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ABDULLAH AZZAM: WOULD HE HAVE ENDORSED 9/11?

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According to Al Qaeda, attacking Westerners, such as in the case of September 11, is theologically permissible. However, a study shows this view being contradicted by primary sources that belong to Abdullah Azzam, the father of the Arab Afghans and founder of Mujahideen Service Bureau that metamorphosed into Al Qaeda after his death.

IN THE JIHADI world, the name Abdullah Azzam occupies a special place. A Palestinian born in 1941, he was revered by jihadist groups for his role during the Afghan war against the Soviet army and for his ideas on jihad. He acquired his Master's degree in Islamic jurisprudence from Damascus University before getting a PhD from the Muslim world's premier seat of learning, Al-Azhar University. He participated in armed resistance against Israeli forces before the Palestinian groups were eventually repressed by the Jordanian government in 1971. He then taught at Jordan University.

When his employment was terminated, he moved to King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. After the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, he joined the International Islamic University in Islamabad to familiarise himself with, and be close to, the event. Later on, he fully dedicated himself to the cause of jihad in Afghanistan by recruiting Muslim foreign fighters and collecting donations from all over the world. In 1989, he was assassinated with his two sons and a son of his friend in a bomb blast in Peshawar while on their way to Friday prayer.

Azzam's View

In a transcript of his lectures titled *Fi Zilal Surah Al-Taubah* (Under the Shades of At-Taubah), after the ninth chapter of the Quran which is the main reference point for jihadism, he asserted that it is not permissible to kill Christians in Afghanistan or, for that matter, in any Muslim country. When a person is granted a visa, he is deemed to have been accorded a security agreement. By entering a country with a visa, one would surely have assumed that his life and property are protected. He would not have come if he had known that he would be killed upon his arrival or during his stay in the country.

Azzam contended that a Muslim should not even touch a strand of hair on the guest's body unless he breaks the agreement by harming the interests of the nation. Even in such situations where the visitor could be killed, he should be first warned that if he stayed inside Afghanistan, he could eventually be sentenced to death. Thus, he should leave the country lest necessary action be taken against him. However, in the event that he is killed after entering the country with a visa, it is considered a breach of the agreement, which is a clear violation of the tenets of Islam.

Conversely, when a Muslim enters any non-Muslim country with a visa, he must not get involved in any act that goes against the country's regulations. He should not deceive, steal, or harm the interests of the country with which he has a pledge of security -- that is the visa. As for the People of the Book (the Jews and the Christians), Azzam held that they should not be fought against unless they attack the Muslims. Muslims, moreover, do not benefit from killing a Christian as it could provoke scores of fellow Muslims being killed in retaliation.

Azzam's connection with Al Qaeda

Based on documented interviews with Azzam's immediate family members, Osama bin Laden first met him in 1984 in Saudi Arabia at King Abdul Aziz University where he was lecturing. He was then actively and officially collecting donations for the cause of Afghanistan. Azzam then went to Afghanistan and Osama later joined him there. In unifying incoming international fighters of different orientations, Azzam established *Maktab Al-Khadamat* (Services Office) which was heavily financed by Osama, who also paid the salaries of its workers.

As far as jihad in Afghanistan is concerned, Osama was its economic powerhouse (besides providing international funding) and Azzam was its intellectual and spiritual master. The two however differed on critical issues before Osama was convinced by Dr Ayman al Zawahiri and company to eventually pull out from *Maktab Al-Khadamat* to establish Al Qaeda. Among the main issues of contention were that of *takfir* -- the practice of branding fellow Muslims with unbelief -- championed by the Egyptian *takfiri* groups in Afghanistan and the segregation of Afghan military camps and facilities. Osama preferred special camps for the Arab mujahideen while Azzam did not deem it necessary as the Arabs essentially came to Afghanistan to assist the community in Afghanistan against the Soviets.

Azzam and contemporary Muslim scholars

Azzam's view on delegitimising attacks on foreigners is consistent with those of contemporary Muslim scholars. A statement by the International Union of Muslim Scholars asserts that non-Muslims living in Muslim countries are residents who should enjoy equal rights and hold similar responsibilities as Muslims. Visas are a pledge of security in entering Muslim countries. They should not be violated through threats to the security of tourists. Therefore, as Sheikh Abdul Majeed Subh, a prominent Azhar scholar puts it, "non-Muslim civilians or foreigners in Muslim countries are given the right of protection of their life and property and hence any attack against their lives and properties is forbidden in Islam. This is known in Islamic jurisprudence as '*ahd al-aman* or the covenant of security and protection".

Conversely, when a Muslim enters a non-Muslim country, as the Saudi scholar Sheikh Munajjid says: "It is as if he is entering into a peaceful agreement with them -- which is the visa given to him to enable him to enter the country -- so if he takes their wealth unlawfully, then he is breaking that agreement, in addition to being a thief. If he betrays them and steals their wealth, it is not right as betrayal is *haram* (forbidden), and the Prophet is reported to have said, 'every betrayer will have a banner by his backside on the Day of Resurrection by which his betrayal is known'."

Sheikh Muhammad Hanooti of the North American Fiqh Council said: "What is *haram* is *haram* for everybody, wherever they are. Categorising certain areas to be *dar al-harb* (Land of War) or *dar al-*

Islam (Land of Islam) does not fit the realistic understanding of Islam, especially when you live in the Western countries.”

Between Respect and Rage

Azzam has been credited with the birth of Al Qaeda, the current security threat, by many researchers. However, these researchers also agreed there were differences between Azzam and Osama on operational and theological issues. Nevertheless, in-depth study of these differences is lacking. The above is one example that digs deep into Azzam’s ideological heritage that could provide critical insights in refuting Al Qaeda’s viral ideology.

Azzam’s worldview can serve as a separating line between his ideology of respect (in honouring agreements) and Al Qaeda’s rhetoric of rage (in disregarding covenants). Hence, Al Qaeda’s tactic in glorifying Azzam’s name in some of their statements is propagandistic at best, and hypocritical at worst. Azzam’s ideology, grounded on his background in Islamic jurisprudence, clearly runs counter to Al Qaeda’s hollow rhetoric.

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