

Combating Terrorism Center Guest Commentary

The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's Books

Part 2: Remedy for Muslim Victimization



LCDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, MSC, USN



*The Combating Terrorism Center
United States Military Academy
West Point, NY*

<http://www.ctc.usma.edu>

Please direct all inquiries to Brian Fishman

brian.fishman@usma.edu

845.938.2801

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Introduction

Abdullah Azzam is considered the strategic heart of al-Qaida. His writings and lectures on *al-Qaida al-Sulba* (the Firm Foundation) form the basis and origins of the organization. Azzam was assassinated on a Peshawar street by a massive car bomb in 1989. He is considered the founding father of the concept of interjecting a rapid reaction force of Arab volunteers into civil wars, crises and small conflicts involving Muslims. It is not enough to write a single review essay of one of Azzam's ten books to grasp the span of his influence on al-Qaida. He reinterpreted Islamic history and modern western philosophy to justify the fantasy ideology of al-Qaeda and the global Islamist militant movements. He also recruited Usama Bin Laden and brought him into the Soviet-Afghan War.

The first review essay covered Azzam's 1983 *fatwa* (religious opinion), crafted at the height of the Soviet-Afghan War and endorsed by senior Sunni Muslim clergy, including the late Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheikh Bin Baz. Azzam postulated that Islam was under assault and that jihad had now become a collective obligation. This essay will review a book published one year after Azzam's death. It is a collection of his strategic, operational and tactical views of jihad. Entitled *Jihad Shaab Muslim* (Jihad of the Muslim Peoples), this 72 page book was published in 1990, by Maktabah Jeel al-Jadid in Sanaa, Yemen and Dar Ibn Hazm Press in Beirut, Lebanon. It blends modern historical observations of the Soviet-Afghan War, with a discourse (from an Islamist militant perspective) of the history of the Indian subcontinent, while including numerous Islamic quotations throughout the text to justify violence as the only remedy to problems in the Muslim world.

It is these books and personalities like Sheikh Abdullah Azzam that fuel today's Islamist militant movement. American military planners must first understand and deconstruct Azzam's skewed ideology and strategies in order to truly understanding the present enemy. We need to immerse ourselves in the language, ideology and global views of Islamic militancy. Understanding Bin Laden, requires an understanding of the long lineage of Islamist militant clerics and theorists stretching back to Sheikh ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 AD) to the subject of this book Sheikh Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989 AD).

Azzam's Interpretation of Jihad as a Compulsory Duty

Azzam opened the book with his discussions with Sheikh Bin Baz, the late Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. The Sheikh had told Azzam that he did not expect the Afghan mujahideen to last seven days against the Soviet onslaught. Azzam

was more optimistic. Centuries of fighting in Afghanistan, beginning with the Mongols and Persians, evolved into a jihad against Hindus and then a war against the Sikhs. Although Azzam had read about the so-called "Great Game"--the competition between regional powers over control of Afghanistan--he viewed it only from the lens of Muslim victimization and triumph. He did not mention the struggle between the royal families of Europe and the ensuing fight between Bolshevism and British liberalism that also played out in Afghanistan.

Azzam posited opinions by discounting centuries of Islamic debate on the nature of warfare and jihad and providing a fresh interpretation of jihad as *fard ayn* (compulsory duty). He used images of Afghan suffering and portrayed the Afghan fighter as David versus the Goliath Soviet war machine. When jihad becomes a collective obligation then, Azzam says, no permission to participate is required. For example, the rules of husband over spouse, of father over child and of the *mihrim* (guardian) are suspended. Azzam uses ibn Taymiyyah's *fatwa* to argue this point, which was pivotal to recruiting efforts during the Soviet-Afghan War. The problem of course was that ibn Taymiyyah represented a narrow view of Islamic jurisprudence. His fatwa was designed to condemn Christians and Jews due to the crusades and label the Mongols (who had embraced Islam) as apostates to further the ambitions of the Mameluke rulers of Egypt, who were locked in a titanic struggle with the Mongols over control of the Levant. Nevertheless Azzam, Bin Laden, and Zawahiri quote ibn Taymiyyah as if it were orthodoxy and not opinion.

If one accepts the premise that jihad has become a collective obligation incumbent upon all Muslims, as Azzam postulates, then he takes a further step towards a destructive interpretation of the significance of jihad in Islamic orthodoxy. Azzam says, "*there is no difference between those who leave prayers when they are capable and those who leave jihad who are capable.*" Azzam does not outright declare jihad one of the pillars of Islam (that would be akin to adding a sixth pillar to Islam, when there are only five and jihad is not one of those five), but comes ideologically close. It is by understanding these intricacies that one can expose the manipulation of Islamic jihadists, who pursue the destruction of western civilization based on false ideology. Azzam then takes readers on fantasy journeys based on his own travels with Afghan warriors and his witnessing of the Battle of Jaji (1987). He mythologized Afghan and Arab fighters. He described the preservation of the body of a martyr who died fighting the Soviets, the soundness of their faces in death (as if in a sound peaceful sleep), and the sweetness of the smell of their dead bodies. He wrote of

mythological stories of angels fighting alongside Prophet Muhammad and claimed those same angels were fighting alongside the Arab and Afghan *mujahideen*.

Azzam's Strategic Program to Fight the Soviets

Azzam stated that the Soviet-Afghan jihad began as an Islamic (harakah) movement with a few ulama (clergy). In the vanguard of this fight against the communists were those who best assumed the discipline and orthodoxy of Islam. Azzam endorsed four Afghan warlords who represented the extreme salafi Islam discipline and religious acceptability (Rabbani, Sayyaf, Hekmetyar and Khalis). Azzam openly admitted that they were raised on Mawdudi, Qutb, and ibn Taymiyyah, and had fought the corrupting influence of Sufi Islam in Afghanistan. Islamist militants and jihadists immerse themselves in the works of the three aforementioned ideologues while excluding all other forms of Islamic discourse or alternate thoughts on jihad (for more information on Qutb and ibn Taymiyyah read Mary Habeck's *Knowing the Enemy*, Columbia Press, 2006 and Lawrence Wright's *Looming Tower*, Knopf, 2006).

This small volume by Azzam is noteworthy as it describes not only theoretical aspects of Islamist militant jihad, but also an actual program of action outlined as follows:

- (1) Islamic religious institutions throughout the Middle East should send all students to fight the (Soviet) jihad, and support these students with a regular stipend.
- (2) Islamic Centers in the United States and Europe can maintain one fighter for between \$6,000-8,000 annually.
- (3) A \$27,000 donation opens a *madrassah* (school) in Pakistan, while \$54,000 opens a medical clinic for 50 people.
- (4) There are thousands of needy *muhajiroon* (refugees) from Afghanistan in Peshawar.
- (5) Media is absolutely critical to publicize the plight of the Afghans, increase street outrage and to market the jihad to those willing to volunteer themselves and donate funds to the cause. The importance of media to Azzam is central to the kind of sub-conventional asymmetric war that is being waged and is summed up by this statement from Azzam's book:

“We must mount our own counter-media campaign labels like religious extremists was applied successfully by the Jewish media (Azzam was fiercely anti-Jewish) and is designed to undermine the role and significance of Arab jihadists in places like Afghanistan.”

(6) Families with the means can open their homes to Arab volunteers; those unable to wage the jihad physically should consider donating. It only takes \$8,000 per year to support an Afghan family. These clinics and schools will grow and cultivate a new generation of committed Muslim fighters to wage war against the enemies of Islam.

So, Azzam’s agenda was not humanitarian. He wanted to ideologically alter the landscape of the region and develop new soldiers willing to follow his plan toward resolving Muslim grievances. When one thinks of Hamas and Hizbullah’s humanitarian efforts one cannot be blinded to the basic fact it is done to support a system and society organized around hatred of an enemy; the enemy in Azzam’s time were the Soviets and Israelis, now it is the United States and the Israelis.

Azzam wanted to stop the flow of Afghans leaving Afghanistan. He argues in *Jihad Shaab Muslim*, that the migration was eroding the ability of guerilla fighters (jihadists) to blend in villages and urban areas. An Arab who shared a trench with an Afghan would shame him into remaining in Afghanistan. He then wrote that the presence of Arabs among the Afghans energized them, because the Arabs arrived thirsty for battle with the Soviets. He concluded this discourse by emphasizing that the Afghan jihad requires persons more than money. The psychological and moral presence of Arab jihadists among the Afghans was significant. Afghans wondered why these Arabs would leave the comfort and riches of their own nation to live in a cave with them. Azzam writes and preaches that: *“how can we (Muslims) have moral laws that make the feeding of the hungry if capable, yet we sit by and see the Soviets attack the ird (honor and dignity) of the Afghans belittling them? Lifting **zulm** (oppression) is an **usul al deen** (requirement of faith).”*

Azzam’s Post-Soviet Afghan Vision

Azzam wrote about a post-Soviet Afghanistan program that included the following objectives:

(1) The jihad against the Russians must be transformed into an international Islamist movement, and then into a war against international communism. Azzam calls this, "a war between the Ummahs (collective peoples of Islam versus Communism)."

(2) *Taaleem al-Mujahideen* (the education of the Afghan generation) is perhaps the most important role Arabs can play in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Fill the void left by a lack of ulama (clergy), demolished schools and overcrowded orphanages with Arab (Islamist) volunteer teachers and clergy to shape the young Afghan generation towards our agenda.

(3) Mobilize Islamic military, financial, engineering talent, media and medical talent against the Soviets at large, and continue the fight.

(4) For us to achieve the propagation and export of militant jihad from Afghanistan, it is incumbent that we resolve the differences among us and among the Afghan factions. It is here that Azzam made overtures to Ahmed Shah Masood, whereas Bin Laden considered Masood an enemy and infidel (On September 9, 2001 Masood was assassinated by Bin Laden, some argue as a prelude to 9-11).

Azzam viewed a triad of the psychological and ideological shaping an environment conducive to jihadists. In the post-Soviet Afghanistan the goal was to undermine the Soviet Union and liberate its Islamic Republics. The jihad cannot end with the eviction of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, but must encompass Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Of course, the tactics learned must be applied toward the eventual liberation of Palestine and the defeat of Israel. In Azzam's mind, the Soviet-Afghan War was a dress rehearsal from which to launch a strategic jihad in areas ripe for Muslim revolution.

Book's Conclusion

Azzam wrote less about condemning Muslims as apostate--a theme Bin Laden engages in--and instead focused on the practicality of mass mobilization for jihad in the name of Islam. To those critical of the jihadist movement, Azzam ended his book by writing that no one can remove our love and commitment for jihad from our very being; no one can prevent us from fulfilling this (religious) obligation, just as no one can ever divorce us from the love of God and his Prophet (Muhammad). Azzam is absolute in his righteousness and

determination. Although he wished more Muslims would join his movement, he did shut out any Muslim leader who opposed him by claiming his opinion was orthodoxy. He had no room for the intricacies of Prophet Muhammad's life as a negotiator, tribal leader, leader of a city-state, father, husband and merchant. In Azzam's world the obsession is with Muhammad the warrior and nothing else matters. Azzam scorned those Muslims who argued that Muhammad was first and foremost a preacher, who would have remained in Mecca and not fled to Medina if he had still been allowed to preach. .

As alluded to earlier, Azzam believed Afghanistan was the *muqadima* (prologue) to what will come in Palestine. He warned that the Israelis might impose border restrictions for access into Palestine, but they (the Israelis) can never erase the memory, desire, and yearning for Palestine; the international jihad will not rest until the fight for Palestine is resumed. Azzam, like Bin Laden and Zawahiri, view any peace agreements or negotiations over the status of Palestine as heresy, even if it is negotiating away an inch of Muslim land. It was only in February 2007, that Hamas agreed to recognize the legitimacy of the Palestinian-Israeli track towards peace. Hamas leaders share Azzam's views. On another note, one can detect insecurities in the Sunni militant Salafi movements like Al-Qaeda when a Shiite terror group Hizballah took on the Israeli Defense Forces in 2006. The fight between who will assume the mantle of the Palestinian cause, once the purview of states like Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Liberation Organization or Syria, has in the 21st century been reduced to terror groups like the Shiite militant group Hizballah, and Sunni militant groups Hamas, Fatah al Islam and Asbat al Ansar.

The final pages end with Azzam describing his vision of Islam triumphant. The question then becomes whose Islam? If it is his, it will alienate Shiites, Sufis and some Sunni groups not to mention significant minorities within the Middle East. He also describes the concepts in which Bin Laden took to name his own new movement al-Qaeda, Azzam said:

"This deen (religion) will triumph and must burst forth from a qaeda al-sulba (firm foundation) it is from here (Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Caucuses) that the Turks and their descendents emerged to rule the Ottoman Empire for five centuries, that Mahamadu Ghaznawi founded the Ghaznavid Dynasty and ruled India for centuries, destroying its pagan idols, and that Ahmed Shah Baba ruled Afghanistan, India and Eastern Iran for decades. Will the triumph over the Soviets be the seeds from where an Islamic empire that will alter world history will emerge?"

The final sentence of the book is: *“it is not an unattainable objective for God is most merciful.”*

What can one learn from Azzam? For one, American military leaders and Counter-Terrorism analysts can derive many things. First, is the absolutism of Azzam’s cause. Second, although Bin Laden was a disciple of Azzam, there are things that Bin Laden diverges from with Azzam, chiefly the pragmatism of unifying Muslims towards the ultimate clash with western and Russian powers. Azzam never alienated Arab regimes the way Bin Laden has. Third, the basic structure of schools, media, and clinics for the jihad was adopted by Bin Laden and applied in Afghanistan and Sudan. Finally, the issue of jihad being a collective obligation is core construct in Islamist militant fantasy ideology, yet it can and must be debated particularly among Muslim scholars who disagree with this view. These scholars, both in the west and in the region, must be given a voice and encouraged to dispel this view using contradictory interpretations of Islam. The west must not define Islam as the enemy, but must label the ideology of jihad and *takfir* (apostasy) as an enemy ideology; a derivative of Islam that has no place in the 21st century and has condemned Muslims and non-Muslims with equal ferocity since its inception.

Editor’s Note: LCDR Aboul-Enein is a Medical Service Corps officer who since 9-11 has been serving as a Middle East Analyst and Advisor. From 2002 to 2006, he served as advisor as well as Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He currently works on Counter-Terrorism issues for the Defense Department. He wishes to thank the John T. Hughes Library in Washington DC and for making Azzam’s book available for review and study. LCDR Aboul-Enein wishes to express his appreciation to LT Andrew Bertrand, MSC, USN of Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk, Virginia for his support, edits and constructive comments that enhanced this piece.