

Introduction

This book is about why jihadism went global. It is a biography of Abdallah Azzam, the Palestinian ideologue who led the recruitment of Arab fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s. It is also a history of the Afghan Arabs, the world's first truly global foreign-fighter mobilization. The Afghan jihad is widely recognized as the Big Bang in the globalization of jihadism, but we have not really understood why the Arabs joined it. The deep answer, as we shall see, lies neither in Islamic theology nor in international politics, but in the domestic politics of the postwar Arab world.¹

This is also the story of a life stranger than fiction. It is the tale of a Palestinian who devoted his life to a war in Central Asia, a farmer who became a globetrotting war recruiter, and a professor who came to love military life. It is the account of a radical ideologue who not only befriended virtually all the leading Islamists of his time, but also met royals, CIA agents, and Cat Stevens the pop star. His story will take us to unexpected places such as California, southern Italy, and Venezuela, and bring us into underground apartments, lavish palaces, and dark mountain caves. It will end literally with a bang: a bomb assassination that remains the greatest murder mystery in the history of jihadism.

What happened in the 1980s is still relevant because the Soviet–Afghan war is the cradle of today's jihadi movement. That was where al-Qaida was born, and that was where famous leaders such as Usama Bin Ladin started their militant careers. The networks forged in Afghanistan became the backbone of the jihadi movement in the 1990s and 2000s, with former Afghan Arabs filling key roles in most jihadi groups. Intellectually, too, the Afghan jihad played a vital role, both as an incubator for key ideas and as the source environment for the jihadi subculture we know today. As the jihadi strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri later said, "This was a turning in Muslim history. People met, thoughts and perspectives met. Groups fought out their

rivalries, and different thoughts and ideas competed. It was a kind of birthplace. Much of what you see today is a result of this period.”²

At the same time, the mobilization to Afghanistan is something of a mystery, because nothing like it had happened before. Earlier decades saw multiple conflicts in the Muslim world – from Algeria in the west to the Philippines in the east – but none attracted foreign fighters on anywhere near the scale of Afghanistan. There had been Islamist foreign fighters in the 1948 Palestine war, but they enjoyed state support and came mainly from neighbouring countries. Indeed, since its emergence in the early twentieth century, the Islamist movement had been preoccupied with domestic politics. The 1960s saw the emergence of radical Islamists who were more open to the use of violence, but they too were focused on domestic political change. In short, as late as the 1970s virtually all radical Islamist politics was local. Then – all of a sudden, as it were – thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world decided to join the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. They came from Venezuela, Sweden, Australia, and South Africa, and from over forty other countries in between. Most, of course, came from the Arab world, and made the term “Afghan Arabs” shorthand for all the foreign volunteers.³

The Afghan jihad is also fascinating from a comparative perspective, because it produced what may be the most transnational rebel movement in modern history. No other ideological family has fostered a set of militant groups as large, as mobile, and as resilient as the jihadi movement. The leftist revolutionaries of the twentieth century had more impact because they captured large states, but Marxist rebel groups did not operate militarily across borders nearly as much as the jihadis have done in recent decades. Far-left terrorist groups in 1970s and 1980s Europe were highly mobile, but they were much smaller and less lethal than groups such as al-Qaida and Islamic State. As such, the jihadis are an anomaly in a world of largely parochial rebel movements, and should pique the curiosity of anyone interested in international politics.

Recent decades have seen extensive research on jihadism, but the formative event – the Arab involvement in Afghanistan – has not been fully explained. When it is not described as something that simply happened, the Arab mobilization to Afghanistan is explained by some combination of government encouragement and the search for a safe haven. Some scholars, such as Gilles Kepel and Peter Mandaville,

emphasize the role of geopolitics and government encouragement, especially from Saudi Arabia.⁴ Others, such as Fawaz Gerges and Bernard Rougier, highlight Afghanistan's role as a safe haven for Islamist revolutionaries under pressure at home.⁵ What most accounts have in common is the view that the foreign fighters were really domestic revolutionaries in exile. Put differently, the Arab mobilization to Afghanistan has been viewed as a natural continuation of the ideas of the Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) that dominated radical Islamist thinking in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, the Arab involvement in Afghanistan represented a rupture from Qutb's ideas, because Qutb talked about regime change, not about other Muslims' wars of national liberation. The Afghan Arabs went to fight non-Muslim invaders in Afghanistan – a qualitatively different endeavour from that of toppling Muslim regimes. Thus the call to fight in Afghanistan represented a change of priorities in Islamist thought, away from fighting corrupt Muslim rulers at home and toward fighting infidel invaders abroad. This shift from revolutionary to pan-Islamist mobilization cries out for an explanation.

In describing this shift, many writers have highlighted the role of Abdallah Azzam, the Palestinian preacher who spent the 1980s recruiting Arabs to the Afghan jihad from his base in Peshawar in Pakistan.⁶ Azzam is widely credited with having played a major role in bringing the Arabs to Afghanistan; he has been called “the spiritual father of the Afghan Arabs,” “the sheikh of the Arab Mujahidin,” and “the hero of the Arab Jihad in Afghanistan.”⁷ However, the claim has not been subjected to careful scrutiny. How do we know that there were not other actors or forces that brought the Arabs to Afghanistan? And if Azzam really was important, then how did he get involved, and how was he able to exert such influence? A close examination of Azzam's life thus promises to yield important insights into how the Arab mobilization happened, and, by extension, why the Islamist foreign-fighter phenomenon emerged when it did.

There are other reasons to study Abdallah Azzam closely. For one thing, he remains one of the most revered figures in the world of radical Islamism. On almost every metric, Azzam is one of the most influential jihadi ideologues of all time, as we shall see in Chapter 16. For another, his life closely tags the history of Islamism in the late twentieth century, so he is a useful prism for viewing that history. As we shall see, Azzam

found himself, often by coincidence, in many of the places where history was being made in this period.

Yet the literature on Azzam is remarkably small. There is only one English-language book about him – Muhammad Haniff Hassan’s *Father of Jihad* – and it concentrates on his ideology, not his biography.⁸ Other than that, the Western academic literature on Azzam is currently limited to about six articles, a three-part report, and a book chapter.⁹ To this list must be added a certain number of magazine articles, op-eds, blog posts, and the like.¹⁰ For comparison, there are at least five biographies in English of Usama Bin Ladin, while Sayyid Qutb is so widely studied that there are two books *about* the books about him.¹¹ The Arabic-language literature on Azzam is larger than the English-language one, but it is mostly hagiographic, so I will come back to it below in my review of primary sources. This has not only left Azzam shrouded in a fog of unanswered factual questions – such as: Who killed him? Did he found al-Qaida? Did he write the Hamas charter? – it has also left us with a limited understanding of his wider historical role and contribution.

The book will try to fill these gaps by exploring three main lines of inquiry. The first is about the basic facts of Azzam’s biography. Where did he come from, and what shaped him as a thinker? What motivated the big decisions in his life, such as his move to Pakistan in 1981? And what were his opinions? The second concerns the sources of Azzam’s influence. Why did he become so influential? What did he do to recruit so many people to Afghanistan? Why did his ideas catch on the way they did? The third question set concerns the mechanisms of the Arab mobilization to Afghanistan. Who were the first movers and what got them involved? By which networks, methods, and resources were subsequent recruits drawn in? And last but not least, what exactly was Azzam’s contribution?

Answering these questions required working roughly two-thirds as a historian and one-third as a social scientist. Much of the work was an inductive, historiographical process of locating, assessing, and reconciling sources to identify key actors and events. This is especially true of my approach to the factual questions about Azzam’s trajectory. Addressing the second and third sets of questions – about ideological influence and the Arab–Afghan mobilization – involved a more analytical approach. For example, to assess Azzam’s relative importance as a recruiter and organizer, I had to identify the other actors who

contributed, think of metrics of contribution, and then compare Azzam to the others.

Finding relevant sources involved a lot of detective work. For the questions about the Arab Afghan mobilization, there was a rich secondary literature to work with, thanks to the recent books by Peter Tomsen, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, Vahid Brown and Don Ressler, Leah Farrall and Mustafa Hamid, and Anne Stenersen.¹² However, for the first two sets of questions I had to rely mainly on primary sources, collected over a long period from many different places.

A crucial source was Azzam's own writings and lectures. This is a corpus of many thousand pages of text and several hundred hours of recorded lectures. I collected most of it from the internet and from university libraries in the USA and Middle East. I believe I have a full collection, but I cannot be certain, because the Azzam corpus is large and unwieldy. Only a small part of it was published in book form in his lifetime. The rest is posthumous editions of unpublished manuscripts, transcriptions of lectures, compilations of articles, and recorded lectures that his supporters took it on themselves to make available after he died. However, this editorial work was decentralized, resulting in transcribed lectures presented as books, medleys and extracts presented as independent works, and multiple title discrepancies. Disentangling all this has been laborious, and establishing a full chronology was impossible, because many of the documents are undated. At the end of the book I provide a list of his major works, and on the book website (www.azzambook.net) I provide a more detailed list of sources as well as the documents themselves.

Another vital source was Islamist biographies of Azzam. Particularly useful were six book-length works in Arabic, which I treat here as primary sources, because they are hagiographic and were authored by people who were Afghan Arabs and/or Muslim Brothers themselves. They include Husni Jarrar's *The Martyr Abdallah Azzam* (1990), Bashir Abu Rumman and Abdallah Sa'id's *The Scholar, Mujahid, Martyr and Sheikh Abdallah Azzam* (1990), Muhammad Amir's *The Mujahid Sheikh Abdallah Azzam* (1990), Fayiz Azzam's *The Martyr Abdallah Azzam between Birth and Martyrdom* (1991), Adnan al-Nahawi's *Abdallah Azzam: Events and Positions* (1994), and, last but not least, Mahmud Azzam's *The Doctor and Martyr Abdallah Yusuf Azzam* (2012).¹³ Several of these books contain testimonies

and primary sources collected in the first few years after Azzam's death, and two of them were written by family members of Azzam who were with him in Pakistan (Fayiz and Mahmud Azzam are his nephews). Another key source was *Through Contemporary Eyes*, a 650-page collection of articles, statements, and letters published in the aftermath of Azzam's death.¹⁴ I also drew on the many article-length biographies in English and Arabic that have circulated on Islamist websites.¹⁵ In addition, I collected theses written about him by sympathizers at schools such as the Islamic University in Gaza.¹⁶

A third key source was my own interviews with people who knew Azzam or observed the Afghanistan war up close. I spoke to around seventy people, including some living legends of modern Islamism such as Abd Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf in Afghanistan and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi in Amman. I went to Azzam's native village, al-Sila al-Harithiyya, where his brother, cousin, and other family members showed me the places he frequented growing up. I went to Amman several times to interview Azzam's son Hudhayfa and other family members. I did not get to meet his widow, Umm Muhammad, but she answered questions by intermediary. In London I spoke at length with Azzam's son-in-law Boudjema Bounoua (better known as Abdallah Anas). In Peshawar I met Jamal Isma'il and Ahmad Zaidan, who had worked with Azzam on *al-Jihad* magazine. I talked to former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives, a former Saudi intelligence official, and a former official of the Pakistani ISI. I also interviewed former students of Azzam's, veteran Muslim Brotherhood members, and Western NGO workers who were in Peshawar in the 1980s.

I also examined the broader corpus of books, magazines, and videos produced by the Afghan Arab community in the 1980s and 1990s. It includes several dozen memoirs, travel accounts, and other types of books. A key source was Basil Muhammad's *Pages from the Record of the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan* (1991), a detailed history of the Arabs in Afghanistan from 1980 to 1987.¹⁷ Arabs in Peshawar also produced magazines; Azzam's own *al-Jihad* magazine is the best known, but there were many others. I also perused jihadi propaganda films from the 1980s, including the productions of the Egyptian filmmaker Isam Diraz, who was embedded with Arab fighters in Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

Some of this material has been available in the nooks and crannies of the internet, but for other things I had to go off the beaten track. In Kabul I trawled bookshops for old editions of Azzam's books. I went to

Peshawar to browse local newspapers from the 1980s, and to Riyadh to find jihadi magazines in libraries and private collections. I contacted the schools Azzam had attended asking for his enrollment dates, in response to which the Kadoorie College in Tulkarm kindly sent me copies of his entire file, complete with his application letter from 1957 and his grade transcripts. I also made an effort to obtain government documents, submitting Freedom of Information Act requests about Azzam to the CIA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the US Customs and Border Protection.

Still, some sources were left unexploited. The language barrier prevented me from accessing the substantial literature on Azzam in Turkish. I also failed to obtain interviews with a few key individuals who knew Azzam well, notably Isma‘il al-Shatti’ and Rachid Ghannouchi. I also did not fully exploit Jordan as a fieldwork site; there are many former students of Azzam’s and veteran Jordanian Muslim Brothers I did not interview. Similarly, there is more work to be done on the Afghan and Pakistani side of the Afghan Arab story. Still, this book presents quite a bit of new evidence that should help us address some important historical questions.

The book’s main finding is that jihadism went global in the 1980s because Islamists had been excluded from domestic politics in preceding decades. Constrained at home, some Islamists turned to an arena in which they faced less government interference – namely, transnational activism for pan-Islamic causes. By the late 1970s a whole new movement of pan-Islamist activists had emerged, one that promoted a victim narrative about worldwide Muslim suffering and provided assistance to faraway Muslim countries through Islamic charities. Then, in the 1980s, hardliners such as Abdallah Azzam interpreted the notion of Muslim solidarity militarily, saying that Muslims should also *fight* for each other. This message resonated with many because Muslim solidarity activism was already in vogue.

Abdallah Azzam did not cause the transnationalization of jihad, but few individuals played a more important part. His clerical training and Muslim Brotherhood background gave him a religious authority and contact network that no other Arab in 1980s Peshawar possessed. The Afghan Arab phenomenon would have emerged without him, but he made it substantially larger than it would have been. Azzam is also partly responsible for the subsequent rise of transnational jihadi terrorism, not because he advocated such tactics, but because he helped

undermine traditional authorities on matters of jihad. Azzam's key message in the 1980s was that Muslims should go and fight in Afghanistan even if their governments or parents objected. This helped produce a movement that could not be controlled, and would descend further and further into radicalism. As such, the story of the globalization of jihad is a lesson in unintended consequences for both governments and Islamists.

The book consists of sixteen chapters which are ordered chronologically and form two natural parts. Chapters 1 through 6 cover Azzam's pre-Afghanistan period, while Chapters 7 through 15 deal with his time in Afghanistan. In the first part, each chapter covers an aspect of his background that helps understand his subsequent influence. These are: his background as a Palestinian, Muslim Brother, Fedayin fighter, Islamic scholar, itinerant dissident, and author. In the second part, each chapter deals with a role that he played in the Afghan jihad and that helps us assess his contribution to the mobilization. He was – partly in this order – an early mover, diplomat, manager, recruiter, ideologue, military man, resident, object of controversy, and assassination target. Chapter 16 is an epilogue about his contested legacy.

In 1987, two years before his death, Azzam wrote a short book titled *Join the Caravan*, which called on all able-bodied Muslims to fight in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The book became an instant classic of jihadi literature, and is still widely read today. The expression “joining the caravan” has since entered the jihadi lexicon as a synonym for joining the jihadi movement. Azzam's caravan grew larger than anyone could have imagined. This is the story of how it got moving.

Prologue

Like every Friday morning, Sheikh Abdallah had been up since before sunrise to pray and read the Qur'an, and he had already clocked up several hours in his study. He took a last look at his notes and went to put on clean new clothes. As the imam of Peshawar's "Arab mosque," he was due to give the Friday sermon to hundreds of people in a little over an hour. The calendar read 24 November 1989, the clock half past eleven.

He was in a good mood. The night before he had finally secured a truce agreement between Hekmatyar and Rabbani, the Afghan Mujahidin leaders who had been practically at war for the past six months. He was looking forward to announcing the peace from the pulpit and then going to Islamabad to celebrate with all the Mujahidin leaders. He was also pleased to have his eldest son Muhammad back in the house; the latter had just come back from Amman after accompanying his grandfather to their native Palestine. Azzam was so upbeat he had not even minded that Hudhayfa and Ibrahim, his two other teenage sons, had asked to leave the Qur'an-reading session early this morning to play sports.

At noon he was ready to go. He put on his jacket, then looked at his watch. "Hudhayfa, where are you? Can you still take us?" he shouted. His son peeked into the hallway with an embarrassed smile. "What, you haven't washed yet? Never mind, Muhammad can take us. You join us there later." He went out to the courtyard and jumped into the passenger seat of his dark red Chevrolet Vega. The mosque was just around the corner, but the roads were pedestrian-unfriendly, so they always took the car. Muhammad got in the front, Ibrahim in the back.

It was now ten past twelve. As their car pulled out from the yard, five-year-old Mus'ab came running, keen to ride with the big boys. "Father, can I please also come?" "No, my son, please go back into the house." With Muhammad behind the wheel, the car headed slowly down the

residential street, then right up Arbab Road, and then right again onto Grand Trunk Road. Fifty meters up, they exited on the right, in the direction of the mosque. Then, all of a sudden, there was a flash of light and a deafening explosion. A large bomb ripped the car apart from underneath. Abdallah Azzam's jihad in Afghanistan was over.