

The Contexts of Religion and Violence

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The Striving Shaykh

Abdullah Azzam and the Revival of Jihad

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The Problem of Religion and Violence

[1] Religion is typically upheld as a vehicle of peace. Yet, history reveals that religion is often entwined with violence. Any number of religions has justified violence under certain conditions, and others have been caught up in its processes. In ancient Near Eastern religions, war was holy in the sense of it being enjoined by the gods and fought for the extension of their lands. In Medieval times, the Roman Church preached crusades and implemented inquisitions. In recent decades, there has been Buddhist terrorism in Japan; Hindu terrorism in India; Jewish terrorism in Israel and the Israeli occupied West Bank; and Christian terrorism in Northern Ireland and the United States. The Christian-tinged Cosmotheism explicated in William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* inspired Timothy McVeigh to bomb the federal building in Oklahoma City (the problematic of religion and violence is succinctly laid out in Juergensmeyer; Hall).

[2] As for Islam, Muslim activists throughout history have evoked jihad in the effort to spread the faith and defend it from its enemies, often in ways that employ violence. The terrorist attacks carried out by radicalized Muslims in recent years in New York, Washington, Madrid, and London confirmed in the minds of many Americans and Europeans the putative violence of Islam. Despite the plea of President George W. Bush for Americans to distinguish carefully between "good" and "bad" Muslims, the events of September 11, 2001

reinforced the long-standing stereotype, strong in the West since Medieval times, that Islam is a religion that condones violent behavior.

[3] Given the evidence, some have suggested an intrinsic relationship between religion and violence. One line of scholarship, represented by Norman Cohn and J. Harold Ellens, holds that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam incorporate in their respective theologies the ancient Zoroastrian notion that history and the human soul are caught in an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, God and the Devil, which cannot be resolved without violence. According to Ellens, the violent discourse of Christian doomsday prophets, no less than the destructive actions of suicide bombers in Palestine and extremist religio-nationalists in Israel, are shaped unconsciously by the metaphor of cosmic conflict that has become the principle narrative of Western culture.

[4] Other scholars who theorize the close relationship between religion and violence look to the primordial connection of religion to ritual killing. The link has been made by the classicist Walter Burkert and the religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith, but the best known proponent of this view is Rene Girard who posits sacrifice as the resolution to the cycles of violence that spring from mimetic rivalry – the contest to obtain the objects or status that another party possesses (see also Hamerton-Kelly). According to Girard, in such situations a scapegoat is singled out, which stands in for the ills suffered by society and becomes the object of collective murder. Girard's thesis is capable of sustaining historical particulars. Recently, he explained the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as mimetic competition played out “on a planetary scale” (2001).

[5] There is another tradition of scholarship and commentary, one that paints a much rosier picture of religion and its place in society. According to this line of inquiry, religion is the primary vehicle of all that is noble in the human experience. Across religious traditions, say these observers, people of faith turn to scripture in order to diffuse hatreds and elevate humans to their God-given potential. If violence does occur in the name of religion, it is because religion has been hijacked by political or ideological zealots who find in the symbols of faith an easy currency. Armed with religious symbols that evoke the deeply held beliefs of a society, ideologues are able to mobilize populations in the direction of worldly goals. Those who support the innocence of religion argue that important distinctions must be made between aggressive forms of politically-motivated religious fundamentalism, whether Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, and inherently peaceful understandings of the religion.

[6] Because of the Al Qaeda phenomenon, much of the work scholars undertake to salvage religion's good name is devoted to Islam. For example, in his excellent book *Shattering the Myth*, Bruce Lawrence explains how vociferous, angry forms of “Public Islam” have blinded Westerners to Islam's normative traditions, which tend to center on ethical stipulations and metaphysical postulates, not on issues of worldly power. “Islam,” Lawrence states flatly, “is not inherently violent.” Following September 11, Muslim scholars and community leaders around the world condemned the attacks and emphasized Islam's core teachings of tolerance, social justice, and equilibrium (see, for example, the essays in Lumbard).

[7] Given the stridency of these positions, it is difficult to know which has greater legitimacy. That being said, their very economy should put us on guard. As is often the case with encompassing frameworks of interpretation, particulars are assimilated to the model,

resulting in an essentialist understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Yet we know from myriad theoretical and case studies that religious meaning is shaped by specific historical conjunctures. As Hall reminds us, “religious violence is embedded in moments of history and structures of culture. Under these circumstances, it seems inappropriate to embrace a single general theory linking violence with religion” (367). How then do we treat so-called religious violence without falling into the trap of essentialism?

[8] Bruce Lincoln suggests one way out of the dilemma. In *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, he explains, “Discourse becomes religious not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority and truth.” According to Lincoln, “religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred, ranging from the high-minded to the murderous, for it is not any specific orientation that distinguishes religion, but rather its metadiscursive capacity to frame the way any content will be received and regarded” (5). Religion, in this understanding, becomes the expression of deeply held social and political aspirations. In any given context, actors can mobilize the resources of a specific religious tradition to support activism of many different kinds, including nationalist and anti-colonial struggles, or even civilizational confrontation. As Lincoln says, “Most traditions possess a large discursive repertoire that knowledgeable actors can deploy, in open or densely coded fashion, to identify their immediate campaign with a sacred and transcendent cause” (65). Islam, whose doctrines were formulated in contexts of confrontation or political triumphalism, is particularly well suited in providing activists with discursive materials from which to draw.

Journey to Jihad

[9] With this theoretical background in place, I want to examine the career of Abdullah Azzam, the so-called “Striving Shaykh” (the term is taken from Bin Omar), who arguably did more than any other person to create the theoretical underpinnings of the contemporary Jihadist movement. Azzam formulated much of the Islamist ideology for the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, recruited Arab fighters to implement his vision of a reborn-caliphate, and established the foundation for the international network that his disciple, Osama bin Laden, would inherit and turn into Al Qaeda. What I hope to make clear is that in reviving the classical doctrine of jihad, Azzam connected significant numbers of young Muslim men to paradigmatic moments of their past, which had the effect of both enhancing and directing their incentive to challenge forces seen as responsible for the decline of Muslim fortunes in the modern world.

[10] There is presently no full critical biography of Abdullah Azzam. Nevertheless, a rudimentary account of his life can be assembled from the largely hagiographical portraits that his followers posted on the internet beginning in the late 1990s.¹ According to these accounts, Azzam was born in 1941 in the village of Silat al-Harithiyya near Jenin in what was then British Mandate Palestine. His childhood unfolded against the dramatic backdrop of

¹ The most complete on-line source for information about Abdullah Azzam was Azzam Publications at www.azzam.com, which was inactivated following 9/11. Since then, some of the biographical material from that site has become available at several other sites. See also Bin Omar; Suellentrop; the most complete biography is Hegghammer.

Israel's creation in 1948 and the absorption of his native West Bank into the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan in 1950. These events, however, did not prevent him from living up to his family's expectations. Possessed from the outset with a scholarly disposition, Azzam studied at the al-Khaduriyya agricultural college near the West Bank town of Tulkaram. After graduation he taught school in villages in Jordan and the West Bank, but a growing interest in religion prompted him to enroll at the faculty of law at Damascus University to study Shari'a. He obtained his degree in 1966. His thesis compared Islamic rulings on divorce with those of the secular civil codes of Jordan and Syria.

[11] In common with other Palestinians, Abdullah Azzam's life was transformed by the June 1967 war. In six short days Israel defeated six Arab armies and seized the West Bank. Azzam followed the train of fleeing West Bank Palestinians to Jordan and settled in a refugee camp at Zarqa before moving on to Amman. Distraught by the circumstances of Palestinian dispossession, and inspired by the Islamic learning he had imbibed in Damascus, he joined the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in Egypt in 1928 by an Egyptian school teacher named Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949), the Muslim Brotherhood was the Arab World's oldest and most influential Islamist movement (Mitchell; see also Lia). Combining a message of Islamic revival with organizational forms and tactical methods learned from secular nationalist parties like the Wafd, the Brotherhood aimed to reacquaint Muslims with the divinely-mandated principles of the Qur'an; in the view of the Brothers, these principles had eroded under the influence of the hegemonic Western culture. In order to reverse the trend of cultural and religious deterioration, al-Banna and his followers attempted to awaken Egyptians to the faith that lay "dormant" (*na'im*) in their souls (al-Banna: 98). In al-Banna's estimation, once strengthened by a "true understanding" of Islam, the Muslims of Egypt would be in a position to resist effectively foreign political and cultural encroachment.

[12] Al-Banna did not limit his vision of a reborn-Islam to the Nile Valley. The establishment in Egypt of an Islamic order was the first step in fostering a wider, transnational Islamic unity. Al-Banna talked of reviving the institution of the caliphate, which had been abolished by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic, in 1924. Toward this end, he and other Brotherhood leaders worked to set up of branches in the surrounding Arab countries, including British Mandate Palestine. Sa'id Ramadan, son-in-law of Hasan al-Banna, opened the movement's first branch in Jerusalem in 1945. Following the creation of Israel in 1948, Jordan became the center of the Palestinian Brotherhood activities. Subsequently, the movement gained additional recruits from among the 1967 refugee population, including the young Abdullah Azzam (see Abu-Amr: 1-10).

[13] Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood limited its activities primarily to the dissemination of Islamic literature and the conduct of social activities; by and large, it was not willing or prepared to take military action against the Israeli occupation. It was also distrustful of the secular revolutionary forces afoot in the Arab World at the time. Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood therefore supported the Hashimite Monarchy in the latter's ideological struggle against the "atheistic" Nasserites, Ba'athists, and communists. The Muslim Brotherhood's opprobrium for the pan-Arab republics extended to the Palestinian guerrilla groups that were held together under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Yasir Arafat (al-Zaydi).

[14] Azzam shared the Muslim Brothers' distrust of secular Arab nationalism. In his view the national focus and left-leaning ideology of the PLO played into the hands of Islam's enemies, who benefited from a territorially-divided and spiritually inert *umma*. In Azzam's maturing view, the struggle to liberate Jerusalem was tied to the liberation of the entire *umma* from "infidel" rule. In common with other Islamists, Azzam was not unhappy when the Hashimites forcibly ejected the PLO from Jordan in September 1970.

[15] Yet at the same time, Azzam appears to have been discomfited by the Brotherhood's gradualist approach to change. Although the details are vague, it is reported that Azzam engaged with like-minded Islamists in armed guerilla operations against the Israelis during 1967-1969 (see Hegghammer: 120-22).

[16] In 1971, Abdullah Azzam went to Egypt where he attended the Azhar, Cairo's great madrasa. There he studied the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, Arabic grammar, rational analytical methods, Qur'an recitation, and Qur'an interpretation, time-honored subjects that aided the student to interpret the Qur'an and apply its teachings to society. Such scholarly training, it should be noted, distinguished Azzam from Islamist thinkers such as Hasan al-Banna, whose higher education was mostly secular and who thus lacked the credentials of an *'alim* (religious scholar). Azzam graduated from the Azhar in 1973 with a Master's degree in Shari'a and a Ph.D. in the Principles of Jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*). Later, Azzam would draw upon this rigorous training in articulating his theology of jihad.

[17] While in Egypt, Azzam also acquainted himself with the radical Islamist thought of Sayyid Qutb, Islamism's premier ideologue. Qutb had been executed in 1966 by the 'Abd al-Nasser regime for his participation in an alleged anti-regime conspiracy. According to reports, Azzam got to know several of Qutb's Egyptian disciples, including "the blind shaykh" Umar 'Abd al-Rahman and Ayman al-Zawahiri, both of whom were influential in guiding the extremist jihadist groups that waged campaigns of terror against the Egyptian government in the 1990s. Azzam never accepted Qutb's thesis that contemporary Muslim regimes were devoid of Islam and therefore ought to be challenged. Taking cues from the juridical decrees of the thirteenth century Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya, Qutb and his radical followers pronounced anathema (*takfir*) upon Muslims who it saw as compromising God's sovereignty (*al-hakimiyya*) by promulgating man-made laws.² Azzam did, however, accept Qutb's more general premise that Western aggression in the Islamic World should be met and challenged, violently if necessary. Qutb's discourse reinforced and sanctioned Azzam's growing belief in the necessity of direct action.

[18] Following his graduation from the Azhar, Azzam returned to Jordan where he taught courses on the Shari'a at Amman University and used his podium to spread the Islamist message among his students. The increasingly strident nature of his Islamism, both inside and outside the classroom, raised eyebrows in the Hashimite establishment. Although Jordan's political leaders were willing to cultivate the Muslim Brotherhood as an ally against the pan-Arab nationalists, they were wary of Brothers who overtly questioned the political

² On Qutb's condemnation of "corrupt" Muslim orders, see Shepard. The ideas of Qutb's radical followers are reflected in Jansen.

status quo within the country (al-Zaydi). Feeling the pressure, Azzam relocated to Saudi Arabia in 1980 where he accepted employment at King ‘Abd al-Aziz University in Jedda.

[19] Azzam was not the only Muslim Brother who moved to the Saudi Kingdom. Beginning in the 1950s, Saudi Arabia beckoned as a destination of exile for a host of mainstream Muslim Brothers in the Arab World who had run afoul of their governments. These included Muhammad Qutb, younger brother of Sayyid, who took up employment at Mecca’s Umm al-Qura University after his release from an Egyptian jail in 1972, and the influential Syrian Muslim Brother Muhammad Surur (b. 1938) who assumed a teaching post at Burayda (Kepel: 173-78). Politically and religiously conservative, the House of Saud sought to use the Islamist exiles to counter Arab socialism and, after 1979, the spread of the Shi’a-oriented Iranian Revolution. Azzam rubbed shoulders with many of the exiled Muslim Brothers and discussed with them the plight of Muslims around the world, including in his home country of Palestine. It was possibly through Muslim Brother-connections that he landed his job at the university.

[20] Saudi Arabia was the birthplace of Wahhabism (referred to by its adherents as “Salafism,” named after the “Salaf” – the revered Companions of the Prophet and the two generations of pious Muslims who followed them). Wahhabism is a puritanical, revivalist version of Islam that ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud, the founder of the Saudi state, spread forcibly throughout the Arabian Peninsula in the 1910s and 1920s. Against the historically-ingrained tendency of religious tolerance and accommodation found among the majority of Muslims, the Wahhabis drew a sharp line of distinction between those who upheld what they considered to be the true and authentic teachings of the Qur’an and “iniquitous” others, including Shi‘as, Sufis, and “infidel” Christians and Jews. As the Saudi state consolidated, its ruling house abandoned the movement’s penchant for territorial conquest in favor of more peaceful means of propagation, but its exclusivist religious tendencies remained intact (on Wahhabism, see Delong-Bas).

[21] Although Azzam he appreciated the conservative, literalist approach of Saudi Islam, he believed it had lost its penchant for jihad. Therefore, during his time in Saudi Arabia, Azzam joined with other Saudi-based Muslim Brothers in propagating Egyptian-style Islamism among elements of the Saudi population. The result was the seeds of a hybrid ideology that would mingle the political activism of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb with the strict Sharia-mindedness of the Wahhabi discourse (Roy: 66-67). This ideology, premised on the confrontation of absolute good threatened by its absolute opposite, would soon energize the most significant jihad movement of modern times.

Organizing Jihad

[22] Throughout history the great hajj at Mecca has been the occasion of fortuitous meetings of Muslim scholars and activists from around the world. And so it was for Abdullah Azzam. According to sources, in 1980 he met an Egyptian Muslim Brother named Kamal al-Sanairi at the hajj who told him of the ravages inflicted on Afghanistan by the Soviet Red Army (al-Zawahiri). The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 in order to prop up a faltering regime of indigenous communists in Kabul. But rather than achieve a quick victory, the Soviets were soon challenged by mounting Muslim opposition organized under various Mujahidin commanders. Al-Sanairi had been one of the first Arabs to assist the Afghans.

Moved by what he had heard, and inspired by al-Sanairi's stories of the heroism of the Afghan people, Azzam made his way to Pakistan. As the external base for the Afghan resistance, Pakistan played the same role, roughly, as Cambodia in the Indochina war in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

[23] The particulars of this tale of encounter may well be apocryphal. Yet, true or not, it reflects Azzam's deeply felt solidarity with fellow Muslims. Stymied in Palestine by Israeli military strength and the PLO's stranglehold on the Palestinian resistance, Azzam saw the Afghanistan war as an opportunity for Islamists to make a difference in the lives of a beleaguered Muslim population. From the outset, he believed that the war was winnable. He knew that in Afghanistan there was a large pool of native fighters. Moreover, the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan was ideal for guerilla warfare (Azzam 1987a: chap. 2; similar comments about Afghanistan were made by al-Zawahiri). And Azzam was certain that the resistance fighters could count on financial and military assistance from the Islamist networks in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

[24] As it turned out, an appreciable degree of support materialized in the form of money and arms from the CIA and the Saudi Intelligence Department, which those organizations channeled to the Afghan resistance through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). All three countries – the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan – shared the common goals of containing communism in South Asia and strengthening Sunni Islam against the revolutionary Shi'ism spilling out of Iran. In aiding and abetting the Sunni-Muslim jihad in Afghanistan, the U.S. and its allies saw that they could accomplish these ends at one stroke. Azzam held no love for the “infidel” United States whose support for the State of Israel and secular Muslim regimes he decried. Yet, he was a pragmatist who understood the value of American support in liberating Afghanistan from communist rule. Any doubt he may have had in this regard was soothed by judgments springing from the four major schools of Islamic law, which permitted collaboration with *mushrikun* (“polytheists”) in cases in which Islam had the upper hand or where Muslims were treated by their non-Muslim allies with respect (Azzam 1987a: chap. 4).

[25] Azzam's opportunity directly to participate in the jihad came when he accepted a teaching post at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, arriving in November 1981. From Islamabad, Azzam traveled regularly to Peshawar and even Afghanistan to be close to the action. He met the various Mujahidin commanders and wrote pamphlets and gave speeches in support of their military efforts. Azzam had special regard for the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Mas'ud, who he deemed “the most brilliant commander in Afghanistan” (Azzam 1987b: part 1). In 1984, he quit his position at the university and established the Maktab al-Khadamat (the Services Office) to provide lodging and logistical support for the foreign volunteers who were beginning to stream into Pakistan to aid the Afghan Mujahidin in their jihad.

[26] Joining him in this enterprise was Osama bin Laden, the son of a wealthy Saudi building contractor who was moved by the plight of the Afghan people. Earlier, bin Laden had coordinated the transit of would-be Saudi fighters from his home in Jedda. Now, relocated in Pakistan, he diverted significant portions of his personal fortune to the Maktab. In 1984, bin Laden increased his support to the war effort by providing monthly stipends to Arab

volunteers participating in the struggle. Over this period, bin Laden deferred to the older and wiser Azzam. Azzam inspired in Bin Laden the firm belief that jihad, and only jihad, could unify Muslims and reverse the tide of Muslim misfortune in the world.

[27] Many of the foreign volunteers, who were known to one another as “Afghans,” were members of established Islamist opposition groups from around the Middle East and South and South East Asia. Overwhelmingly, they were Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria, although Muslims from other countries were also present. More than 300 Indonesians – and possibly as many as 600 – went through Azzam’s Maktab al-Khidamat (International Crisis Group). The volunteers included, in addition to bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had just completed a prison term earned for his incidental role in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, the Algerian Sa’id Makhlufi, destined to be one of the founders of the Islamist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), and the Indonesian Abdullah Sungkar, who went on to found the radical Jemaah Islamiyya. Blocked in their home countries by police action, these Islamist soldiers considered Afghanistan an appropriate and inviting location to engage the principle of jihad.

[28] Azzam directed many of the volunteers to the Salaman al-Farasi military training camp of Abd-i Rab Rasul Sayyaf, chairman of the Pushtun-dominated guerilla coalition called the “Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahidin.” In contrast to the traditional, Sufi-inspired forms of Islam upheld by most Afghan commanders, Sayyaf was a devout, Arabic-speaking Wahhabi. Azzam pointed other volunteers to the Hizb-i Islami, headed by the Afghan commander Gulbidin Hikmatyar, which took much of its inspiration from Sayyid Qutb, but was also one of the chief beneficiaries of Saudi money and doctrine.

[29] Out of this melting-pot of ethnicities and creeds emerged a new kind of Islamism that was different in many respects from the established discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike the Brotherhood, whose activities focused on the establishment of Islam in distinct modern states such as Egypt and Jordan, the volunteers and many Afghans tended to define their Islam in strictly Salafi terms. In so doing, they reified Islam as an abstract faith and moral code distinct from national or cultural identities, traditions, and histories. In taking up the gun, the jihadis had in their sight nothing less than the salvation of the *umma* broadly conceived.

[30] The mix of Puritanism and jihad was potent. For the fighters in Afghanistan, the war was a source of heroism, solidarity, and total devotion to Islam defined in terms of the Shari’a. It was an enabling experience that allowed men to live bare, authentic lives stripped of all that was superfluous. Living roughly in a land of snowcapped mountains and barren plains, among people minimally affected by western materialism, the foreign volunteers saw themselves as protagonists in a grand metaphysical struggle between good and evil. Like the Europeans and Americans who joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, they fought for a lofty ideal, not for worldly gain. Indeed, many volunteers arrived in Pakistan anticipating that they would lay down their lives for the sake of Islam in the world.

[31] Although caught up in the immediacy of the conflict, Azzam looked ahead to the period of liberation. He was aware that the struggle against the Red Army was a school in which he and his fellow fighters might learn techniques and strategies useful to the recovery of other countries lost to Islam. The list of such countries was long and included, in addition to

Afghanistan, Palestine, Kashmir, the Southern Philippines, and even Spain – the fabled al-Andalus. In Azzam’s vision, the foreign fighters comprised the vanguard of an army of Muslim liberation. He called this elite force “al-Qa’ida al-Sulbah” – literally, “the solid base” (1998). It was this organization, created in the crucible of the Afghan war, that bin Laden would inherit and turn to other purposes in the 1990s.

[32] But Azzam’s greatest accomplishment lay not in recruiting hardened Islamists (they needed little convincing), but in publicizing the jihad among ordinary Muslims. Many of these lived unfulfilled lives in the ethnic ghettos of Europe and the slums of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, or endured underemployment and social marginalization in the oil-wealthy Gulf States. Others were ambitious, educated young men who nonetheless felt keenly the humiliation visited upon Muslims in modern times. Many were simply open to the idea of adventure.

[33] In the mid to late-1980s, Azzam and his Palestinian colleague Tamim al-Adnani (who Azzam called “the Lofty Mountain” on account of his enormous size) preached the jihad in a number of North American cities. According to Benjamin and Simon, “Among other stops he visited a convention in 1989 sponsored by the Muslim Arab Youth Association and the Islamic Association for Palestine in Oklahoma, where he issued vehement calls to support the jihad” (99). Azzam was point man at Brooklyn’s al-Kifah Afghan Refugee Center, an important base of recruitment for the war, where he enjoined Muslims to “join the caravan” (Cooley: 69). Azzam’s spell-binding exhortations to would-be jihadis were captured on videotape and distributed around the world. “Oh brothers,” he proclaimed during a fund raising trip to the United States, “after Afghanistan, nothing in the world is impossible for us. There are no superpowers of mini-powers – what matters, is the will power that springs from our religious belief” (quoted in Kohlman: 15-16). Azzam was a charismatic figure with an inborn ability to convince. During his harangues, he cast a spell on his listeners. “Nobody had the nerve to show hostility toward him or to dispute his words because he had powerful reasoning,” his son Hudhayfa recalled in a 2005 interview (*Asbarq al-Awsat*).

[34] Estimates vary as to the number of Muslims from around the world who answered the call to jihad. According to Lawrence Wright, some estimates have it “that as many as fifty thousand Arabs passed through Afghanistan during the war against the Soviets. However, Abdullah Anas, an Algerian mujahid who married one of Abdullah Azzam’s daughters, says that there were never more than three thousand Arabs in Afghanistan” (Wright: 73). Although relatively few of the volunteers managed to cross the Kyber Pass into Afghanistan, and fewer still saw military action, all shared Azzam’s vision of Islamic resurrection.

[35] Abdullah Azzam understood that in drawing the volunteers to the war he was tapping into something deep, profound, and basic to the experience of Muslims in modern times. Since the middle decades of the nineteenth century, if not before, Muslims the world over had been beset with a fundamental malaise, the “sense,” in the words of the Canadian scholar of Islam Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “that something has gone wrong with Islamic history” (41). Viewing the condition of contemporary Muslims from the vantage point of the battlefield, Azzam followed the lead of earlier generations of Muslim reformers and activists in drawing upon a myth of Islam’s rebirth as a vital force in world affairs. We use the term “myth” not in the common meaning of an unfounded and false notion, but in the sense

developed by Georges Sorel, as a body of beliefs that express the fundamental, largely unconscious or assumed cultural and political values of a society, in short, as a dramatic expression of ideology. The details narrated in a myth of this sort may be true or false. Most often they meld truth and fiction in ways that are difficult to distinguish. What is important, however, is that the narrative elements of the myth are perceived and embraced as true; to be effective myth must engage not reason, but belief and faith. It must tap into the deep realm of feeling and articulate the “epic state of mind” without which heroism and sacrifice would be impossible (see Calvert).

[36] Abdullah Azzam appears to have recognized, if only intuitively, this function of myth. In drawing upon images and symbols derived from the Islamic heritage, he facilitated the setting of community boundaries and provided the necessary justification for acts of violence. In common with Muslim revivalists from other times and places, Azzam proclaimed the restoration of Islam as the necessary panacea to the conditions of internal cultural and political decline in Muslim lands.

Theorizing Jihad

[37] Abdullah Azzam channeled his “motivations of the heart” through the juridical sources of the *turath*, the revered “heritage” of Islamic learning. Having established a base of operations in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province, he set about to establish firm doctrinal foundations for the anti-Soviet struggle already in progress. Correct doctrine, he reasoned, was important in imposing appropriate behavior and understanding on the eager but undereducated volunteers who thronged the streets of Peshawar and Islamabad. Hudhayfa remembered that his father was concerned lest these armed men misdirect their zeal. Abdullah Azzam said of these men, “They lacked wisdom, did not know how to control their weapons or even where to direct their weapons.” In his view, zeal alone was not sufficient to attain Islam’s rebirth (*Asbarq al-Awsat*). Zeal had to be tempered, disciplined, and purified in accordance with Qur’anic principles. Only then could it succeed in reaching its desired goal, the liberation of Muslim lands.

[38] As someone with formal training in the religious sciences, Azzam knew that the injunction to jihad is based on divergent and even contradictory texts in the Qur’an. While some verses caution Muslims against confronting enemies, and others allow fighting disbelievers only in defense, a select few verses appear to sanction jihad in all circumstances. This is true, for example, of sura 9:29, one of four so-called “sword verses,” which enjoins Muslims to “Fight those who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid that which Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection” (Maulana Muhammad Ali, translator). The medieval exegetes regarded these divergent texts as corresponding to the “occasions of revelation” (*asbab al-nuzul*), in other words, to the changing circumstances of the Prophet Muhammad’s career. According to this understanding, the divine revelations encouraged Muslims to avoid physical conflict during the Meccan stage when they were weak, but expanded the conditions under which war could be waged once the Muslims attained a position of strength at Medina. Further, and important for our purposes, the scholars held that the chronologically later sword verses abrogated all earlier verses concerning relations with non-Muslims,

including those that speak of jihad's primarily defensive role (on the concept and practice of abrogation in Qur'an studies, see Firestone: 47-65). The classical doctrine grew out of this aggressive understanding of jihad and served to justify conflict with idolaters and non-Muslim scripturaries. Throughout the early and later medieval periods, scholars such as 'Abd al-Rahman al-Awza'i (d. 774), 'Abdullah Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797), Muhammad al-Shaybani (d. 804), and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) constructed a raft of rules and advice that regulated combat against disbelievers, including stipulations regarding the equitable division of spoils, the fate of prisoners, and the harming of women, children, and old people (normally prohibited) (see Cook: 5-31, 49-72).

[39] Unlike bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, two activists who pick and choose from the inherited doctrine (see Devji), Azzam honored the integrity of the classical canon of jurisprudence. He regarded the jihadist literature of the medieval period as a template capable of sustaining and directing the struggle against Islam's enemies in the contemporary period. Like many other Islamists, he treated contemporary events as manifestations of conditions addressed in sacred scripture. In his view, all battles, including the one in progress in Afghanistan, were identical in terms of their objective, the implementation of God's rule over the earth, and in terms of their means, namely, jihad. In deferring to the hallowed literature of militancy, he followed earlier Islamists such as the Egyptians Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb and the South Asian Abu Ala al-Mawdudi (d.1979), in rescuing jihad from modernist and apologetic definitions that regarded it as primarily a spiritual struggle aimed at base desires and inclinations. Such definitions, Azzam believed, neutralized jihad as an effective force in the lives of Muslims. In fact, Azzam dismissed the prophetic hadith that was commonly cited to downplay the Lesser Jihad (combat) in relation to the Greater Jihad (jihad of the soul). He believed it had been fabricated. For Azzam, it was imperative that the classical doctrine of jihad be revived.

[40] Azzam spelled out his vision of jihad in two treatises, which he crafted as *fatawa* (juridical opinions): *Defense of the Muslim Lands* and *Join the Caravan*. Both appeared in the mid 1980s. Although written from an Islamist perspective, the appeal of these documents was, and remains, broad, providing legitimacy to the contention that the Afghan jihad was not, in essence, a radical venture but one that spoke to the concern of Muslims everywhere. *Defense of Muslim Lands* was introduced by Saudi Arabia's conservative chief cleric, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz and endorsed by an assortment of other scholars and Islamist laymen, including the Saudi cleric Salih Ibn Uthaymin and the Syrian Muslim Brother Sa'ïd Hawwa. All of these individuals regarded Azzam, the Azhari graduate, as someone sufficiently educated to issue a legitimate *fatwa*.

[41] Like other Islamist tractates, for example, Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, Abdullah Azzam begins both works by noting the contemporary malaise of Muslims and the need for jihad. "What then," he asks his readers, "do you think of the millions of Muslims who are being humiliated with dreadful persecution, and are living the lives of cattle?" Whereas the Salaf had fought vociferously on behalf of truth, recent generations of Muslims have, with few exceptions, neglected the practice of jihad. This was a point already made famous by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj's 1981 treatise *al-Farida al-Gha'iba* ("The Neglected Duty"), which provided doctrinal justification for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat (reproduced in Jansen). Azzam writes, "Because [jihad] is absent from the present

condition of Muslims, they have become ‘as rubbish of the flood waters’” (1987a: chap. 3). Azzam reminds his readers that, according to the consensus of the jurists, jihad is a *fard*, an “obligation” incumbent on all Muslims on the basis of scriptural evidence. It is necessary for Muslims in the same way as *Iman* (belief in God and His prophet), prayer, fasting, and the hajj. Like other *fara'id* (pl. of *fard*), the performance of jihad is rewarded by God and its omission punished. In abandoning the mandate to jihad, Muslims have opened themselves to failure and decline.

[42] According to Azzam, the obligation to jihad was of two kinds. Following the medieval jurists, he distinguished between jihad as *fard kifaya*, a collective obligation, and jihad as *fard 'ayn*, an individual duty. According to the jurists, jihad becomes a “collective duty” when carried out by a sufficient number of Muslims on behalf of the community at large. In the strictly legal sense, it is comparable to funeral prayers, the performance of which can be delegated (Juynboll). Azzam explains, “If sufficient amount of people respond [to jihad], the obligation falls from the rest” (1987a: chap. 3). Normally, says Azzam, jihad of this kind relates to offensive operations directed by Muslim leaders who expand the domain of Islam by means of professional armies or bands of volunteers, such as occurred during the Islamic conquests of the early medieval period. According to Azzam, Muslim leaders today should continue to press for Islam’s expansion. He explains that, by law, the Imam (“leader”) is duty bound “to assemble and send out an army unit into the land of war once or twice a year . . . and if he does not send an army he is in sin.”

[43] Jihad as *fard 'ayn*, on the other hand, is incumbent on all Muslims, not simply on representatives of the community as in the case of jihad as *fard kifaya*. Jihad becomes a *fard 'ayn* when Muslim territory is directly threatened or occupied by infidels. Due to the disastrous consequence of occupation, jihad trumps certain other individual duties, such as hajj. This kind of jihad requires the dutiful attention of the people whose land is occupied and of those near by. But “if they fail to repel the *kuffar* [infidels] due to a lack of resources or due to indolence,” then the duty “spreads to those behind,” and if they fail, to those beyond them until the enemy is finally repelled” (1987a: chap. 3; see 1987b: part 1). Quoting Ibn Taymiyya, Azzam explains that this is because “The Muslim lands are like one land” (1987a: chap. 3). Adopting a modern form of the holistic metaphor common to medieval Islamic writers, Azzam writes, “It is necessary that the whole body of the Islamic *umma* rally together to protect the organ which is exposed to the onslaught of the microbe” (1987b: part 2).

[44] In making these claims, Azzam drew solidly upon the scholarly consensus of the *asr al-tadwin* (the early medieval “age of writing,” during which the primary works of jurisprudence and theology were composed). This consensus likewise spoke of the conditions that set jihad as a *fard 'ayn*. In his works, Azzam quotes liberally from the four schools of jurisprudence: Hanbali scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathir, and Ibn Qadama; Shafi'is, such as al-Ramli; Malaki jurists like al-Qurtubi and Ibn al-Qasim; and Hanifis, such as Ibn Abidin. Azzam’s scholarly predisposition is clearly conservative and inclusive of the general body of received doctrine.

[45] Azzam’s willingness to accept the teachings of the four schools of law put him at odds with many of the Salafi/Wahhabi volunteers who joined the ranks of the jihad. Mainly from

Saudi Arabia, these men tended not to recognize the validity of the schools, choosing instead to defer without mediation to the “pure” sources of the faith, which in practice meant following the normative example of the first three generations of Muslims. In their strict adherence to scriptural fundamentals, many Salafis decried the Hanafi Islam practiced by most Afghans as indicative of *taqlid*, the “imitation” of scholarly authorities, and thus removed from the unencumbered understanding of the faith held by the pious ancestors. Over and above doctrinal considerations, they were critical of Afghan cultural practices, for example, the use of chewing tobacco (*niswar*) and the habit of *ziyara*, or tomb visitation. They asked: How could “proper” Muslims cooperate with Hanafi backsliders? (1987a: chap. 4).

[46] Azzam shared many of the Salafis’ reservations regarding traditional Islam in Afghanistan. He wrote that it was not difficult to find “an entire regiment in which not a single person among them is proficient in the recitation of the Qur’an” (1987b: part 1). But he cautioned against prejudice. For one thing, years of war had eroded Afghanistan’s religious landscape. But more importantly, excessive Arab criticism of the Afghans threatened to derail the jihad. “We must choose,” he told his Salafi followers, “from two evils. Either Russia takes Afghanistan, turns it into a Kaffir [unbelieving] country and forbids the Qur’an and Islam, or we undertake jihad in a nation with sins and errors” (1987a: chap. 4). In the meantime, he said, educated Arab volunteers bore a responsibility to educate the Afghan mainstream in the precepts of “true” Islam.

[47] Ideally, for Azzam, a Muslim warrior should be both strong and learned. “The life of the *umma*,” he wrote, “is connected to the ink of the scholars and the blood of the martyrs. What is more beautiful than to write the history of the *umma* with both the ink of the scholar and his blood . . . The extent to which the number of martyred scholars increases, is the extent to which nations are delivered from their slumber, rescued from their decline and awoken from their sleep” (2001).

[48] Azzam believed that the Muslim world was in a condition of emergency that required the immediate activation of jihad as an individual duty (*fard ‘ayn*). In the *Defense of Muslim Lands*, he called attention to a host of territories lost to Islam in the course of the West’s colonial assault, including, among other countries, Afghanistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Kashmir, Chad, and Eritrea. He wrote: “The sin upon this present generation” for not advancing on these territories is greater than the sin inherited from the loss of the lands that have previously fallen into the hands of the *kuffar* (1987a: chap. 4). Azzam regarded his beloved homeland Palestine as the “foremost Islamic problem,” and he encouraged Palestinian Muslims to focus their attention on Palestine (1987a: chap. 4). As for other Muslims, they should devote their energies to the liberation of Afghanistan. Unlike Palestine, whose politics and guerilla organizations had come under the control of secular leaders, the mainstream Afghan resistance had a distinct Islamic flavor from the start. Furthermore, the Mujahidin commanders were a vehicle on which the Islamist movement could ride and make an immediate contribution to the defense of Islam. Once Afghanistan was liberated, Muslim warriors could then focus their attention on the liberation of Palestine and other occupied Muslim lands.

[49] Azzam did not, however, ignore the issue of Palestine altogether. During the last stages of war in Afghanistan he actively supported the foundation of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance

Movement, which came into existence in 1987-88 at the outset of the first Palestinian uprising (*Intifadha*). According to one report, “during his trips to the United States he met with activists of the IAP (The Islamic Association for Palestine), a cover name which collected funds for Hamas and disseminated its doctrines” (Center for Special Studies). In acknowledgment of Azzam’s support, Hamas glorified the shaykh as one of four leading martyrs of the Islamist cause in Palestine, the others being Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, Hasan al-Banna, and Izz al-Din al-Qasim.

[50] Azzam knew that there were many in the Muslim world – fathers, mothers, teachers – who were against sending their young men to war in far away Afghanistan. In his *fatwa*, he reminded such people that the medieval jurists had considered jihad, when it was *fard ‘ayn*, as taking precedence over obedience to parents and shaykhs. Azzam concurred with this judgment. Aspiring fighters, he noted, were to be released from the sanction of elders and community authorities. In explaining this judgment, Azzam gave the example of a group of people walking along the sea shore, and among them are a number 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?

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?”

Saving the drowning child is *fard* on all swimmers who witness him (1987a: chap. 3).

[51] Azzam was equally adamant that women were obliged to participate in jihad when it was *fard ‘ayn*. In answering the call, the woman did “not need her husband’s, father’s, or wali’s (guardian’s) permission.” In support of this contention, he cited Qur’an 9:71 “And the Believers, men and women, are friends one of another. They enjoin good and forbid evil,” and drew upon the *fiqh* literature, which explained the “many ways a woman can participate in jihad,” both on the battle field and off: She can participate in the actual fighting, she can provide food, water, and medical support to warriors in the field, and she can take up guard duties. Azzam provides examples of women, in both past and present ages, who engaged in each of these activities, ranging from Safiyya bint Abd al-Muttalib, who carried a spear in to the battle of Uhud at the time of the Prophet, to Hawa’ Barayev, who martyred herself in Chechnya, killing twenty-seven Russian soldiers. But, says Azzam, the greatest contribution women can make to the jihad is to “raise their children to be brave and loving, courageous and sensitive, and fearing none other than Allah,” for children of such strong character grow up to be mujahidin (n.d., “What Role Can Sisters Play in Jihad?”).

[52] Throughout his writings, Azzam’s aim was nothing less that to mobilize a transnational Muslim nation under arms. “If only the Muslims had fought in Palestine,” he quips, “Palestine would not have been lost” (1987a: chap. 4).

“The Blood of the Martyr Smells of Musk”

[53] Azzam’s call to battle was based on the hope that warfare would revolutionize Muslim society and turn it away from failure and impotence. He viewed the forceful liberation of the *irredenta* as not only necessary, but as a cleansing force reflective of the authentic and moral motives of the Muslim warrior. “Glory,” Azzam wrote, “does not build its lofty edifice except with skulls” (2001).

[54] For Azzam, jihad was an act of pure devotion. In his view, it was of little concern whether an individual act of jihad scored a success against the enemy. What was important was that the devotional effort be made. Just as it was meritorious for a scholar to strive for knowledge regardless of outcome, so too was it important that the warrior engage the enemy for the sake of God. If victory did come to the Muslim fighter, it was not the consequence of anything he did, but rather was God’s gift to a deserving servant. Ideally, says Azzam, the goal of the mujahid is martyrdom.

[55] Azzam’s notion of martyrdom, like his understanding of jihad, is well rooted in the Islamic tradition. The Qur’an refers in a number of places (2:154, 3:157, 169, 4:74, 9:111, 67:4-6) to the rewards granted *shuhada’ al-mar’aka* (“battlefield martyrs”). Whereas the Qur’an suffices with generalities and encouragements, the collections of hadith provide detailed descriptions of the blessings that await the martyr: “All [the martyr’s] sins will be forgiven; he will be protected from the torments of the grave; a crown of glory will be placed on his head; he will be married to seventy-two houris and his intercession will be accepted for up to seventy of his relations.” Some hadith relate how “the spirits of martyrs will ascend directly to paradise, there to reside in the claws of green birds near God’s throne” (Kohlberg: 2004).

[56] In his articles, Azzam cites these and other traditions. He was keen to convince would-be jihadis that God’s favor was present on the battlefields of Afghanistan. In one pamphlet called “The Signs of al-Rahman in the Afghan Jihad,” he enumerates the many miracles that accompanied the jihad against the Soviets, including the purity of the martyrs’ bodies, which smelled of musk; instances of divine and angelic aid on the battlefield, and prognostications of victory. Azzam relates the testimony of a mujahid named Mawlana Arslan: “At times, even before the arrival of the attacking Russian aircraft, we were apprised of the imminent attack. Birds would come and hover above our troops before the jets arrived. Whenever we would see them hovering, we would prepare for the attack of the jets.” According to Abd al-Jabbar, “While I was looking on, a tank rolled over a mujahid named Ghulam Muhayyuddin, and he remained alive.” In good classical, juridical fashion, Azzam substantiates these and other stories by referring to their chains of transmitters or else as instances of *tawatur*, accounts of such number as to render fabrication impossible (n.d.).

[57] Such stories, in Azzam’s view, reinforced the sacredness of the undertaking at hand. Rather than function as components of a battle narrative, they stand alone as tales of exemplary devotion. In relating these tales of jihad, Azzam holds fast to the traditional Islamic understanding of history as the record of individual pious lives. Indeed, his martyrologies and miracle tales resemble nothing so much as the inspirational stories of Sufis and saints handed down from the medieval period. In reviving elements of the traditions of

jihad and martyrdom, Azzam was able to reconcile the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage to the needs of the present moment.

[58] In 1989, Azzam and his two sons were killed in a car bomb explosion as they drove to the mosque in Peshawar. No solid evidence exists linking the assassination with any particular group, although the Pakistani and Saudi intelligence services and a number of mujahidin factions were all held in suspicion. But there is another suspect, Ayman al-Zawahiri. It is notable that soon after Azzam's death, the Egyptian al-Zawahiri was able to exert his influence over Azzam's erstwhile disciple, bin Laden, and change the direction of the jihad. No longer would the jihadi volunteers focus their energies on liberating the "lost lands" of Islam. Following al-Zawahiri, they would aim their guns at "corrupt" Muslim regimes and, more famously, at the "Far Enemy" – the United States (this shift in strategy is laid out in Gerges).

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