

Combating Terrorism Center
Guest Commentary

**The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's
Books**

**Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim
Land through Jihad**



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Introduction

Sheikh Abdullah Azzam is a name that only gets attention among true students of Islamist militancy, yet he has had a tremendous impact on Usama Bin Laden and left him with the tools needed to establish a global jihadist network. Azzam was born in Jenin, Palestine in 1941, and was evicted from his hometown of Jenin in the 1967 Six-Day War. He spent years pursuing his studies in Islamic jurisprudence attending university in Syria and graduating with a doctorate in Islamic studies from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. He was nicknamed the fighting cleric for his obsession with jihadist ideology and the militant works of ibn Taymiyyah (1258 AD). Azzam believed the only way to reclaim his lost homeland was through violent jihad which later became his obsession.

On or about 1980, Azzam realized that the Arab jihadists fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan required organization, safe house, and structure. He established *Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen* (The Services Offices for Arab Jihadists) which attracted Usama Bin Laden, then graduating from King Abdul-Aziz University to join his new venture. Azzam convinced Bin Laden that his financial connections, business experience, and dedication would be of great use to his new organization in Pakistan. Bin Laden found a calling in Azzam's rudimentary network that enabled him to bring organizational discipline to Azzam's project, along with massive infusions of cash. It is from Azzam's office that Bin Laden would venture on his own in establishing *Bait al-Ansar* (House of Allies) and creating the military training camps necessary to train an exclusive Arab fighting force. The role Bin Laden played in the Afghan war against the Soviets (1979-1988) is well-documented in several biographies. Yet Azzam remains an afterthought in a post-9/11 world. It was Azzam who:

- Discovered Usama Bin Laden, while teaching an elective in Jeddah.
- Created a theoretical concept of what Azzam would call *Al-Qaeda al-Sulba* (Firm Base) of support and services from which global jihad could be waged from Afghanistan.
- Encouraged Sunni Islamist militant groups to learn from Hizballah (a Shiite terror group) and set up networks for fund raising, recruitment, gun practice, and conventions in the United States far from the efficiency of Arab security services.

Azzam would die in a massive car bomb in 1989, as he and his two sons were making their way to Peshawar mosque for Friday (Sabbath) Prayers. His

assassination remains a mystery, and speculation abounds from Mossad to Usama Bin Laden himself killing the old cleric to gain strategic control of the Arab-Afghan movement.

Azzam's central concept will be the subject of this review essay, which are his militant jihadist *fatwas* (religious edicts), created from the perspective of the Soviet-Afghan War as interpreted by Islamist radicals. Azzam's alteration of jihad as a collective obligation incumbent upon all Muslims, forms the basic construct for all his strategic, operational, and tactical ideas on global jihad. There is no question that his books are among the volumes Usama Bin Laden has in his library. American military planners and Coalition partners must take time to assess Azzam's books in military colleges as a means of understanding the strategic thinking of Al-Qaeda and their affiliates. He is considered the Clausewitzian theorist of Islamist militancy, who combines a lethal understanding and destructive interpretation of Islamic law and history, with destructive interpretations of the French, and Russian Revolutions. It is incumbent that these obscure Arabic titles written by militant clerics like Azzam be translated and analyzed with the same determination as Russian documents and books on strategy and military affairs were during the Cold War. This review essay will focus on five of his ten major volumes to give American military readers a basic introduction to Usama Bin Laden's earliest strategic and spiritual mentor.

The subject of this review essay will be Azzam's book *Al-Defaa aan Ardhee al-Muslimeen aham furood al-ayaan* (Defending Muslim Lands is Among the Most Important Collective Obligations) published in 1985 and undergoing its second printing in 1987 (Amman, Jordan: *Maktaba Risala al-Haditha* Publishers, 1987). The book is 133 pages, of which 79 pages is Azzam's *fatwa* (religious edict) for collective jihad. It is considered his masterpiece and unlike Bin Laden who issues edicts that are of dubious quality, Azzam using his clerical connections took the time to get this *fatwa* endorsed by leading clerical names in Saudi Arabia and Egypt in a decade in which such *fatwas* were tolerated as they were viewed as anti-communist.

Azzam Lobbies the Sunni Clerical Establishment for an Endorsement of his *Fatwa*

Azzam opens the book by telling readers that this *fatwa* was part of a larger writ he authored and put before the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the late Abdul-Aziz Bin Baz, considered the highest clerical authority at the time of the

Soviet war in Afghanistan. The Saudi Grand Mufti, Bin Baz, endorsed Azzam's *fatwa* of jihad against the Soviets as correct, thereby creating a corpus of literature that made it religiously sanctioned to respond to assaults on Muslim lands like Palestine and Afghanistan as *fard ayn*, meaning a compulsory duty incumbent upon all Muslims until these lands are liberated. This militant and radicalist interpretation of 20th century global events and the remedy of violent jihad to address these challenges would be the hallmark of Azzam. The Palestinian cleric was savvy in urging Bin Baz to write the preface to his *fatwa*, something the late senior Saudi cleric never got around to, but Sheikh Bin Baz public endorsement of Azzam's theories to incite jihad in Afghanistan among Arab youth would lead to Azzam's theoretical principles on jihad and the collective obligation he proposed to be preached at the Bin Laden Mosque in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and the Central Mosque in the Saudi capitol of Riyadh. The ideological air within Muslim communities in the eighties would be charged with the proposition that jihad was no longer *fard kifaya* (an individual obligation) but now *fard ayn* (collective obligation) as Islam came under physical, cultural and media assault. Although the Azzam's *fatwa* would be crafted in the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it would have a corrosive impact upon Islam and energize the Islamist militant movement beyond the decade long Soviet-Afghan War.

As a cleric, Azzam could debate and get the support of prominent Saudi and Egyptian clerics, as he held a professorship at King Abdul-Aziz University teaching Islamist jurisprudence. Here he created a cabal of like minded clerics chiefly nine of them who endorsed Azzam's single-handed alteration of jihad from an duty performed by some to a compulsory duty. This included Abdullah Alwan, Saeed Hawi, Mohammaed al-Uthaimen (who died in 2001 and was among the top clerics in the Wahabi establishment with his own website), and Omar Saif. Reading Azzam's book reveals the methodology by which a *fatwa* (religious edict) is crafted and more importantly how it is politically endorsed through the Sunni clerical establishment. Azzam's *fatwa* making jihad a collective obligation incumbent upon all Muslims in the case of Afghanistan and Palestine was presented before the *Markaz Taweeah al Amaa* (The Center for Religious Awareness) during the 1983 Pilgrimage season in the Saudi town of Mina, on the outskirts of Mecca. Azzam understood if he received the endorsement of this group and key known clerics his *fatwa* could then be preached to the global clerical establishment through such mechanisms as the World Muslim League. Azzam opened his speech among an international clerical establishment who attended the conference hosted in the center for religious awareness while partaking of the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) by saying:

Azzam opens his radical remarks saying: *“The Salafs (early followers of Muhammad, purists) and the Khalafs (Caliphs) and the entire fuqaha (clergy) and commentators (on Islam) in every Islamic generation agree that if one inch of Muslim land is attacked, that Jihad becomes a compulsory duty incumbent upon every Muslim man and woman, therefore a son can leave for war without the permission of his father, and a the woman without the permission of her husband.”*

Azzam uses the politically charged invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets and the Palestinian question to alter centuries of commentary on Islamic warfare, that argued at length as to who should participate in combat and obsessed about just war, to propagate a singular radical view of jihad first espoused by Ibn Taymiyyah around 1258 AD. He ended his presentation by declaring, *“I bring this writ and declaration from the Commander of the Mujahideen (Abdul Rasul Sayyaf) and after living among the Afghans for three years, as the jihad in Afghanistan is in need of rijal (fighters). So who among you Ulama (clergy) objects, let them object now!”* On cue Azzam writes that a cleric then declared, *“Brother there is no objection in this matter!”* Azzam attended this conference as a known figure, a fighting cleric who had already established his program of bringing in young Arabs to fight the Soviets, among whom was Usama Bin Laden.

From this meeting Azzam wrote the subject of this review, his book, *Al-Defaa aan Ardh al-Muslimeen aham furood al-ayaan* (Defending Muslim Lands is Among the Most Important Collective Obligations). He then had the book endorsed by not only known Saudi clerics of the time but also:

- Sheikh Mutaee, Egypt’s Chief Interpreter of the *Sunna* (Muhammad’s life) and Validity of Islamic Rulings. He is also an authority on explaining the different *Madhabs* (four schools of Sunni Islamic Law).
- Shiekh Omar Saif, a member of Yemen’s Higher Ulama Council.

Azzam: The Apostle of Takfir and Jihad

Azzam views Prophet Muhammad from one lens, that of warrior, he does not write about him as a father, merchant, arbiter, city leader, youth, or husband. His books are concentrated with jihadic verses and sayings of the Prophet uttered during his struggle for the survival of Islam from the more powerful Meccan oligarchy. Azzam focuses on these verses and sayings, he quotes liberally from about a dozen chapters of the Quran, the Muslim divine book contains 114 chapters, because it in these few chapters the heaviest concentration of sword verses are found. He then uses these sword verses to argue that *“the*

use of the sword and the spear was to compel (humankind) towards the worship of God alone and is a form of dawwa (evangelism)." Azzam ignores Muhammad's life-saving relations with Christians, and the Prophet's interactions with the Jewish tribes of Khaybar and Medina. He also ignored the Quranic verse: *"let there be no compulsion (in matters) of religion."* His Palestinian experience betrays the obsession Azzam had with sword verses. His *fatwa* ends with Azzam declaring that whoever opposes him is among the disbelievers, he then delves into *Takfir* (declaring all Muslims and non-Muslims who stand in his way as apostates and deserving of death). It is a concept that has killed Muslim intellectualism and favors the Islamist militant. *Takfir* is a key ideological weapon among the tools of militant jihadists today that must be exposed and discredited as unacceptable in the 21st century information age.

Azzam then lays out a Manichean (a struggle of good and evil) argument, that advocates the concept that (religious) truth requires strength to protect it and that there are those willing to sacrifice themselves to fight people who spread dissent and evil in this world. Azzam's books make it clear the evil was the Soviet Union, Israel, and the United States. In Azzam's book he lays out jihad in a duality that of personal struggle and the ultimate sacrifice for God. The most important *fard* (obligation) and that which Azzam says is missing for Islamic greatness if jihad (not struggle but fighting in the cause of God), he writes and preaches that *"jihad has left the common consciousness of Muslims today,"* meaning that the remedy for Islamic decline is a return to fighting and dying for God. He then outlines the warfare aspect of jihad into two types:

- (1) When Muslims are a persecuted minority jihad becomes an *fard kifaya* (optional obligation), in which the Imam authorizes annual expeditions into *Dar el Harb* (the Abode of War), those lands considered not under Muslim dominance. This is a simplistic formula and Islamic history is replete with examples of the caliph, tribal chiefs and *ulama* (clergy) negotiating and consulting before a declaration of war. Muhammad Abdul-Wahab, the founder of Wahabism, although brought forth a militant strain of Sunni Islam, did write with concern about the use of Islam to satisfy the demands of tribal warfare versus what he considered warfare for the faith.
- (2) The issue of jihad as *fard ayn* (collective obligation) Azzam writes is if the infidel enters Islamic lands, if an infidel army is massing on an Islamic border, if the infidel takes Muslim prisoners and finally if the imam's warning to the infidel to leave Islamic lands goes unheeded. Then jihad does not require the permission of husband, debtor or father.

Azzam Attempts to Appeal to the Four Schools of Sunni Islam

Azzam then synthesizes the most radical elements of the four Sunni schools of Islamic law, leaving out any commentary, historical context, or dissenting views, to justify his interpretation of jihad. He finds the eleventh century text of ibn Najeem, who commented on a wide variety of subjects including the exploration of the validity of Prophetic sayings based on its transmission two centuries after Prophet Muhammad's death, to argue that when jihad becomes *Fard Ayn* (a collective obligation) then it becomes as obligatory as fasting or prayer. In the Maliki school of Sunni Islam, prevalent in North Africa it is understood that jihad to defend Islamic occupied lands can be undertaken by the slave, woman, and adolescent even if forbidden by their ward or master. Azzam is clever in revealing these few lines and not delving too much into historical context or analysis, for it ties together more and more Sunnis to his view and provides a justification that jihad will set you free, an appealing message in a society that has many without prospects and for youths desperate to establish themselves as individuals within their tribe, family, or community. Azzam then uses the analogy of a drowning person; swimmers do not take permission to rescue the drowning person? If a parent tells you not to pray or fast, and to break God's commandments, do you obey? Azzam simplifies Islamic law and history, he does not expose his listener to the intricacies of Islamic law or the hardships that await those who volunteer to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. He obscures time, place, and precedent to justify his single minded goal of redeeming Muslim glory through violence. For instance, he says that at the time of Prophet Muhammad there were no class distinctions for warriors, those with money like Omar and Uthman fought alongside those less privileged. Azzam does not consider the times in which these men lived, a pre-Islamic Arabian male learned how to wield a sword and other weapons before reaching maturity, because tribal society demanded this. In addition, the Meccan oligarchy had threatened Muhammad with annihilation in Medina.

Jihad in the Age of Air Travel and Other Militant Ideas

Azzam quotes copiously from ibn Taymiyyah and applies his own modernist interpretation. Such as ibn Taymiyyah's quote: "*if the enemy enters Islamic lands, the entire Islamic empire and nation are one in repelling the invader, they need no permission to travel to the fringe of the Islamic lands to conduct jihad.*" Azzam takes this and postulates that the information age and the age of air travel has compressed the concept of the fringe of Islamic lands, where in the past one

Islamic province in the Caucasus regions would be defended by those living there and neighboring nations; today air travel means the Muslims from Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria can respond. These words were preached as early as 1981 and written as early as 1983, foreshadowing the globalized information age that Usama Bin Laden would capitalize on for his own agenda and his organization al-Qaeda. Azzam's view of religion is not a compassionate one, but he writes that all religion was sent to preserve: Faith, person, honor, thought and property. The reader is left to ponder the methods of how to preserve those outlined items, but Azzam makes clear that violence is an integral and central part of the methods of preserving those things.

Azzam begins to delve into making intelligible and acceptable the murder of Muslims. Azzam writes that if Muslim's are held hostage by infidels, then war must be waged even at the expense of the lives of those Muslims held captive. He uses verse nine of the Quranic chapter Hujairat, that ordains if there be Muslim dissenters then they are to be killed if an accommodation cannot be reached. Azzam again does not discuss the fine details of this verse and the painstaking negotiations and truce making Prophet Muhammad underwent before sanctioning warfare.

"We must focus our efforts on Palestine and Afghanistan, because these are central issues in the Muslim world (of the 1980s)," writes Azzam. He urges those who cannot go to Palestine for jihad, to instead go to Afghanistan, and he discusses the strategic rationality for the centrality of Afghanistan over Palestine as the central front for the 1980s jihad by noting that the Afghan war against the Soviets still remains in the hands of the *mujahideen* whereas Palestine is in the hands of the superpowers. What this means, is that Azzam felt more freedom of operation and maneuver in Afghanistan than in Palestine. The Afghan border Azzam writes is *"3,000 kilometers of open borders, and it has no political nation-state control in large sections of the country."* In Palestine, Azzam points out, *"the borders are tightly controlled and security is omnipresent."*

Azzam argues that a myth has spread that the Afghans are in need of money and not manpower. He appeals that the reverse is true and the presence of Arabs among the Afghans boosts the fighting spirits of the *mujhaideen*, and that the presence of one Arab is better than a million dollars. He says that Afghanistan was designed by God himself with its terrain and mountains that are ideal for jihad against major powers. Azzam also shames Muslims by saying: *"The weight of the USSR and International Communism stands behind the (communist) Afghan government, while Muslims still discuss what to do!"*

Important Questions: A Key to Understanding Azzam's Insecurities

Azzam's sections on questions to be answered are revealing and demonstrate the insecurities and ideological holes that he wishes to plug in the jihadist rationale. These represent an opportunity to explore the weaknesses in Islamist militant rhetoric and begin to undermine this ideology. But to do this requires that the questions and answers be highlighted. The questions are without question asked by skeptical minds and Azzam responds as follows:

(1) **Can we apply these *fatwas* (ordaining collective jihad) today?** Azzam answers by stating emphatically that jihad today is a compulsory duty like fasting and prayer. He even states that *jihad bil nafs* (personal jihad or taking matters in your own hands) is superseded by fasting and prayer. This is Azzam's personal reading of Islamic law and there are clerics who would argue that taking matters in your own hands without consultation would lead to chaos. In addition, a few clerics would argue that as long as Muslims who live in non-Muslim lands are free to practice their faith, then these lands are not in a state of *dar al-harb* (abode of war) but *dar al-ahd* (abode of truce). Of course Azzam only meant the Soviet-Afghan War and the Palestinian conflicts; it was Bin Laden and Zawahiri who would widen the conflict to include the United States and the world at large. He then uses the Islamic legalistic rules of prayer to argue that jihad supersedes prayer, because the five prayers are abbreviated in times of war or when one travels, even a warrior breaks their fast in Ramadan while on campaign. Therefore because these two pillars of Islam (Prayers and Fasting) are amended during times of war and travel (ie. Praying on horseback or combining the five prayers at certain times), then war itself is of a holier nature than prayers and fasting. The key to this argument is for Azzam to convince the Islamic world that it in a crisis only collective jihad is the remedy. He then takes this rationale a step further by saying one does not need the permission of parents to undertake jihad. He dismisses the concept of taking the permission of the state, by rationalizing that Islam today is restricted and overburdened by *qawmia* (tribalism and nationalism), geographic boundaries add further restrictions as well as international treaties like the Sykes-Picot Agreement (The 1916 agreement between France, England, Italy, and Russia to divide the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East into spheres of influence, it was leaked by Communist leader Lenin to embarrass the Western powers).

(2) **Can we conduct jihad without a unifying *emir* (Muslim leader)?** He answers, yes and argues that the Crusades and Mongols were fought under the

banner of many Muslim emirs. No single *emir* directed and sustained these long wars. In addition, none of the *ulama* (clergy) abrogated or cancelled jihad due to political circumstances of not having a single unifying *emir*. He ends by saying that if an *emir*, *imam* (cleric) or even commander of the faithful (reference to the caliph) falls in battle this does not excuse the obligation of jihad.

(3) **Should we fight for fractional Afghan warlords?** Azzam replies yes, Muslims should fight despite divisions among Afghan warlords, as the central objective is the preservation of Islamic land, and each warlord is considered an *emir*.

(4) **Should we fight alone when the rest of the Muslims are apathetic?** Jihad is incumbent upon those attacked and then upon Muslims bordering the Islamic region under assault, extending in concentric circles. He reemphasizes that the air and information age had changed the perception of time and distance, making jihad an obligation upon all Muslims who are able.

(5) **Should Muslims fight with other Muslims of questionable morals?** Which is the greater evil? Azzam asks rhetorically, Soviets who suppress the Quran and occupy Islamic lands or a *qawm* (Muslim people) who engage in personal sin? As long as they profess the Islamic creed, they are allies. He then makes an interesting observation saying that if Muslims had banded together over Palestine, there would be no need for George Habbash, the Christian head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Naif Hawatmeh, head of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DLFP), both are Marxist radical Palestinian groups.

(6) **Should Muslims consult with infidels?** Azzam is pragmatic in his answer saying that aid from the United States was used to pursue the war in Afghanistan, and help from the Soviets was used to further Palestinian objectives. He argues that yes one can consult non-Muslims along as (A) Muslims are in a position of strength; (B) the treachery and intent of the non-Muslim is known; and finally (C) the needs of the Muslim and non-Muslim are known. Truces cannot be made that undermines the central concept of defending Muslim lands or giving up Muslim lands.

Conclusion

This particular book synthesizes Azzam's central tenet that jihad is a compulsory duty for all Muslims. If one accepts that Muslim society is under

siege and the blame for all its ills does not lie from within but can be blamed on the west, then one can manipulate Islamic texts, take them out of historical context, misquote and mix modernist reinterpretations of Islamic precedence to sanction Azzam's views. If indeed Azzam can establish that jihad is a compulsory duty for all Muslims, then he can take readers to the next step, which is equating jihad to prayer and fasting, even superseding jihad and placing it above the five pillars of Islam. This by no means is an accepted interpretation of Islamic law and must be countered, otherwise Azzam entices the youth to participate in jihad without the permission of parents, guardians, spouses, or even the state. His reinterpretation of jihad must be exposed as a product of Azzam's time which was a useful tool against the Soviets but one that has no place in today's world. His theories must be countered by arguing the rational and pragmatic decisions Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors took that involved negotiation, tolerating other faiths, and attempting to co-exist within the confines of seventh century Arabian tribal politics. This book also reveals the clever and political maneuvering Azzam undertook to get his *fatwa* endorsed by some of the most noted clerics of the time. Azzam used his own clerical connections to give his ideas a voice and to get it endorsed and thereby preached in local mosques in Saudi Arabia, Gaza, and Egypt of the 1980s. Finally, the book reveals the difference between Azzam and Bin Laden, where Azzam was pragmatic in limiting jihad to Afghanistan and Palestine, while Bin Laden globalized it. Where Azzam is pragmatic about acknowledging non-Muslim help in Afghanistan and Palestine, Bin Laden credits all success to God, his Arab-Afghans and his Afghan allies. However, Azzam's ideas on jihad as a compulsory duty, his use of key radical texts and Islamic commentaries by the likes of ibn Taymiyyah, all form a part of Usama Bin Laden's strategic views. Today's war will not be fought on the Clausewitzian model, it will only be fought by rationalizing the fantasy ideology of Islamist militancy and making it unappealing to a greater segment of the Muslim population by staying on message with key Islamic laws, histories and precedence that discredit Azzam, ibn Taymiyyah, Bin Laden and Zawahiri. For us to succeed we must immerse ourselves in the literature and the mind of the adversary, just as our forefathers immersed themselves in Russian books that described Soviet tactics, strategy and international communist ideology.

Editor's Note: LCDR Aboul-Enein is considered one of the most dynamic thinkers on Islamist militant ideology. He has had the privilege of advising at the highest levels of the Defense Department, serving the Office of the Secretary of Defense from 2002 to 2006. LCDR Aboul-Enein is currently a Defense Department Middle East Analyst. He wishes to thank the John T. Hughes

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