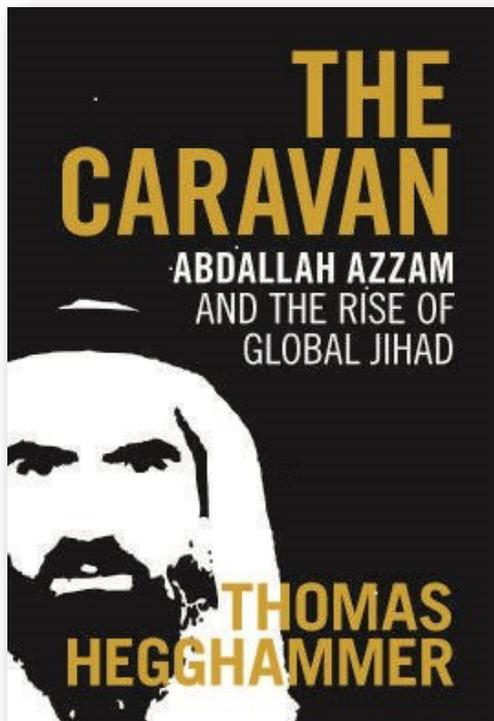




The Caravan – Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad



Thomas Hegghammer's (T. H.) newest book, titled "The Caravan – Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad"¹, has been recently published by the prestigious Publishing house Cambridge University Press. Abdallah Azzam, a religious teacher of Palestinian descent, known by few in the Western world, but to those who are familiar with his work, is, along with Hassan El Bana and Sayyid

¹ Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan - Abdallah Azzam and the rise of Global Jihad*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2020.

Qutb, considered a founding theorist of the concept of global jihad. This is the reason why T. H. could rightly consider exploring Azzam's activities, teachings and how they are put into practice, as well as how the activities of radical Muslim organisations impact the present, all in a biographical book.

The author of the book, expert in international jihadism, is Senior Researcher at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), and a Lecturer at the University of Oslo. T. H. had conducted his research for more than a decade, the results of which are included in the current volume, from which the reader can get to know not only the major stages of the Palestinian religious leader's adventurous life, but also the jihadist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, their development, major events and characters.

Hegghammer not only examined Azzam's religious work as a teacher, but also the timeframe between his childhood up to his death, for which he conducted field research and interviews and made use of previously unemployed and authoritative English and Arabic sources. We learn that in 1953, at the age of only 12, he had joined the Muslim Brotherhood, later graduated with a teacher's degree, and left his homeland after the six-day war of 1967. The events of that time had an impact on



his later life that made the restoration of Jerusalem under the Islamic flag one of his main goals. However, at that time, the Palestinian liberation organisations were mainly left-wing, while the Islamists formed only a minority group. The two groups were in constant conflict with each other, and so, Azzam hated the leftists, whom he considered apostates (*kufir*) and an enemy of Islam. His second main objective was to preserve and teach the Islamic religion and culture purely “free from foreign influences”. However, unlike several religious teachers, Azzam did not reject the achievements of the modern age, which he considered usable for the spread of Islam. In the book, we can trace Azzam’s life and activities in Jordan, where he joined the *Fedayeen* group, who planned a coup against the ruler for being expelled from the country by the Jordanian authorities. Therefore, in 1971, Azzam fled to Egypt, where he enrolled in the world’s most famous Muslim university, Al-Azhar, which he graduated from with a 600-page doctoral thesis. After his doctoral studies, he returned to Jordan and became an internationally recognised religious authority, a teacher who knew all the major jihadist leaders and whose main goal was to teach pure Islam. An Islamic revival took place in the 1970s, during which he held various lectures and seminars, not only in the United States, but also in most Western European countries. He had also met Osama Bin Laden at one of these seminars in Indianapolis, in the United States, who later became the leader of the Muslim volunteers fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, then the leader of Al-Qaeda. In 1980, he was again forced to leave Jordan, so he soon moved

to Saudi Arabia, together with his family. In addition to his educational activities, he soon recruited fighters for the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets and collected aid for refugees displaced from Afghanistan. As part of this activity, he travelled the world, teaching and seeking support, in several countries, for a group fighting the Soviets, called the mujahideen, whom he later joined. By this time, he was already operating in Pakistan.

He soon became one of the leading theorists of Muslim groups fighting in Afghanistan, playing a significant role in internationalising jihad and teaching that jihad is the personal duty of every Muslim. This teaching has been used by many to validate terrorist attacks against civilian targets and to take an active part in “jihad without borders”, freeing themselves from the traditional constraints imposed on them by nation-states or religious, tribal, or family authorities. Referring to Azzam’s teachings, a large number of second and third-generation Muslims joined the Islamic State and carried out acts contrary to the teachings of the Qur’an, despite prohibitions from their government, their parents or even local religious leaders. Nevertheless, several members of the Muslim community not only did not condemn them, but considered them a kind of heroes. Therefore, one of the author’s important claims is that, because of Azzam’s teachings, Islam lost effective control over the Islamist international community and, thus, opened Pandora’s box. Azzam’s authority was still somewhat accepted by these groups, but after his death in 1989, the previously seemingly united community split into smaller groups. The rejection of authoritarianism



(“Authority problem”) would not only not have created an international unity within Islam, but it would have produced further fragmentation and, then, conflicts between the pragmatist and militant Muslim groups. Of these, those who forced the armed struggle came out victorious, and this led to the formation of Al-Qaeda, which has gained a global role, and later, formed other terrorist groups. Nevertheless, Azzam himself together with his teachings were highly valued by all of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other Muslim militant organisations, and his teachings were used, in several cases, to validate and legitimise their actions. However, not only them, but many Muslim believers were/are influenced by Azzam’s books – especially the 1985 “Defence of Muslim Lands” – and other writings. As a result, in 2013 and 2014, several young people joined the Islamic State to fight a holy war for the victory of Islam.

Another important teaching of Azzam was the total rejection of the nation-states – including the Muslim states, which he believed were created by the Western powers and the Zionists, against whom he had very hostile feelings –, as he saw them as one, if not the biggest, obstacle to Pan-Islamism. Therefore, he regarded himself as a member of the *ummah*, the international Islamic community, and not a citizen of a particular country, and encouraged his followers to do the same. Perhaps this is why he became one of the role models for Muslim fighters who have fought for Islam on many battlefields, within the framework of Islamic globalisation. Such were the Muslims who fought in Bosnia, in the 1990s and then, after the formation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, were granted Bosnian

citizenship and settled there. However, as foreign fighters, they have continued to fight in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other wars against Western states (unbelievers). Another important viewpoint of the author is that jihad could not become international because political Islam and Islamism could not be integrated by the otherwise Muslim nation-states, radical Muslim groups were suppressed, their activities were successfully restricted, and those who became dangerous to them were forced to exile. Most of them fled to Saudi Arabia and Europe, where the majority were employed by various Muslim NGOs. This created an active, international community, whose members did not belong to any state or participate in any of its political life, but as members of international Islamic organisations with a strong financial background, they were free to continue their activities on the international stage. Because they felt that Islam was under attack, much more emphasis was placed on the unity of the Muslim community, which was planned to be achieved by leaving out the nation-states. As a result of the perceived or real threat, Islam was militarised, part in which Azzam played a significant role – he encouraged Muslims not only towards humanitarian but also “military solidarity”, he expected them not only to send money to Afghan refugees, but to participate in armed jihad against infidels attacking Afghans. The author also points out that jihad has now stepped out of the “personal” and, also, the local and regional frameworks and has become global, the impact of which on everyday life is not negligible. He also indicates that sectarian differences were not a problem in the early jihadist period as they are today.



This is because the unity of the Muslim community has also accepted and included cooperation with the Shiites, as the Al-Ma'sada camp was established with the help of the Afghan Shiites, which became the centre of Al-Qaeda and where Bin Laden had lived in peace with the Shiites. In contrast, one of the main goals of the Islamic State' leaders was to eradicate the Shiite community in Iraq, which hit them back in several ways.

The author has examined several common myths in his book that proved to be untrue. One of them is the claim that Al-Qaeda was armed and trained by the CIA and they, then, turned against their former allies after they had won against the Soviets. In contrast, the truth is that the Arabs fighting in Afghanistan avoided representatives of the CIA and various Western countries, and they received support not primarily from them, but from Muslim countries and organisations. Also, Al-Qaeda was not particularly important to the CIA at the time, as it played only a marginal role among anti-Soviet groups, and the intelligence agency had only limited activities in the region. Of course, the Americans supported the mujahedeen, and even allowed Azzam and his comrades to raise money and recruit volunteers in the US undisturbed, which was a bad decision in retrospect. This is also confirmed by Azzam's son-in-law, Abdullah Anas, in his book "To the Mountains – My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan", published jointly with Tam Hussein in 2019, in which he claimed that only a few hundred Arabs were fighting in

Afghanistan, and they did not really have a role in defeating the Soviets and never received any serious support from the United States. Hegghammer specifically wrote about the bombing carried out against Azzam, on the 20th of November 1989, in front of the Arab Mosque in Peshawar, in which both he and his two sons lost their lives. After more than ten years of research, the author could not figure out whether the assassination was perpetrated by the Soviets, the Western states, Muslim countries, opponents within the jihadist community, or the Afghan (MAK) or the Pakistani Secret Service (ISI). Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the attack was a kind of message to the Arab community in Afghanistan, and the way the attack was carried out showed it must have been an important organisation behind it.

The 695-page book, written in great detail, is not an easy read, it also makes the reader think hard and constantly take sides. Nevertheless, once the reader gets immersed, the book can no longer be put aside. Photos and maps in the book help the reader understand it better, together with the detailed bibliography the author has used. I recommend this book to anyone studying security policy or history, and to anyone interested in the Middle East, the Afghan-Soviet war and its background, the ideological background of modern or, otherwise, global jihad, and the activities of the people who created and influenced it – including Azzam.

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