire and nation are one in repelling the invader.”²²

It worked! Fifty thousand foreign fighters moved through Afghanistan at this time (considerably less than the 300,000 that he claimed), and he was often their first and last point of contact — first as ideas in lectures, books and media, then face-to-face after arriving in Pakistan, then as coordinator of their training in Peshawar, and finally as a guide to their battlefield deployments. He was often called the “patriarch of Arab and non-Arab Muslim volunteers.”²³ Men as poorly suited for combat as Tamim al-Adnani — so fat he was nicknamed the “Lofty Mountain” and had to be carried up and down the mountain routes — arrived seeking jihad and announcing themselves as followers of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam. Azzam had the foundations of his solid base, and the core

principles of a revivalist Islam, focused on violent jihad. Soon afterward, Azzam boldly issued a *fatwa* on the Soviet forces in Afghanistan and the obligation of Muslims to fight. Surprisingly, this was endorsed publicly by the Saudi Grand Mufti, Bin Baz, giving Azzam’s growing theocratic ideas and global influence significant religious sanction and legal support. The siren call had gone out, the caliphate was being revived, international networks were growing, and Afghanistan would always be “Abdullah Azzam’s war.” He played the role well: “Never shall I leave the land of jihad, except in three circumstances. Either I shall be killed in Afghanistan, killed in Peshawar, or handcuffed and expelled from Pakistan.”²⁴

As the gears of violent jihad began shifting, it was Abdullah Azzam shoveling the coal.

He constructed an understanding of Islam that, from Afghanistan outward, would roll over the world. It harkens back to the movements of Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Taymiyyah, places individual responsibility at its heart, and from Afghanistan would grow into the September 11 attacks and a truly global, and dangerously alluring, terroristic future. Azzam knew he needed a base for all this to follow; he needed to build up the Afghan jihad in the minds of Muslims as an emergency of the faith:

This is the example of Afghanistan today. She is crying out for help, her children are being slaughtered, her women are being raped, the innocent are killed and their corpses scattered, and when sincere young men want to move to save and assist them, they are criticized and blamed: “how could you leave without your parents’ permission?”²⁵

Azzam had jihad and *istishhad* (martyrdom) on his mind, claiming that no Muslim could be devout without living out these ideas. He quotes a now disputed (and often considered fabricated) *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad), and accepts what clerics and movements before him had denied, that jihad is also a war with the self: “We have returned from the lesser jihad (battle) to the greater jihad (of the soul).”²⁶ Azzam knew that denying integral parts of Islam was the very reason that previous attempts at building a modern militant Islam had failed to gain traction beyond their parochial beginnings. Azzam moved away from people he previously followed, such as Ibn Taymiyah and Ibn al Qayyim al-Jawziya, consciously accepting Muhammad’s announcement of the importance of inner jihad and placing it in the context that Islam had fallen from its early heights. So “Jihad of the Sword” is again needed before Muslims can focus on the jihad of the soul. Once on the backburner, violence took over entirely. Azzam always talked of global domination, a militarized Islam marching across the world, ending Muslim “oppression”: “Jihad and the rifle alone; no negotiations, no conferences, no dialogues.”²⁷ Certainly influenced by his experiences in Palestine, Azzam began with an idea of jihad against occupying forces, and then shifted this emphasis to include a ubiquitous global occupation of the faith. In this, jihad moved from being a private enterprise, often under a government umbrella, to include an obligation upon all Muslims to travel abroad in search of jihad if it could not be found at home or if more pressing battles could be found. The modern “foreign fighter” phenomenon grew from this, along with the anti-conservative obligation upon women — not just the wives of fighters — to join the

ranks, abandoning their husbands, fathers and male guardians, if these people try to block their path to jihad. Citing a passage from the Quran, Azzam saw this as the one act for which women do not need male permission: “and the Believers, men and women, are friends one of another.”²⁸ Azzam successfully blended the idea of jihad as an act of purity with the excitement and feeling of meaning that comes from battlefield companionship. The soul is cleansed through violence and death, and Islam is restored through violence and death. The modern world was explained by individual failures to accept this: “Because [jihad] is absent from the present condition of Muslims, they have become ‘as rubbish of the odd waters’.”²⁹

But this had all been tried before, countless times, by countless clerics. Azzam needed a deeper nerve to touch, something to ensure militant Islam would continue beyond his own preaching. He needed violent jihadism to grow organically, and appeal to those he couldn’t personally reach. Azzam needed to change the structure of Islam itself, so that radicalization would become a logical pathway for future generations. He would go to war within Islam.

Takfirism is the accusation of unbelief against another Muslim, the idea the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood structured their movement upon. The Brotherhood saw the Muslim leadership of countries such as Egypt to be Islamic only in name; and Azzam agreed with this international outlook, seeing the *takfir* all across the Muslim world. But also true to form, he considered that this made the vast majority of Muslims legitimate targets of violence. Outside of those actively engaged in jihad, the world’s Muslims were either disguised infidels or effective hostages under the rule

of these infidels. By this understanding, both groups could now be killed; the latter regrettably. This is where the distinction between the “far enemy” (foreign powers) and the “near enemy” (Muslim governments), which al-Qaeda would later popularize, was first developed. Azzam again went back to the earliest days of Islam, to the age of *Jahiliyya* (the period of ignorance before Islam). He imagined modern Islamic societies and the governments that ruled over them falling back into a state of such ignorance, corrupting the true Islam by moving away from its foundational documents toward modernity.

Azzam wanted more though; he wouldn't accept the commonly held assumption that the “infidel” in the Quran referred only to pagans. After Azzam, Jews, Christians and all other “non-Muslims,” including all Muslims not seeking or actively undertaking jihad, were now infidels and accordingly marked for death. Peace with infidels was permitted only if it was temporary and did not weaken the position of Islam into the future, as Azzam imagined, a peace treaty with Israel would do by legitimizing the Jewish state. After his death, the theory stuck, with terrorists such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, now leader of al-Qaeda, announcing in 2006 that any kind of agreement with Israel would, by definition, constitute “agreements of submission.”³⁰ This was, once again, an Islam that drew its strength from its link to the past.

It was also an Islam that played heavily on the need for a single, united Islam. Azzam originally balked at the idea that Muslim regimes around the world were, in fact, enemies of Islam or not Muslims at all, simply because he saw the artificial barriers inside the faith as the greatest problem hindering Islamic dominance. It was for this reason that he hated geograph-

ic boundaries, just as he did the Sykes-Picot Agreement; not because he disagreed about where they were drawn, but because he considered their very drawing to be a problem. Hoping to bring Islam back to the “oneness” of God — an unreformable, unchangeable theology — Azzam naturally resented the *qawmia* (tribalism) he saw corrupting the Muslim world. Working to unify the faith, Azzam also tried to rebind the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence — Hanbali, Malaki, Shafii and Hanafi — hoping to build a universal template for Islamic struggle that would inspire new generations of terrorists, regardless of the traditions they are raised in: “The life of the umma is connected to the ink of the scholars and the blood of the martyrs.”³¹ Always conscious to build a narrative that mirrored the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Azzam began to draw a picture where Islam would move from what he saw as disaster and suffering to peace and strength, through warfare and domination... if only they were united.

Azzam felt that if Muslims would only embrace their individual responsibility to undertake jihad, and if they understood and embraced this universally across Islam, the plight of the faith would be solved: “If only the Muslims applied the command of their Lord, and executed the verdict of their Sharia in going out to Palestine [for Jihad] for a single week, Palestine would be permanently purified of the Jews.”³² Azzam needed to create a picture of Islam — easily understood and demonstrative of his vision for individual Muslim responsibility — that he could use to recruit foreign fighters into the Afghan jihad. Azzam did this through the analogy of a drowning child:

Some people are walking along the seashore and amongst them is a group

of good swimmers. They see a child about to drown. It shouts “save me!” and nobody moves towards him. One of the swimmers wants to move to save him but his father forbids him. Can any scholar in this day and time say that he must obey his father and let the child drown?

Saving the drowning child is *Fard* on all the swimmers who witness him. Before anyone moves there is a call for all to save him. If someone moves to save him, the sin falls from the rest. But, if no one moves, all the swimmers are in sin.

No permission is required before anyone moves. Even if the parents forbid the son to save the drowner, they must not be obeyed. If some answer the call, then the sin falls from the rest. If none respond, all are in sin.³³

There is an individual responsibility for all Muslims to expel infidels from their lands, just as with Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and a community responsibility to come and assist any Muslims who cannot, or do not, act themselves. For all able-bodied Muslims, jihad was now elevated to a religious duty on a par with praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and visiting Mecca. And the Muslim world should be considered in a state of emergency — a drowning child needing to be saved.

In the early years of the Afghan jihad, Abdullah Azzam, still trying to build an international groundswell around his ideas and how he saw them manifest in Afghanistan, traveled regularly between Peshawar and Jeddah, trying to recruit fighters and funding from the Saudi kingdom. In Jeddah, Azzam would always stay at the same spartan guest house, steadily turning it

into a central transit hub for international jihadis trying to join the battle in Afghanistan. The house belonged to a Saudi he had met in 1984 and for whom he had become a paternal replacement following the death of his father: Osama bin Laden. What appealed to Azzam was what most of the mujahedeen found appealing about Bin Laden — his money. Bin Laden was seen by Azzam as a means to pay salaries for fighters and commissions to recruiters who would persuade new jihadis to join the cause. Azzam once said about Bin Laden and his openness with money, “If you ask for a million riyals for the Mujahedeen, he would write you out a check on the spot.”³⁴ In return, Bin Laden found in Azzam a religious leader where age and education made him an appropriate role model.

As had happened with so many other Muslims, Bin Laden was captivated. Before long, he was parroting the words of Azzam seamlessly. Once again trying to link history to the present, Azzam often cited the example of *al-Andalus* (the previously Muslim-controlled region of Spain) to highlight his concern for the lack of unity in Islam. In a 2001 video just after the September 11 terror attacks, Bin Laden echoed Azzam again: “Let the whole world know that we shall never accept that the tragedy of Andalusia would be repeated in Palestine. We cannot accept that Palestine will become Jewish.”³⁵ Bin Laden increasingly spoke Azzam’s language of Islam, referencing Ibn Taymiyah when denouncing corrupt Muslim regimes, making the distinction between near and far enemies, and wrapping Islam around struggle and jihad as purification. Modeling himself on Azzam, Bin Laden consciously presented the elder man as a leader of the faith. After his death, Bin Laden said, “Sheikh Abdullah Azzam was not an individual, but an entire nation

by himself. Muslim women have proven themselves incapable of giving birth to a man like him after he was killed.”³⁶

Jamal Khalifa, Bin Laden’s brother-in-law, claimed that Osama had made numerous secret visits to Afghanistan prior to the 1979 Soviet invasion; in reality, it was likely that Bin Laden had never heard of the country until that point. It was certainly Abdullah Azzam who coaxed a reticent Bin Laden to visit the battlefield in 1984, crossing from Pakistani safe havens into Jali, an Arab mountain camp near a Soviet outpost. Azzam must have known what this would do to the wealthy Saudi, who was so unsuited to hardship and battle that even after joining the Afghan jihad full-time, he spent most of the stay sheltering in his cave, complaining of constant fatigue and illness. After arriving in Jali, Bin Laden expectedly recoiled at the filth, poor equipment and general misery of the Arab fighters he found there. Until that point, Bin Laden’s image of the fighting was as rosy as the mythology Azzam had been selling to young Muslims in America. After a raid by Soviet planes, Bin Laden immediately crossed back over the border, returned to Saudi Arabia, and kicked his fundraising efforts into a higher gear. Azzam had opened the door to Bin Laden, and particularly his money. Through his own deepened involvement, Azzam increased Arab-Afghan involvement and began lifting Bin Laden to an uncomfortable position of power.

The shift began quite quickly. Bin Laden’s money ingratiated Azzam with the fighters, as well as, occasionally, the local Afghans. He was, after all, delivering them arms and, in the case of the Arabs, paying their salaries. The money began to talk. Although Bin Laden’s position of power was rising to the level of Azzam’s

and steadily beyond, for Abdullah Azzam both men were on the same ideological page — the one Azzam had designed. Both men saw the most pressing challenge to be improving the conditions of the Arab fighters — their training and preparation methods — in order to avoid the scorn that the local Afghan fighters were expressing toward them. They broke, however, over Bin Laden’s decision that the solution should be the maintenance of a separate Arab force. This would, he believed, help to avoid mistreatment and the growing concern that the Afghans were using them as cannon fodder. This, for Azzam, was unacceptable; for him, Islam should never be balkanised. Rather, Azzam wanted to disperse the Arabs among the other brigades to help build unity and strengthen his idea of an integrated, international Muslim jihad. Bin Laden won this argument, and later, to the dismay of many of the recruits who had traveled to Afghanistan based solely on the words of Azzam, the Arab jihadis held a formal leadership vote and elected Bin Laden rather than Azzam. Azzam dismissed the whole exercise as a need to appease the Egyptians and the Saudis in the ranks, a symbolic appointment that changed nothing of importance. Increasingly, however, the wheels were turning against him, and Bin Laden’s money was the prime mover.

It was this same money that Azzam used to set up the *Makhtab al-Khadamat* (Services Bureau) in Peshawar. Effectively, it was just a house that operated as a hostel for jihadis traveling to and from the conflict, as well as a publishing center for Azzam’s books, magazines and sermons. A personally satisfying, yet purposely simple, operation, the Bureau was a hub for foreign fighters and the propagation of Azzam’s theocracy. As became the case

with all things connected to the Afghan jihad, however, Saudi funding began pouring in, as did money from Bin Laden himself. So successful was the Bureau in fundraising, particularly from the financial connections supplied by Bin Laden, that it started to catch the attention of the same Afghan warlords who were so disdainful of the Arab fighters, particularly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hizb-i Islami in Afghanistan, who ingratiated himself with Azzam in an effort not to lose any of the funding he was receiving from Iran, Libya, America and the Pakistani security services. Also casting an eye on the Services Bureau was an Egyptian follower of Bin Laden, a doctor named Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Due to his medical background, Zawahiri immediately found a friend in Bin Laden, who called on him at all hours to treat an array of ailments — particularly an undisclosed disease that caused low blood pressure and required regular intravenous glucose. Zawahiri's closeness increasingly became a problem. While the Afghan jihad continued, the battle for Bin Laden's attention was unhelpful, but changes would still be channeled into a conflict that Azzam had built into the jihad: consciousness. Every victory was a victory for his vision of Islam. Thus, when Zawahiri and his Egyptian followers joined the ranks later in the conflict, Azzam brushed their influence aside, even when the Muslim Brotherhood's conception of takfir began circulating in the camps and fracturing the fighters back into their national identities. But as the conflict in Afghanistan edged toward victory and Azzam witnessed the country collapsing into civil war and the Arabs taking sides, he realized to what extent he had lost control of the jihadi narrative. This was the great fear Azzam had always

railed against — Muslim fighting Muslim, Muslim betraying Muslim. Azzam believed that Zawahiri's stoking of revolution in Muslim countries was the direct cause of such fratricide. But Zawahiri had Bin Laden's ear in a way that Azzam no longer did; the future of jihad was slipping away from him. And, importantly, Zawahiri and his Egyptian cohort were looking at Azzam, viewing him as the last significant obstacle to their full control of Bin Laden.

Abdullah Azzam must have thought back to the moment Bin Laden was elected leader of the Arab-Afghans, when it seemed natural for Azzam to hold the position. He personally welcomed in Peshawar most of those present at the meeting; he had been their first point of contact. Now they were shifting toward a Saudi-led nationalism. Most of the money coming into the jihad was from oil-rich Saudi Arabia, and these donors wanted the Afghan conflict to work in the long-term national interest of their country. Bin Laden was fixated on what he saw as the failures of the Saudi kingdom, in much the same way that Azzam was fixated on Palestine. Azzam didn't fully appreciate the significance of this element; he considered a vote for Bin Laden a simple cosmetic measure to ensure that Saudi money would continue to flow into the conflict, trusting that it was being managed by a Saudi (Bin Laden) at the other end. Azzam even convinced his most loyal supporters to vote for Bin Laden. As the meeting descended into an open platform for people to attack his character, Azzam was clearly blindsided by the feeling that had been building around him. Sitting quietly, even silencing Azzam's supporters when they tried to interject, Bin Laden let the Egyptian followers of Zawahiri lodge complaint after complaint against the spiritual leader of the Afghan

jihad. It came to a head when Abu Abdul Rahman, a close follower of Zawahiri, accused Azzam of confiscating funds designated for Rahman's medical projects, claiming Azzam was working with the Americans. The accusations were allowed to stand, and an official trial date was called to answer the charges. Peshawar was suddenly ablaze with posters littering the streets and running skirmishes between opposing sets of supporters, as if a heavy-weight boxing match was coming to town.

With Bin Laden no longer crediting Azzam's influence for his decisions, the Egyptians, including Zawahiri himself, took this as tacit support for a broad-scale slander of Azzam's character. By presenting himself as the sole leader and refusing to defend his former teacher, Bin Laden seemed to be sending out a dog-whistle that Azzam was dispensable. New conspiracies grew by the day. Beyond the American spy he had already been accused of being, Azzam was charged with trying to co-opt the Arab-Afghan movement for Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood; with treachery for supporting the Tajik commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud; and for poor management and theft from the Services Bureau. It was this last charge that likely indicated the source of many of the grievances. Heading into the battle, Azzam through the Bureau, was still controlling a large proportion of the funds.

When it all came to trial, the groundwork had been laid. Realizing the verdict to come and perhaps suffering a pang of guilt, Bin Laden ran to the trial in a panic with his friend Wael Julaidan, shouting "We cannot trust the Egyptians," and "They will kill him."³⁷ As expected, Azzam lost the case and was ordered to return the funds in question, but it was likely only the last-minute presence of Bin Laden

that spared him the corporal punishment and/or mutilation that was customary for such convictions. The wolves were at Azzam's door, and they hadn't gotten the blood they were hoping for. But, as Azzam looked around the battlefield he had fought so hard to establish, he must have found it hard to recognize. As the conflict in Afghanistan died down, large numbers of wealthy Saudis had arrived hoping for a risk-free joy ride they could recount later as suffering and sacrifice. The Arab-Afghan jihad was suddenly full of pampered children on holiday.

Peshawar had become dangerous for Azzam. Bin Laden, on his way out of Pakistan, cautioned his former teacher during a teary goodbye that he had too many enemies in town. Azzam wouldn't leave. On November 24, 1989, he was traveling with his two sons and a driver to his local mosque, when a remotely detonated roadside bomb exploded. Twenty kilograms of TNT tore through the crowded street. Appropriate for a man who knew the power of myth, the circumstances of the assassination are shrouded in conspiracies. The Mukhabarat (Jordanian intelligence services), KHAD (the state intelligence agency of Afghanistan), the KGB (Russian secret police), the American CIA, and ISI (the Pakistani intelligence services) have all been accused of the attack, in various capacities and from various motivations. The clamor blaming ISI grew in strength after it refused to share any of the forensic evidence collected from the crime scene. The apparent sophistication of the attack drew many people to implicate Mossad (the Israeli intelligence services), suspicions that fit neatly with Azzam's continuing support for Palestinian terrorism.

Similarly strong claims have been made against Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin

Hekmatyar, after Azzam publicly offered support for Ahmed Shah Massoud in the emerging Afghan civil war. Azzam had traveled to visit Massoud in the Panjshir Valley and returned championing him as “the most brilliant commander in Afghanistan,” even saying, “I have seen the true Islamic Jihad. It is Massoud.”³⁸ Hekmatyar was rightly worried that the Saudi and Arab funds Azzam still controlled through the Services Bureau might stop coming his way in favor of Massoud. But if Hekmatyar had wanted Azzam dead, it is hard to explain why his men had foiled a previous assassination attempt by disarming an anti-tank mine placed under the podium where Azzam delivered lectures at the local mosque (the bomb was large enough to kill 100 people). Alternatively, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was known to be seeking control of the Services Bureau and was rumored to be spreading the story in Peshawar on the morning of the bombing that Azzam was an American collaborator.

The bomb, according to eye witnesses, literally ripped its victims to pieces. Yet, as the accepted story now goes, Azzam’s body lay peaceful, unmarked and pristine in death. One last impossible myth: Following the assassination, Hamas declared a national strike across the West Bank and Gaza and published, in the magazine *Al-Jihad*, that Abdullah Azzam should forever be considered a top-ranking martyr. Revenge was promised. But Azzam, if alive today, would hate what has happened to his

alma mater. He would denounce Hamas for signing a *hudna* (armistice) with Israel, for signing the Mecca agreement, for not fully implementing *sharia* (Islamic law), and for showing degrees of restraint toward Israel following Operation Cast Lead in 2009.

Abdullah Azzam strategized right up to his death. He was always plotting a future for his faith that would be defined by violence: “Palaces of glory are built only by skulls and limbs severed from the body,” and “The tree of this religion is watered only with blood.”³⁹ In the month he was killed, a new terrorist organization was formed, its name hushed in the streetcorners of Peshawar. It was Bin Laden’s group, later Zawahiri’s. In ideology, it would always belong to Azzam. As if structuring directly from the inner workings of his mind, they went seeking Islamic unity through struggle and terror. Appropriately it was called al-Qaeda — the base. Azzam consciously deconstructed his faith, labored over its scripture, and tried to reinspire its history. He built it back up in a way that only led to violence. He was carefully setting bombs that would take time, would lie dormant yet eventually explode across the Muslim world. Modern terrorism belongs to Abdullah Azzam, and his words echo among groups like ISIS: “We shall continue the jihad no matter how long the path, until the last breath and the last beat of the pulse — or until we see the Islamic state established.”⁴⁰

¹ Tom Holland, “ISIS: The Origins of Violence,” BBC (first aired May 17, 2017).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Asaf Maliach, “Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda, and Hamas: Concepts of Jihad and Istishhad,” *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2010): 80.

⁵ Ibid., 84.

- ⁶ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (Knopf, 2006), 95.
- ⁷ Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam": 85.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ¹² Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam and Palestine," *Welt des Islams* 53 (2013): 382.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 384.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ J.C.M. Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh: Abdullah Azzam and the Revival of Jihad," *Journal of Religion and Society, Supplement Series* 2 (2007): 14.
- ¹⁶ Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam and Palestine": 378.
- ¹⁷ Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh": 17.
- ¹⁸ Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat* (Naval Institute Press, 2010), 147.
- ¹⁹ Youssef H. Aboul Enein, *The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's Books — Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim Land through Jihad* (The Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy West Point, NY, 2008), 9.
- ²⁰ Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam": 83.
- ²¹ Malcolm Nance, *An End to al-Qaeda: Destroying Bin Laden's Jihad and Restoring America's Honor* (St. Martin's Press, 2010), 165.
- ²² Harvey Sindima, *Major Issues in Islam: The Challenges Within and Without* (Hamilton Books, 2017), 332.
- ²³ Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam": 90.
- ²⁴ Andrew McGregor, "Jihad and the Rifle Alone: Abdullah Azzam and the Islamist Revolution," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003): 100.
- ²⁵ Abdullah Azzam, "The Defense of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman," *Religioscope* (2002): 20.
- ²⁶ McGregor, "Jihad and the Rifle Alone": 104.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh": 15.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³⁰ Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam": 87.
- ³¹ Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh": 14.
- ³² McGregor, "Jihad and the Rifle Alone."
- ³³ Azzam, "Defense of the Muslim Lands," 20.
- ³⁴ Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 96.
- ³⁵ David Bukay, *From Muhammad to Bin Laden: Religious and Ideological Sources of the Homicide Bombers Phenomenon* (Routledge, 2007), 274.
- ³⁶ H.J. Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism* (Routledge, 2016), 163.
- ³⁷ Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 136.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.
- ³⁹ Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam," 81.
- ⁴⁰ Rohan Gunaratna, "Why Afghanistan Matters: The Global Threat of Terrorism" in *Afghanistan after the Western Drawdown*, eds. Rohan Gunaratna and Douglas Woodall (Rowman & Littlefield: 2015), 89.