# ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām and Palestine

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**Abstract**

*ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām (1941-1989) helped make jihadism more transnational by spearheading the effort to bring Muslim foreign fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s. But why would a West Bank native devote himself to a war in Central Asia and not to the Palestinian struggle? In order to understand ʿAzzām's unusual ideological trajectory, this article examines his relationship with Palestine, notably his experiences growing up in the territories, the extent of his involvement in the armed Palestinian struggle, and his views on the conflict with Israel. The article draws on previously underexploited primary sources, including ʿAzzām's own writings, rare Arabic-language biographies, and interviews with family members. I argue that ʿAzzām's Palestinian background predisposed him to transnational militancy. His exile in 1967 made him an aggrieved and rootless citizen of the Islamic world. His time fighting the Israel Defense Forces with the Fedayeen in 1969-70 gave him a taste of combat and a glimpse of pan-Islamic solidarity in practice. The inaccessibility of the battlefield after 1970 combined with ʿAzzām's distaste for the leftist PLO led him to pursue the more accessible jihad in Afghanistan instead. There, he hoped to build an Islamist army that could reconquer Palestine. When Ḥamās rose as a military organization in the late 1980s, ʿAzzām embraced and supported it. Thus ʿAzzām was, to some extent, a byproduct of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

**Keywords**

Palestine, Israel, Afghanistan, *ʿulamāʾ*, *jihād*, Islamism, transnationalism, nationalism

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*I am Palestinian, and if I found a way to Palestine and to al-Aqṣá, I would fight there.*

ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, ca. 1989[1]

**Introduction**

By mobilizing foreign fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Palestinian Islamist ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām (1941-1989) played an important role in "making jihad go global."[2] This article argues that ʿAzzām's transnationalism was, to some extent, a byproduct of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His exile in June 1967 left him willing but unable to fight in Palestine, so he chose jihad in Afghanistan instead as a strategy toward a future re-conquest of his homeland. The article presents new historical documents that indicate that ʿAzzām's attachment to, and involvement with, the Palestinian cause after 1967 was deeper than the academic literature has suggested so far. Unlike other jihadi ideologues of Palestinian origin, such as Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Qatāda al-Filistīnī, whose direct involvement in the resistance has been negligible, ʿAzzām actively collaborated with Islamists in the territories until his death in 1989. These findings add to the evidence that the Palestinian cause has been a genuine motivation – and not just a superficial slogan – for founding figures in the international jihadi movement.

ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām may be described as the first modern ideologue of transnational jihad. Before him most militant Islamist ideologues, such as Sayyid Quṭb, Saʿīd Ḥawá, or Muḥammad Faraj, envisaged nationally confined struggles against their respective governments.[3] In the early 1980s ʿAzzām articulated a new jihad doctrine which said that liberating occupied Muslim territory was more important than toppling Muslim governments, and that Muslims worldwide needed to fight together.[4] Muslims, he argued, have a religious duty to fight in each other's wars of national liberation. This pan-Islamic solidarity message inspired thousands of non-Afghans to join the fight against the Soviets in the late 1980s and

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[1] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn* [Memories of Palestine], (ca. 1990), http://tawhed.ws/dl?i=yj0ogw3g (accessed 17 May 2013), p. 3.

[2] Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[3] Albert J. Bergesen, ed., *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion, and Society*, New edition (Routledge, 2007); Itzchak Weissmann, "Sa'id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no 4 (1993): pp. 601–623; Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

[4] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Al-Difāʿ ʿan Araḍī al-Muslimīn: Ahamm Furūḍ al-Aʿyān* [The Defence of Muslim Lands: The Most Important of Individual Duties], (ca. 1985), http://tawhed.ws/r?i=x483iubf (accessed 17 May 2013); ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Ilhaq bi'l-Qāfila* [Join the Caravan], (ca. 1987), http://tawhed.ws/r?i=6nxrvref (accessed 17 May 2013).



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form multinational networks from which groups such as al-Qāʿida would later emerge.[5] ʿAzzām himself never advocated international terrorism, but his ideas have continued to inspire foreign fighter activism to this day.[6] Examining ʿAzzām's intellectual trajectory is thus worthwhile because it sheds light on the roots of transnational jihadism.

The most puzzling aspect of ʿAzzām's trajectory is the fact that he joined the Afghan jihad at a time when the Palestinian struggle was still ongoing. Why would a man join a distant war while his own country is under occupation? In other words, how did one of the most intense nationalist struggles in the Middle East produce one of its foremost transnationalists? To solve this puzzle, it is necessary to take a closer look at ʿAzzām's relationship with Palestine. This article therefore addresses three sets of research questions: First, what exactly was ʿAzzām's Palestinian background? Where and how long did he live there, and was he or his family ever directly affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Second, what exactly did he do for Palestine in his adult life? Did he break with his past when emigrating in 1967, or did he actively support the struggle from abroad? Third, what did ʿAzzām say about Palestine in his writings? Where did it fit in his strategic worldview, and how did he respond to the accusation that he had abandoned Palestine for Afghanistan?

We find few answers to these questions in the existing literature because ʿAzzām's early life remains understudied. The academic biographical literature is small and focuses mostly on ʿAzzām's general ideology and his activities in Afghanistan.[7] A partial exception is Asaf Maliach's recent article on ʿAzzām's links with Ḥamās, but, here too the emphasis is on the 1980s.[8] The non-academic biographical literature, be it newspaper articles or online Islamist hagiographies, also offers few details on ʿAzzām's youth beyond basic information about where and when he studied.[9] One might have hoped to find more details in the

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[5] Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapters 1, 2 and 5.

[6] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2011): pp. 53–94.

[7] The Western academic literature on ʿAzzām is small and includes primarily Andrew McGregor, "'Jihad and the Rifle Alone': 'Abdullah 'Azzam and the Islamist Revolution," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003); Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam: L'imam du jihad," in *Al-Qaida dans le texte*, ed. Gilles Kepel et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005): pp. 115-138; John C. M. Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh: Abdallah Azzam and the Revival of Jihad," *Journal of Religion and Society - Supplement Series* (2007): pp. 83–102; and Youssef Aboul-Enein, *The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's Books (3 Parts)* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

[8] Asaf Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda, and Hamas: Concepts of Jihad and Istishhad," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2010): pp. 79–93.

[9] Shorter (non-Islamist) profiles of ʿAzzām include Steven Emerson, "Abdullah Assam: The Man Before Osama Bin Laden," *Journal of Counterterrorism & Security International,* (1998), http://www.iacsp.com/itobli3.html (accessed 11 April 2009); Jonathan Fighel, "Sheikh Abdullah Azzam: Bin Laden's Spiritual Mentor," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism,* (27 September 2001), http://212.150.54.123/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=388 (accessed 17 May 2013); Chris Suellentrop,



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historiography of Jordanian or Palestinian Islamism, but ʿAzzām is – interestingly enough – nearly absent from this literature.[10] The only corpus with substantial insights on this topic is a set of pro-ʿAzzām biographies in Arabic from the 1990s (and one from 2012) that have gone largely unexploited by Western academics.[11] Because these books are largely unknown, ideologically biased, and full of quotations and facsimiles, I will treat them here as primary sources.

The purpose of this article is thus twofold: first, to establish the historical facts about ʿAzzām's biography as related to Palestine; and second, to assess the role of his Palestinian background in his ideological evolution. The overall objective is to improve our understanding of ʿAzzām's ideological turn towards transnationalism. It is important for the reader to note that this is not a full biography, and that the empirical scope of the inquiry is limited in two important ways. Geographically I am only concerned with ʿAzzām's activities in and for Palestine, so things that happen elsewhere – e.g., during his studies in Damascus in the mid-1960s or Cairo in the early 1970s – are not included unless they have a Palestinian connection. Chronologically, I stop when ʿAzzām dies in 1989 and leave to others the question of his posthumous influence in the Palestinian territories.[12]

The article draws on a wide range of primary sources, three sets of which are particularly important. First are ʿAzzām's own texts and recorded speeches, which I have collected on the Internet and in the field over almost a decade.[13] ʿAzzām's vast corpus

"Abdullah Azzam: The Godfather of Jihad," *Slate.com* (16 April 2002); and Bruce Riedel, "The 9/11 Attacks' Spiritual Father," *The Daily Beast,* (11 September 2011), http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/09/11/abdullah-azzam-spiritual-father-of-9-11-attacks-ideas-live-on.html (accessed 20 May 2013). For Islamist biographies in English, see for example Abdallah Bin Omar, "The Striving Sheikh: Abdullah Azzam," *Nida'ul Islam* (July 1996); and "Biography of Shaykh Abdullah Azzam (rahimahullah)," *Minbar Ansar-ul-Deen,* (2012), https://minbaransardeen.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/biography-of-shaykh-abdullah-azzam-rahimahullah/ (accessed 21 May 2013).

[10] The only reference to ʿAzzām I have found in this literature is a brief mention in Azzam Tamimi, *Ḥamās: Unwritten Chapters*, 2nd ed. (London: Hurst, 2009), p. 44.

[11] The main works include Bashīr Abū Rummān and ʿAbdallāh Saʿīd, *Al-ʿĀlim wa'l-Mujāhid wa'l-Shahīd al-Shaykh ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām [The Scholar, Mujahid, Martyr and Sheikh ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām]* (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 1990); Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh ʿĀmir, *Al-Shaykh Al-Mujāhid ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: Al-Rajul Alladhi Tarjama al-Aqwāl ilá Afʿāl [The Mujahid Sheikh ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: The Man Who Translated Words into Deeds]*, 1st ed. (Kuwait: Maktabat Dār al-Bayān, 1990).; Husnī Adhām Jarār, *Al-Shahīd ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: Rajul Daʿwa wa Madrasat Jihād [The Martyr ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: Man of Daʿwa and School of Jihad]* (Amman: Dār al-Ḍiyāʾ, 1990).; Abū Mujāhid, *Al-Shahīd ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām Bayna al-Mīlād wa'l-Istishhād [The Martyr ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām from Birth to Martyrdom]* (Peshawar: Markaz al-Shahīd ʿAzzām al-Iʿlāmī, 1991); Adnān ʿAlī al-Naḥawī, *ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: Aḥdāth wa Mawāqif [ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām: Events and Positions]* (Riyadh: Dār al-Naḥawī, 1994); Maḥmūd Saʿīd ʿAzzām, *Al-Duktūr al-Shahīd ʿAbdallāh Yūsuf ʿAzzām: Shaykhī Alladhi ʿAriftu* (Gaza: Muʾassasat Ibdāʿ li'l-Abḥath wa'l-Dirasāt wa'l-Tadrīb, 2012).

[12] "The Dr. Abdallah Azzam Academy," *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center,* (6 April 2009), http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/articleprint.aspx?id=18268 (accessed 20 May 2013).

[13] A substantial – though not exhaustive – collection is available on the *Minbar al-Tawḥīd wa'l-Jihād* website at http://tawhed.ws/a?a=a82qriko (accessed 13 May 2013).



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includes several works devoted to Palestine. In books such as *The Red Cancer*, he analyzes and criticizes the PLO.[14] Books such as *Hamas: Historical Roots and Charter* and *Memories of Palestine* contain detailed autobiographical accounts of his time in the territories.[15] Second is the abovementioned set of Arabic language biographies from the early 1990s. These vary in quality, but the best contain a lot of new information and form the backbone of the account presented below. Third are interviews with ʿAzzām's family, friends, and acquaintances, conducted by the author over several years. For example, I interviewed ʿAzzām's son and nephew in Amman (2005 and 2008), his brother and cousins in Silat al-Harithiyya (2008), some of his former assistants in Peshawar and Islamabad (2008), and his son-in-law in London (2005, 2008, and 2011). The interviews are not all cited below, but they all informed the author's assessment of the documentary evidence. In addition to these three main bodies of data, I draw on a limited number of other rare sources, such as copies of ʿAzzām's grade transcripts from high school and rare photographs shared by the ʿAzzām family.

My argument is that ʿAzzām's Palestinian heritage predisposed him to transnational militancy. His exile in 1967 made him an aggrieved and rootless "citizen of the Islamic world". His stint fighting with the Fedayeen in 1969-70 gave him a taste of combat and a glimpse of pan-Islamic solidarity in practice. The inaccessibility of the battlefield after September 1970 combined with his distaste for the leftism of the PLO led him to pursue the more accessible jihad in Afghanistan instead, hoping that Afghanistan would be a military base for a future re-conquest of Palestine.

The article is divided into three parts, each addressing one of the three sets of research questions articulated above. Part one looks at ʿAzzām's upbringing in Palestine, part two at his activities for Palestine after 1967, and part three at his writings.

## Upbringing in Palestine

ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām spent 24 of his first 25 years in the West Bank. This first section examines his Palestinian years with an emphasis on four sub-topics: his family background, his experience of the 1948 war, his education, and his actions during the 1967 war.

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[14] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Al-Saraṭan al-Aḥmar* [*The Red Cancer*], (ca. 1978), http://tawhed.ws/dl?i=djrxzkg2 (accessed 17 May 2013).

[15] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās... al-Judhūr al-Tārīkhiyya wa'l-Mīthāq* [*Ḥamās... Historical Roots and Charter*]. (Amman: unknown publisher, 1990).



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*Family background*

ʿAbdallāh Yūsuf Mustafá ʿAzzām was born on 14 November 1941 in the village of Sīlat al-Hārithiyya near Jenin in Mandate Palestine.[16] In the early 1940s, "Sila", as locals call it, was a mid-sized village of some eighteen hundred inhabitants, most of whom were farmers.[17] The region was predominantly rural; even Jenin was a town of merely four thousand in this period, compared to over 40,000 today.

Sila is in a geographically peripheral, but politically charged corner of the Palestinian territories. The northern West Bank has a history of political activism and resistance to foreign occupation. In the 19th century, for example, the Ottomans had trouble collecting tax from the area.[18] During the Arab revolt (1936-39) the Nablus-Tulkarm-Jenin region was a centre of resistance referred to by the British as the "Triangle of Death", a term also used by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) from 1948 onward.[19] The legendary fighter ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Qassām was killed in 1935 near Yaʿbad, just ten kilometres south-west of Sila.[20] Later, during the two intifadas (launched in 1987 and 2000 respectively), Jenin became a well-known militant stronghold. According to one of ʿAzzām's Islamist biographers, Sila itself was a "striving village" (*qariya mujāhida*) with "a noble role in jihad."[21] In 1799, its men fought Napoleon's invading forces in the Jezreel valley plain, and in 1936 it became famous as the hometown of Yūsuf Abū Durra, one of the heroes of the Arab revolt.[22] It is doubtful whether Sila had more of a militant culture than other towns in the area – ʿAzzām himself later complained that there were only 100 rifles in the village in 1948 – but he would have been aware of his ancestor's exploits.[23]

ʿAbdallāh was born into a pious farming family in a neighbourhood of Sila called Ḥārat al-Shawāhina.[24] His father Yūsuf ʿAzzām (d. 1990) worked the fields while his mother Zākiya al-Ahmad (d. 1988) looked after the family.[25] Although not wealthy, the ʿAzzāms

[16] The date of birth appears in ʿAzzām's application for admission to the Khadoorie Agricultural School, dated 7 May 1957 (unpublished document in author's possession).
[17] Sami Hadawi, *Village Statistics 1945: A Classification of Land and Area Ownership in Palestine* (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 1970).
[18] Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 17-18.
[19] Joan Gross, David McMurray and Ted Swedenburg, "Arab Noise and Ramadan Nights: Rai, Rap, and Franco-Maghrebi Identity," *Diaspora* 3, no. 1, (1994): pp. 3-39; Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 386.
[20] ʿAzzām noted this fact in his writings; see, e.g., ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 28.
[21] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 15.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 43.
[24] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 16; Abū Mujāhid, *al-Shahīd*, p. 1.
[25] ʿAbdallāh's college application in 1957 lists his father's occupation as *muzāriʿ* [farmer] (unpublished document in author's possession).



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were economically slightly better off than the village average. They owned at least 150 *dunums* (i.e., dekares) of arable land to the west of Sila, a sizeable plot at a time when the average holding in northern Palestine was between 30 and 45 *dunums*.[26] The family was also able to support their son ʿAbdallāh through college from 1957 to 1960, paying 30 Jordanian Dinars (JD) per year for his board and lodging, a not inconsiderable sum at the time.[27]

As a member of the village council, ʿAzzām's father was respected in Sila, but he was no notable.[28] One of ʿAzzām's hagiographers notes in passing that his father "waged jihad in Palestine", but none of the other biographers or family members have mentioned any such exploits, so it may be an embellishment.[29] The extended ʿAzzām family was known in the Levant, but it had not produced any public figures of note. The Jenin branch of the family was nicknamed "the sheikhs", not because they produced many religious scholars, but because the men tended to grow their beards.[30] The Levantine ʿAzzām family bears no known link to the prestigious Egyptian family of former Arab League secretary ʿAbd al-Rahmān ʿAzzām (d. 1976) and former Cairo University President ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAzzām (d. 1959; incidentally also the maternal grandfather of al-Qāʿida leader Ayman al-Zawāhiri).[31] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, in short, came from relatively humble origins.

*The 1948 war*

The war of 1948 appears not to have harmed the ʿAzzāms physically. There was little if any fighting in Sila, although the area immediately to the north saw heavy fighting in April and May 1948. By mid-May, the Haganah had seized the Jezreel valley plain – Arab territory under the UN partition plan – and cleared it of Arab inhabitants, some seven thousand in all.[32] In late May 1948 the Israeli so-called Golani Brigade moved south, initiating the Battle of

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[26] The information about the size of the ʿAzzām family plot was provided by ʿAbdallāh himself in his 1957 college application. I have not found land data for the late 1950s West Bank, but in 1936 the average holding in Palestine north of Beersheva was 45 *dunums*, and in 1972 the average in the northern West Bank was 31.5 *dunums*; see Jacob Metzer, *The Divided Economy of Mandatory Palestine*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 97; and Raja Khalidi, *The Arab Economy in Israel: The Dynamics of a Region's Development*. (London: Croom Helm, 1988), p. 74.
[27] In February 1958 Khadoorie issued an overdue notice to ʿAzzām's father requesting payment of 15JD for board and lodging in the spring semester (unpublished document in author's possession). In 1961, GNP per capita on the West bank was 58JD; Fawzi A. Gharaibeh, *The Economies of the West bank and Gaza Strip* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985), p. 10. In 1969, the median monthly income in Jordan was 40 JD; Peter Dodd and Halim Barakat, "Palestinian Refugees of 1967: A Sociological Study," *Muslim World* 60, no. 2 (1970): pp. 123-142.
[28] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās,* p. 44.
[29] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 52.
[30] Abū Mujāhid, *Al-Shahīd*, p. 11.
[31] Lawrence Wright, "The Man Behind Bin Laden," *New Yorker* (16 September 2002), pp. 56-85.
[32] Walid Khalidi, ed., *All that remains: the Palestinian villages occupied and depopulated by Israel in 1948*. (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).



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Jenin (1-3 June), in which Iraqi forces and local fighters pushed back the Israeli offensive in a rare case of Arab over-performance in the war.[33] Other than this, there were few hostilities in the area that year. There is also no evidence that the ʿAzzām family came into contact with Arab foreign fighters in the so-called "Army of Salvation" (*jaysh al-inqādh*).

Still, they were affected by the war in at least two important ways. One was through loss of land on the Jezreel valley plain. According to ʿAzzām's own account, formal ownership of the plain had fallen into the hands of two Christian families (the Sarsaq and Maṭran) through bureaucratic manoeuvring long before the war.[34] Unaware or unconcerned with these legal technicalities, residents of Sila continued to till the land as their own. In 1948, Jews then bought the land from the Christian families and established military control of the plain, which, according to ʿAzzām, "included the land of my father and my grandfather and the people in my village."[35]

In his memoirs ʿAzzām also reports that Jewish militias committed atrocities against Palestinian farmers who tried to ignore the change in land ownership in 1948-49. "On one occasion", he writes, "a group of young [Arab] men went down to reap the wheat that they had sown [earlier that spring]. Then Jewish fighters seized them, cut their stomachs open, filled them with wheat and put the bodies on iron poles as an example to others."[36] Moreover, Israel's acquisition of the valley had a big psychological effect on Palestinians in the area, if only because the latter had such a clear view of the plain from their hillside homes. As Ḥusni Jarār, himself from Jenin, notes:

> "Wherever the martyr moved as a child, before his eyes was the Jezreel valley plain, seized by the Jews through international conspiracies. [...] He grew up seeing the land of his village occupied and cultivated by the Jews right before his very eyes, as they reaped its fruits and enjoyed its goods."[37]

A second important effect of the war was the massive influx of refugees from neighbouring areas captured by Israel. According to Walīd Khālidī, Jenin governorate absorbed some 100,000 of the 700,000 Palestinian refugees of 1948.[38] Many of the refugees were temporarily sheltered by local families while they looked for new places to live. The

[33] Morris, *1948,* pp. 248-50.
[34] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*., p. 38.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[37] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, pp. 16 and 20-21.
[38] Khalidi, *All that remains*.



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ʿAzzāms opened their house to a family that had been evicted from the village of Umm al-Shūf near Haifa.[39] The two families had a prior relationship, the nature of which is not clear from the sources.[40] The ʿAwāṭila family, as they were called, stayed in Sila for a while before settling in Dayr al-Ghusūn northeast of Tulkarm. The families stayed in touch long afterwards, and in a hollywoodesque turn of events, one of the ʿAwaṭila daughters later married our protagonist.[41]

After the 1948 war, Sila residents found themselves right on the border with Israel, as a result of which they would experience disputes with Israeli farmers and occasional incursions by the Israeli military. One source of conflict was cattle – now the sole resource of many of Sila's farmers – going astray and getting confiscated by Israelis.[42] Another frustration was Israeli military patrols, which ʿAzzām said he saw come to his house "on many a night".[43] ʿAzzām also writes that he saw a certain Qāsim Dawāsa get killed by an Israeli patrol right outside ʿAzzām's house. Jordanian authorities, he claims, did little to protect Sila residents' interests, often dismissing reports of cattle theft and Israeli incursions as trifles or fabrications.

*Education*

These political tensions aside, ʿAzzām's early upbringing seems to have been relatively stable and peaceful. In the spring of 1957, at the age of 15, ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām graduated from Sīlat al-Hārithiyya middle school and enrolled briefly in Jenin high school, before changing to the Khadoorie Agricultural College in Tulkarm.[44] We do not know why he chose a vocational high school; it could be that his father encouraged him to prepare for the family trade.

So it was that the "Godfather of Jihad" was educated in a school with Jewish roots. Khadoorie was one of two schools established in the early 1930s with money bequeathed to the British by the Jewish philanthropist Ellis Kadoorie.[45] The Tulkarm school, founded in 1930, catered for Arab students, while the other school, established in 1933 in Kfar Tavor

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[39] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 20.
[40] "*Liqāʾ Zawjat al-Shahīd ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām maʿ Saḥīfat al-Waqt al-Turkiyya* [Interview with the Wife of Martyr Abdallah Azzam by the Turkish Vakit Newspaper]," http://www.al-hesbah.org/v/showthread.php?t=56703 (accessed 7 March 2006).
[41] ʿAzzām's future wife, Samīra ʿAwāṭila, was born in his sister's house in Sila in 1950 when he was eight years old; Mohammed Al Shafey, "Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews Umm Mohammed: The Wife of Bin laden's Spiritual Mentor," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat English* (30 April 2006).
[42] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 44.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[44] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 16.
[45] Anita Shapira, *Yigal Allon, native son: a biography*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 35-36. The school still exists today; see http://www.kadoorie.edu.ps/ (accessed 16 March 2012).



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east of Nazareth, catered for Jews. The latter is well known in Israel due to its prominent alumni, who include Yitzhak Rabin and Yigal Allon. The Arab Khadoorie school is located on the western side of Tulkarm, virtually on the green line, as a result of which it too lost much of its agricultural land to Israel in the 1948 war. Life on the border with the enemy would become a recurrent theme in ʿAzzām's life.

After ʿAzzām graduated from Khadoorie in the spring of 1960, he was sent by the College to work as a teacher in the remote village of Adir near the central Jordanian city of Karak, some 90 kilometers south of Amman.[46] Khadoorie students were required to spend the first year after graduation teaching in a local school somewhere in Jordan. ʿAbdallāh had reportedly wanted a placement closer to home, but a personal dispute with the director of the college reportedly led to him being appointed to a remote location.[47] ʿAzzām must have enjoyed teaching, for he would continue in the profession. When his year in Adir was over, he moved back to Sila, and in the autumn of 1961 he began teaching in a school in the village of Burqīn just west of Jenin. The commute between Sila and Burqin soon proved too time-consuming, so he moved to Jenin where he rented a room with two friends from the Muslim Brotherhood.[48]

In early 1962, at the age of 20, ʿAzzām began looking seriously into options for studying Islamic Law.[49] In this period no institution in Jordan offered religious degrees, so the options were Cairo and Damascus.[50] ʿAzzām chose the latter, and in the autumn of 1962 ʿAzzām enrolled as a student in the Faculty of Sharia at Damascus University. He would spend the next four academic years studying toward a *license* (Bachelor's degree) in Islamic Law. However, ʿAzzām never actually lived in Syria; instead, he continued to reside in Jenin and teach in Burqin, while going to Damascus once or twice a term for exams and other formalities.[51] Distance learning was not uncommon in the Faculty; data from 1968 (earlier information is unavailable) indicate that nine of ten Jordanian students in the Faculty were non-resident.[52]

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[46] Many biographies say he graduated in 1959, but his school records show he did not leave until 1960 (unpublished documents in author's possession).
[47] Abū Mujāhid, *al-Shahīd*, p. 2.
[48] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 19.
[49] He must have made up his mind by mid-1962, for in August he wrote to Khadoorie College requesting his records so he could apply to Damascus University; unpublished document in author's possession.
[50] Jordan University was founded in 1962, but did not have a Faculty of Sharia until 1971; see www.ju.edu.jo (accessed 16 March 2012).
[51] Interview with ʿAzzām's wife via the intermediary of their son Ḥudhayfa, Amman, September 2005.
[52] Bernard Botiveau, "La formation des oulémas en Syrie: la Faculté de Sharîʿa de l'université de Damas," in Gilbert Delanoe, ed., *Les Intellectuels et le Pouvoir : Syrie, Egypte, Tunisie, Algérie* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1986), p. 88.



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It is not clear why ʿAzzām chose to commute. Lack of money may have been one factor, attachment to family and friends another. He soon had an even better reason to stay: in late 1962 or early 1963 he married Samīra ʿAwāṭila, a daughter of the family that had stayed with the ʿAzzāms in May 1948.[53] He was twenty-one; she was only twelve.[54] The young family moved into a house in Sila which ʿAzzām had rented after their engagement. In late 1966 or early 1967 they had a daughter, Fāṭima, their only child born in Palestine. Another daughter, Wāfa, was born in Amman in 1967 or 1968, before their first son, Muḥammad, arrived in early 1969 while the family was living in northern Jordan. Over the next fifteen years, Abū Muḥammad and Umm Muḥammad would have five more children: Hudhayfa (b. 1972 in Cairo), Ibrahīm (b. 1974 in Amman), Sumayya (b. 1975 in Amman), Hamza (b. 1977 in Amman), and Muṣʿab (b. 1984 in Islamabad).[55]

In the spring of 1966, ʿAzzām graduated from Damascus University, after which he continued to teach in Burqin while living in Sila. He appears to have led a relatively quiet existence centred on his family, teaching, and *daʿwa* work with the Muslim Brothers in Jenin.

*The 1967 war*

In 1967 war returned to Palestine, this time with graver consequences for ʿAzzām and his family. During the afternoon of 5 June a motorized infantry battalion entered Sila on its way south-east towards Jenin.[56] ʿAzzām was in Sila at the time; he later wrote that he and a group of four friends were the only ones in the village to resist the incursion.[57] Their "resistance" consisted of firing a few shots at the tanks with old Lee Enfield rifles before being persuaded to desist by older men in the village.[58] Later, his hagiographers would embellish this account, saying ʿAzzām and his men "stood before the Israeli tanks" and that "some of the sheikh's followers fell as martyrs in the confrontations with the Jews." However, there is no reliable evidence that ʿAzzām or any of his friends were hurt in the Six-Day War.[59]

ʿAzzām instead decided to leave the West Bank for Jordan. Around 9 June, he set out eastward on foot, walking the 25 kilometers to the Jordan river together with a group of

[53] "*Liqāʾ Zawjat al-Shahīd.*" She later described the engagement as follows: "I was born in the house of Sheikh Abdullah's sister. He was eight-years-old at the time. We later left for Tulkarem and he happened to have been there studying. He visited us once, and three days later, his father asked for my hand in marriage and we got married […] I was twelve years old"; Al Shafey, "Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews Umm Mohammed."
[54] "*Liqāʾ Zawjat al-Shahīd*"; Al Shafey, "Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews Umm Mohammed".
[55] Jarār, *al-Shahīd,* p. 38; Abu Rummān and Saʿīd, *al-ʿĀlim*, p. 110; ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh,* p. 54.
[56] Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 205 and 219.
[57] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*., pp. 44-45.
[58] Ibid.; Jarār, *al-Shahid*., pp. 21 and 57.
[59] ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh*, p. 55.



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friends and an older man from the village who knew the way.[60] The journey was probably completed in a day, but was not risk-free, as hostilities were ongoing. On at least one occasion they were stopped by Israeli patrols. Several of ʿAzzām's hagiographers recount an anecdote according to which the emigrating party was stopped and frisked by Israeli soldiers. As the man who was searching ʿAzzām put his hand in the pocket containing a copy of the Qurʾan, ʿAzzām brusquely grabbed the soldier's hand. The soldier stepped back and pointed a gun at him, but the elder in ʿAzzām's company defused the situation, allowing them to proceed.[61]

ʿAzzām's main motivation for leaving was probably ideological. To the best of our knowledge, there were no forced expulsions from Sīlat al-Hārithiyya in 1967, although it is possible that less coercive forms of intimidation or "migratory encouragement" occurred.[62] The fact that ʿAzzām was the only member of his family to leave further suggests that he departed by choice. His immediate family joined him in Jordan a while later, but most of his relatives never left at all. This is consistent with historical research showing that forced eviction was less common in 1967 than in 1948. In a survey conducted among refugees in Jordan in 1970, four in every five refugee families said they were not evicted by force, and eighty-five percent reported no casualties in the family.[63] Most said they left for fear of collateral war damage, loss of livelihood or a life under occupation. Four in every five families said they would return under any circumstances, while a fifth said they would only return if the occupation ended.[64] ʿAzzām was probably part of a category of refugees motivated primarily by nationalist and religious sentiment.

The Six-Day War was a turning point in ʿAzzām's life. He was now a refugee who would never again set foot in Palestine. More importantly, from now on he began to seriously consider taking up arms against Israel. There is no evidence of ʿAzzām taking part in, or even seeking, weapons training prior to June 1967. However, from this point "the idea of training and using of weapons to confront the Jews began preoccupying his mind."[65]

**Activities for Palestine**

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[60] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, pp. 21 and 57.
[61] ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh*, p. 55; interview with Fāyiz ʿAzzām (Sīlat al-Hārithiyya, May 2008).
[62] For example, Benny Morris noted "some evidence of IDF soldiers going around with loudspeakers ordering West Bankers to leave their homes and cross the Jordan"; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 328.
[63] Dodd and Barakat, "Palestinian Refugees".
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 21.



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This second section examines the extent of ʿAzzām's participation in the armed struggle for Palestine after 1967. We will see that his involvement varied considerably over time, from a period of direct participation (1969-70), via a long phase of withdrawal (1970-1986), to a period of support from afar (1987-89). I will describe the first phase in some detail and deal briefly with the latter.

*With the Fedayeen*

ʿAzzām's decision to join the Afghan jihad is often described as a case of a cleric-turned-warrior, but in reality, ʿAzzām had been a warrior before he became a cleric. In 1969-1970 he spent over a year with the Fedayeen in Jordan, taking part in combat operations against the Israeli military.

ʿAzzām fought with a small and little known group of Islamist guerrillas that operated in North-West Jordan from early 1969 to September 1970. The story behind the establishment of these bases is not well known, but it appears that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood negotiated a deal with Fataḥ in early 1969 allowing religious Fedayeen to run their own bases, so long as they formally operated under Fataḥ command.[66] They set up a training camp in the Dibbīn woods / ʿAjlūn mountains area west of Jirāsh, as well as four operational bases in the Shālala area by the Yarmūk river some 20 kilometers north of Irbid.[67] Outsiders called them "the Bases of the Sheikhs" (*qawāʿid al-shuyūkh*), while the insiders named them after places in Palestine; one was called "Bayt al-Maqdis", another "Ghazza" (the names of the last two bases do not appear in the sources.)[68] The four camps were under the overall supervision of a Fatah official named Mundhir al-Dajjāni, but they were staffed and led by Muslim Brothers and enjoyed de facto operational autonomy.[69] The operational leader and principal instructor was an Egyptian veteran of the 1948 war named ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ʿAlī.[70]

Interestingly, the Islamist Fedayeen included an important foreign component right from the beginning. ʿAzzām writes that with him in the first contingent were several

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[66] The deal was probably reached shortly before or after the fifth session of the Palestine National Assembly on 2-4 February 1969; Riad El-Rayyes and Dunia Nahas, *Guerrillas for Palestine* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p. 75.

[67] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 69. A source named Dawūd Jarār (likely from Jenin) said "The first base we established was in the woods of Dibbīn, and ʿAzzām was there"; Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 58.

[68] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 226; Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 59; ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, pp. 69 and 71.

[69] Mishari Al-Dhaidi, "History of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood – part one," *al-Sharq al-Awsat English* (27 December 2005).

[70] Jarār, *Al-Shahīd*, p. 62.



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Sudanese Muslim Brothers led by the prominent Islamist and former minister Muḥammad Sāliḥ ʿUmar.[71] Later on, the Bases of the Sheikhs would include a few trainers from Egypt and tens of recruits from Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.[72] This suggests a degree of organized recruitment by regional Muslim Brotherhood branches.

The camps also attracted Islamist visitors from across the region. People came for a few days or weeks, perhaps anxious to see the first Islamist military effort against Israel since 1948. Senior Brotherhood officials such as ʿIṣām al-ʿAṭṭar came to inspect the young recruits, while famous militants such as the Syrian Marwān al-Ḥadīd trained there for a short while.[73] Among the visitors were individuals who would later go on to become leading Brotherhood figures, such as Rashīd Ghannūshi (Tunisia), ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbd al-Khāliq (Kuwait), Ismaʿīl al-Shaṭṭī (Kuwait), Jāsim al-Yasīn (Kuwait), and Aḥmad Nawfal (Jordan). All these visitors later wrote enthusiastically about their time in the camps and about meeting ʿAzzām there.[74] The Jordanian camps thus appear to have served as an important socialization arena for young Brotherhood cadres from across the region. The networks forged here would last for decades and come in useful during ʿAzzām's fundraising and recruitment efforts in the 1980s.

ʿAzzām himself joined the Fedayeen around February 1969 and stayed until the bitter end of September 1970.[75] His precise trajectory in the year and a half prior to joining is shrouded in some uncertainty due to sparse evidence. What we know is that, upon arrival in Jordan in June 1967, he stayed briefly in the Zarqāʾ refugee camp northeast of Amman before moving to Amman proper. There he quickly found job as a teacher, because the influx of West Bank refugees had dramatically increased the demand for teachers. In fact in this period, schools offered two sessions per day to accommodate all the new students from the

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[71] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 69.
[72] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*., p. 59.
[73] Interview with ʿIṣām al-ʿAttār (Aachen, December 2009); Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *MERIP Reports* 12, no. 110 (1982): pp. 12-20.
[74] All these figures volunteered this information in their obituaries to ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām in 1989. For al-Yasin, see ʿAmir, *al-Shaykh,* pp. 169-71; for al-Shaṭṭī, see *ibid.*, pp. 164-166; for Ghannūshī, see *ibid.*, pp. 311-319; for Nawfal, see Tamimi, *Ḥamās,* p. 323. Today these figures appear to consider their past involvement with the Fedayeen sensitive or compromising. When this author interviewed Ahmad Nawfal in Amman in 2008, he refused to speak about the matter. ʿIṣām al-ʿAttār only did so reluctantly during my 2009 interview with him. Similarly, ʿAzzām Tamīmī's book-length biography of Ghannūshī does not even mention the latter's visit to the Fedayeen camps; Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[75] Several of ʿAzzām's Islamist biographers say he joined the armed struggle in 1968, but this is unlikely given that the Brotherhood camps were only set up in early 1969. Azzam himself said he spent "a year and a half in the Palestinian jihad". Given that we know he was with the Fedayeen in September 1970, early 1969 is the most likely joining date.



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West Bank. ʿAzzām taught the morning shift in the al-Tāj secondary school in the Jabal al-Tāj area of Amman.[76]

At some point in late 1968, ʿAzzām decided to join the Fedayeen. However, it is not clear what triggered him or how he learned about the opportunity. His hagiographers describe the decision as a spontaneous one, reached one night after hearing young men in the streets of Amman chanting *anāshīd* about fighting for Palestine.[77] However, he must have contemplated it for a while, because Fedayeen activity in Jordan had begun a year earlier and was headline news after the famous battle of Karāma in March 1968.

Whatever the circumstances, ʿAzzām's decision was financially and socially costly for him and his family. For one it meant renouncing a stable salary and forcing his wife to live in poor conditions with three children under the age of three. For another, it meant a step down the social ladder, since Fedayeen activity at the time was associated with the uneducated and unemployed.[78] His wife later noted:

> When he decided to join the Brotherhood brigades [*katāʾib al-ikhwān*], he pondered how to inform us, and he decided to keep it secret from his family so that the news would not reach the West Bank, prompting the Jews to blow up or destroy their houses or subject his siblings to imprisonment or torture. He was also worried that his family might react negatively, because the worship of jihad was forgotten by most, and people thought jihad was for the unemployed, and that the educated and employed were excused, so they would not go so long as they had an income.[79]

ʿAzzām's parents and extended family did in fact react negatively. ʿAzzām's cousin Fāyiz ʿAzzām (Abū Mujāhid) writes:

> I still remember the day when a group of relatives, including his father, came to persuade him to leave his path. In those days, jihad was seen as a little odd, especially for an employed, educated man of good extraction. The view of most people was that jihad is for the unemployed! This was in the village of Raṣīfa where his sister lived.

[76] Author's email correspondence with Abdallah Abu Nabah (a pupil at al-Tāj in 1967), 26 May 2010.
[77] Abū Mujāhid, *al-Shahīd*, p. 2.
[78] Scholars disagree about the socio-economic background of the Fedayeen. Some argue the Fedayeen attracted educated middle class youth while others argue most recruits were uneducated, from rural backgrounds, and attracted by the salary paid to guerrillas; Daniel Charles Kurtzer, "Palestine guerilla and Israeli counterinsurgency warfare: The radicalization of the Palestine Arab community to violence, 1949-1970," Ph.D. diss., (New York: Columbia University, 1976), p. 247.
[79] Jarār, *al-shahīd,*.p. 59.



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> His father told him: ‘Son, I was hoping that you would become a great judge in Amman, and here you are [as a father of] small children, and you are with the youth in the mountains.’ Then [the father] and the mother began to weep. ʿAzzām got angry and stood up and said: ‘I am inviting you to heaven and you are inviting me to hell!?’ From that day, his view was that one does not need parental permission [to wage jihad].[80]

Similarly, his wife Samīra’s social status declined among female relatives and friends. Fāyiz ‘Azzām noted that “the views and respect of the women toward his wife and his children changed because she had been the wife of a civil servant, and was now the wife of a mujāhid moving around in the mountains with small children.”[81] She herself later said that her husband “always asked whether any friends or relatives were visiting me, and I said ‘some are, others are not, because they frown on me as the wife of a small mujāhid who has no possessions in this world.’”[82] In the 1980s, of course, the tables would turn, as ʿAzzām became a family hero and many of his male relatives joined him as volunteer fighters in Afghanistan.

However, in the short term the young couple was in for a rough ride. Over the next eighteen months ʿAzzām would be away training or fighting all but four days per month, and the family would live in at least three different locations (first in Jirāsh, then in Zarqāʾ, and then in Irbid). After he had left his pregnant wife and children in Jirāsh, ‘Azzām headed to boot camp in the Dibbīn woods:

> The training lasted four months […] and I remember being full only once. For the whole four months and a half we had bread for breakfast, lunch and dinner […] yes we were hungry a lot, but it was one of the best times of my life. One of us [said he] felt like a king […] because he had been liberated of everything and nobody had power over him.[83]

After initial training, ʿAzzām moved to the Bases of the Sheikhs in the north. There he began taking part in actual operations, while continuing to train. As a 28-year-old Sharia graduate and longtime Brotherhood member, ʿAzzām was a relatively senior figure among the fighters,

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[80] Abū Mujāhid, *al-Shahid*, pp. 2-3.
[81] *Ibid.,* p. 3.
[82] Jarār, *al-Shahid*., pp. 60-61.
[83] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 3.



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which is probably why he was appointed commander [*amīr*] of the Bayt al-Maqdis base in Marw.[84] However, he was still a novice in military matters. As one of his comrades, Muḥammad Nūr, later recounted:

> Once, when he was with the mujāhidīn in Jordan, the sheikh made a slight mistake in a military matter in the Bayt al-Maqdis base where he was the leader and responsible for the group. When martyr Abū ʿAmrū – the trainer of the group – was angry with him, the sheikh stood up, gave a military salute and declared that he was willing to take any reprimand he deserved.[85]

ʿAzzām took part in raids on Israeli targets along the border. His memoirs and other sources speak of "many operations", but they all highlight three incidents in particular. First was the "Battle of al-Mashrūʿ", a gun battle with the IDF in 1969 from which the mujāhidūn only barely escaped alive. A small group of fighters, including ʿAzzām, a certain ʿAbd al-Sattār Zāʿim, Abū Muṣʿab al-Sūrī (not the famous al-Qāʿida ideologue), and others, had attacked an IDF target but found themselves cut off and holed up under a bridge, with al-Sūrī gravely wounded. They were saved by the Jordanian Army, which opened massive artillery fire as cover. The brigade commander (*qāʾid al-katība*) was injured in the process, earning the gratitude of ʿAzzām and his comrades.[86]

Second was the "Battle of 5 June 1970", in which a group of six fighters led by ʿAzzām himself confronted two tanks and a minesweeper, killing at least twelve IDF soldiers. Our protagonist recounts:

> [Israeli Prime Minister Moshe] Dayan had sent a Canadian and an American correspondent to accompany them on the border and show them that the Fedayeen operations had finished. Then [the mujāhidūn] came out on them like jinn from underground and shelled them and wounded the two journalists; the Jews admitted to losing twelve soldiers, but the enemy losses were much higher than this.[87]

The attack team included a certain Abū Ismaʿīl, Mahdī al-Idlibī al-Ḥamawī, Ibrahīm Bin Billa, and Bilāl al-Filastīnī, in addition to ʿAzzām himself. The team was made up of fighters

[84] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 58.
[85] *Ibid.,* p. 33.
[86] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 71.
[87] *Ibid.*



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from different bases, some from the Bayt al-Maqdis base and some from the Gaza base. Three of them died, including Mahdī al-Idlibī and Bilāl al-Maqdisī.[88]

Third was the "Sayyid Quṭb operation", which took place on 29 August 1970. ʿAzzām explains:

> Abū ʿAmrū (Sāliḥ Ḥasan) was preparing a missile operation which he called 'the Sayyid Quṭb operation' against a patrol of several tanks. He made the plan and checked the location and rigged the missiles which he was going to trigger with an electric fuse, but he was ambushed by the Jews, and a battle erupted in which Abū ʿAmrū fell a martyr together with Maḥmūd al-Barqāwī and Zuhayr Qayshū (from Ḥama). The date of their martyrdom coincided with that of Sayyid Quṭb, namely 29 August.[89]

Of the three operations highlighted by ʿAzzām, only the second can be described as a success. The fact that he chose to list two blatant defeats among his most memorable battles suggests that the Islamist Fedayeen's record as a fighting force was less than impressive.

From what we know, thirteen fighters were killed in combat during the camps' existence. We know the names of nine of these, namely, Sāliḥ Ḥasan (Egypt), Mahdī al-Idlibī (Ḥamā, Syria), Naṣr ʿĪsa (Ḥamā, Syria), Zuhayr Qayshu (Ḥamā, Syria), Riḍwān Krishān (Maʿan, Jordan), Riḍwān Balʿa (Damascus, Syria), Muḥammad Saʿīd Baʿabbad (Yemen), Maḥmūd al-Barqāwī (Palestine), Abū al-Ḥasan Ibrahīm al-Ghazzī (Palestine).[90] The number of nationalities represented illustrates the multinational composition of the bases. However, the cosmopolitanism also posed a practical problem, namely, that of repatriating the dead. ʿAzzām explains how he himself served as transnational undertaker on at least one occasion:

> As for the funeral of Zuhayr, I brought [the body] to Ḥamā in Syria and stayed there several days as a guest of Marwān Ḥadīd. While I was there, another burial party was brought to Ḥamā, that of Naṣr ʿĪsā, the brother of doctor Rashīd ʿĪsā, who spent time with us in Palestine accompanying a group of brothers from Hama. Together with us at the time was ʿAbd al-Sattār Zaʿīm.[91]

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[88] *Ibid.*
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 73; Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 65. Ibrahīm al-Ghazzī is described in both sources as "one of the founders of Fataḥ and one of the top trainers in the ʿUlūk camp."
[91] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 72.



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Although the Bases of the Sheikhs were separate from other Fedayeen camps, the Islamists could not avoid a certain amount of shoulder-rubbing with the leftists, because the Irbid area was also home to some of the most radical leftist factions. In September 1970 PFLP-affiliated fighters would even declare their own "People's Socialist Republic" in Irbid.[92] As one might expect, relations were very bad – though never violent – and we shall see later how this friction came to affect ʿAzzām's view of the entire struggle.

By contrast, ʿAzzām and his comrades enjoyed excellent relations with the Jordanian Army. ʿAzzām wrote: "We had good relations with the Jordanian army, which respected us and […] cooperated very well with us."[93] He noted that a certain major-general Khalaf Rafīʿ, the man responsible for border security in the Ghūr region, "would stop his car if he saw one of us."[94] The Islamist Fedayeen cooperated with the Jordanian Army at the tactical level, as illustrated in the account of the Battle of al-Mashrūʿ.

The relations between the Jordanian regime and the Fedayeen movement as a whole were less good, and in 1970 they rapidly deteriorated, culminating in the events of "Black September" in which the Jordanian army cracked down on the Fedayeen and forced them to cease operations. ʿAzzām and his Islamist comrades emerged politically unscathed from Black September because they had refused to take sides.[95] The Brotherhood saw the fighting as *fitna* – sedition – and had no strong affinity with either of the two parties. ʿAzzām recounts:

> We gathered together the brothers responsible for the young men and decided that if the army clashed with the Fedayeen, we would not enter into this conflict […] in which we feared forbidden blood would be spilled. […] the battle was not clear, and the banner was not Islamic. […] fighting the army was not acceptable, neither legally, logically, nor pragmatically. So we chose to remain neutral. Then the conversation turned to the dangers that lurked in the next stage, and the uncertainty surrounding the next few nights. But God's eye watched over this group. […] and by God's great

[92] Clinton Bailey, *Jordan's Palestinian Challenge 1948-1983: A Political History* (London: Westview, 1984), p. 61.
[93] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, pp. 70-71.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[95] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*., p. 63.



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> fortune […] none of us was hurt despite the fact that many civilians were killed, tortured, and imprisoned.[96]

The Islamist Fedayeen camps remained operative right up until the final crackdown of mid-September 1970, and ʿAzzām was there all along. When the situation exploded on 15 September, ʿAzzām was home on leave:

> I remember at the time I was in Irbid, because our base was near Irbid and my family was living in Irbid, and I was on leave and sitting at home when the crackdown began. So we brought the women to the refuge under the house, i.e., the women of the neighbourhood inside trenches and refuges, while the men sat in the rooms, and the missiles struck and destroyed one house after the other.[97]

He also wrote:

> I was under the missiles and shells that flew in every direction during the *fitna* of 1970 […] I lived through the siege on Fedayeen in the cities and their pursuit from house to house and from hilltop to hilltop in Amman. […] I lived through the rounding up of fedayeen in the woods of Jirāsh [and their] final suppression […] by Jordanian tanks.[98]

As this evidence shows, ʿAzzām did fight militarily against Israel when he had the opportunity. He was with the Islamist Fedayeen from the beginning to the end of their existence, and he sacrificed material comfort and risked his life in a military adventure that most Palestinians avoided.

*Withdrawal*

However, after Black September ʿAzzām effectively lay down his arms as far as Palestine was concerned. The main reason seems to have been that after the events of 1970-71, the only way for a Palestinian to continue fighting was to join one of the radical PLO factions, which ʿAzzām despised. Thus, for the next decade he would focus on his academic career, heading

[96] Azzām, *Ḥamās*, pp. 72-73.
[97] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 4.
[98] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 49.



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first to Cairo for doctoral studies at the University of al-Azhar (1970-73) and then teaching Islamic Law at the University of Jordan in Amman (1973-80). In 1980-81 he taught briefly at King ʿAbd al-ʿAziz University in Jidda before moving to Pakistan and devoting himself to the Afghan jihad. From the early 1970s to the mid- 1980s he seems to have had little to do with armed Palestinian groups inside or outside the territories.

This is not to say that he put the Palestinian cause behind him. As a preacher in Jordan in the 1970s, he spoke incessantly of the need to fight Israel, "preparing [the students] for the day they would meet the enemy and end the occupation of the Muslim Umma in Palestine."[99] All along he followed political developments in Palestine closely, as evidenced by his detailed account of the origins and the evolution of the intifada in his book on Ḥamās.[100] However, ʿAzzām was adamant that any military effort had to occur under an Islamic banner, and in this particular period, Islamists in the territories were not yet waging armed struggle.

*Supporting the Intifada*

However, when Palestinian Islamists began carrying out attacks against Israeli targets in the early 1980s, and eventually led a fully-fledged uprising from 1987 onwards, ʿAzzām was very enthusiastic. This time he did not join the fight, but instead supported Ḥamās politically, financially and logistically from his base in Pakistan, as a side project to his Afghan activities.

Politically, ʿAzzām was a strong supporter of Ḥamās and of the intifada and sung its praises whenever possible. He also offered advice: When Ḥamās prepared to publish its charter in 1987, it sent a draft copy to ʿAzzām for "review". It is not clear what influence, if any, he had on the final text, but he did not write the whole charter, despite what some sources (including his own wife) later claimed. However, he did write a book in early 1989 entitled *Ḥamās... Historical Roots and Charter*, as well as several articles in *al-Jihad* magazine promoting the Palestinian cause.[101]

Financially, ʿAzzām helped raise funds for Ḥamās from international Muslim donors. Throughout the 1980s, he travelled in the Muslim world to raise awareness about Afghan jihad, so when the Palestinian intifada broke out he was more than happy to let Palestine piggyback on the fundraising work he was already doing for Afghanistan.

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[99] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 23.
[100] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, pp. 82ff.
[101] Some of the confusion regarding his authorship of the Charter stems from the fact that he includes it in the book's appendix.



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In many a lecture he talked about both conflicts and how they were connected. Occasionally, Palestine eclipsed Afghanistan. For example, when ʿAzzām spoke at the Muslim Union conference in Oklahoma in December 1988 his talk was all about Palestine, not Afghanistan, for the conference marked the one year anniversary of the Palestinian intifada. In his remarks he urged people to donate more to the Palestinian cause and prompted a spontaneous collection of money and gold from the audience.[102] Asaf Maliach described ʿAzzām's fundraising role as follows:

> Azzam raised funds for Ḥamās, both in his travels through Arab nations and through the branches of the Office of Services for the Mujahideen in the United States. One of the pipelines for funnelling money to Ḥamās ran through various institutions operating in the name of the PLO in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, such as the Palestinian Youth Association and the Palestine Student association.[103]

ʿAzzām also provided military support, primarily in the form of training. He encouraged Palestinians to come and train, as in this quote from one of his lectures: "Sons of Palestine, you have an opportunity to train on every type of weapon [in Afghanistan], this is a golden opportunity, do not miss it."[104] It is not clear to what extent ʿAzzām targeted Palestine for recruitment, but we know that the Afghan jihad attracted interest and support inside the territories. Battle hymns (*anāshīd*) from Afghanistan were reportedly popular among Palestinians, and ʿAzzām's book *Signs of the Merciful* was printed and distributed there.[105]

Some Palestinians did indeed seize the opportunity to come and train. One of ʿAzzām's Islamist biographers notes that ʿAzzām

> was in constant touch with the Palestinian resistance movement represented by Ḥamās through the Muslim Student Union [*ittiḥād al-ṭalaba al-muslimīn*], and they were providing him with news of the jihad. He trained the youth who had the permissions and were able to go to Palestine, and sent them back after training and advised them to stay in Palestine and join the mujāhidūn there.[106]

[102] *Ibid*., p. 74.
[103] Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda, and Hamas," p. 88.
[104] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[105] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās,* p. 81.
[106] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 65.



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Similarly, ʿAzzām's wife later said her husband had been "very keen to train mujahidin in Afghanistan and send them to Palestine, and indeed the first generation of the military wing of the al-Qassām [brigades] was trained by him".[107] Looking back on this period an Israeli intelligence official later wrote:

> Osama bin Laden's name first came to the attention of Israeli intelligence in the late 1980s. In late 1987, (during the early stages of the first Palestinian Intifada uprising), officers of Israel's General Security Service, the Shabak, began to see the name 'bin Laden' appearing in documents captured from Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza. Investigations revealed that the man in question was a rich Saudi working closely with the radical Palestinian cleric Abdullah Azam, who was recruiting volunteers in Arab countries to fight with the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan.[108]

There has been some speculation that ʿAzzām's military assistance went beyond general training to also include support for specific operations in Israel/Palestine. However, so far the available evidence is weak. For example, a former Israeli security official told this author that Israeli authorities as early as 1986 had uncovered a planned suicide bombing "with links to Afghanistan", but the source did not elaborate on the plot or the nature of the links.[109] A more detailed piece of potential evidence is provided by ʿAzzām Tamīmī in his history of Ḥamās. Tamīmī describes a militant group operating in the West Bank in the early 1980s called Sarāya al-Jihād al-Islāmī, whose leaders, according to Tamīmī, "had extensive contacts with other Palestinian groups within Palestine and abroad. These included Abdallah Azzam."[110] Tamīmī names three of the group's leaders as Bāsim (Ḥamdī) Ṣultān, Marwān al-Kayyālī, and Muḥammad Ḥassan Bhays, and notes that they were all assassinated by Mossad in Cyprus in 1988.[111] Again, the nature of the supposed links to ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām is not described. Most likely, ʿAzzām's name came up in these discussions because some of the operatives had trained in Afghanistan, not because ʿAzzām was involved in the plotting. This hypothesis is supported by the following quotation from another of ʿAzzām's hagiographers:

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[107] "*Liqāʾ Zawjat al-Shahīd*".
[108] Shlomo Shpiro, "Israeli Intelligence and al-Qaeda," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 25, no. 2 (2012): p. 241.
[109] Interview with anonymous former security official, undisclosed date and location.
[110] Tamimi, *Ḥamās,* p. 44.
[111] *Ibid*., p. 327.



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> some of the [Palestinian militants detained by Israel] started confessing that they had trained under ʿAbdallāh ʻAzzām in Pakistan, and received weapons instruction in the mujahidin camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This concerned [Israel] who tried to via the US to put pressure on Pakistan to have sheikh ʿAbdallāh expelled, to end the training of Palestinian youth there.

Even if ʿAzzām was not involved in specific plots, we can be fairly certain that Israeli authorities knew of ʿAzzām and the training he provided to Palestinian militants before and during the intifada. This obviously prompts the question of whether Mossad assassinated him. ʿAzzām's death by a remotely detonated roadside bomb in Peshawar in November 1989 arguably remains the biggest murder mystery in the history of jihadism. Israel has been mentioned as one of several suspects over the years, along with the Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Arab Afghans such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Afghan intelligence service KHAD, Jordanian intelligence, and the CIA. Unfortunately, it is impossible to single out a prime suspect, in large part because Pakistani authorities never shared any information about the forensic evidence.

This author considers Mossad as one of three main candidates, along with KHAD and Hekmatyar. However, the case is far from clear-cut. On the one hand Israel arguably had the motivation, the capability, and a record of assassinating Palestinian militants abroad. It is within the realm of the possible that Israeli intelligence, in the midst of the Intifada, may have come to view ʿAzzām as a potential force multiplier for the Palestinian insurgency because he was training Palestinians in Afghanistan. On the other hand most – though not all – Mossad killings until then had been more targeted than the Peshawar bomb, which also killed two of ʿAzzām's adolescent sons.[112] Moreover, ʿAzzām was arguably not a target of quite the same value – in terms of operational involvement – as some of Mossad's previous victims. It is also not clear why Israel would not claim the attack, thereby benefitting from its deterrent effect, as they did with several of its previous liquidations. The evidence presented in this article does not shift the balance of this assessment in any significant way. The details on ʿAzzām's training of Palestinians suggest that Israel may have had a slightly stronger motive than previously believed, but it is hardly enough to conclude. As noted earlier, there are also

[112] A notable exception is the 22 January 1979 car bombing of Black September leader Ali Hassan Salameh in Beirut, which killed four innocent bystanders; Michael Bar-Zohar and Eitan Haber, *The Quest for the Red Prince: Israel's Relentless Manhunt for One of the World's Deadliest and Most Wanted Arab Terrorists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983).



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good reasons to suspect the Afghan intelligence service KHAD, which regularly carried out bombings and assassinations against Mujahidin elements in Peshawar in those days.

**Views on Palestine**

Having looked at what ʿAzzām *did* for Palestine, I will now examine what he said about it. This section considers ʿAzzām's ranking of Palestine in the hierarchy of Islamic causes, his views on armed resistance, his analysis of the relationship between the Afghan and Palestinian jihad, and finally his views on Ḥamās. There is no shortage of sources, because Palestine appears to have been on ʿAzzām's mind throughout his intellectual life. Some of his first and last books – *The Red Cancer* (1978) and *Ḥamās: Historical Roots and Charter* (1990) were about Palestine. Many of the texts in between contain reflections and remarks on the struggle.[113]

*Palestine as the primary struggle*

For ʿAzzām, the liberation of Jerusalem was an inescapable religious duty. "Palestine is a matter of creed [ʿ*aqīda*]", he often said, suggesting that one could not be a Muslim without fighting for the liberation of Palestine.[114] He often lamented the fact that he had had to leave the jihad in Palestine after Black September in 1970, and declared: "we will not have peace of mind until we return to the jihad in Palestine."[115]

For ʿAzzām, Palestine was not just important; it had priority over other struggles in the Muslim world. He stated outright that "Palestine is more important than Afghanistan" [*filastīn awlá min afghanistān*], and that "those Arabs who are able to wage jihad in Palestine should start there. Those who cannot should go to Afghanistan."[116] ʿAzzām was thus very open about the fact that jihad in Afghanistan was not his first choice. As one biographer described it, "the sheikh's body was in Afghanistan, but his spirit was suspended over Nablus and Jerusalem."[117]

*The resistance as corrupted and inaccessible*

[113] For a list, see Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, pp. 80-81.
[114] *Ibid*., p. 72.
[115] ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh*, p. 117.
[116] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 4; ʿAzzām, *al-Difāʿ*, p. 18.
[117] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 1 (editor's foreword).



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ʿAzzām was frequently accused by other activists of having abandoned his homeland in favour of Afghanistan.[118] His defence was to argue that circumstance had prevented him from fighting in Palestine, and that the war for Kabul was a means to the long-term end of liberating Jerusalem. He provided two main reasons for why he had not fought more against Israel.

The first was that the armed Palestinian resistance, in his view, had been hijacked by leftists. In ʿAzzām's view, Israel could only be defeated by an army fighting under an Islamic banner. Communism, by contrast, weakens the faith and is responsible for the failure of the Palestinian resistance. Hostility to leftism and bitterness with the PLO are major themes in ʿAzzām's ideological production.

ʿAzzām's attitudes to leftism were the result partly of a historical analysis and partly of anecdotal experiences. His historical analysis is laid out in the book *The Red Cancer*, which argues, as the title suggests, that communism has been a deeply corrupting influence on Palestinian politics. A key reason for this, he argues, it its Jewish origin:

> The Bolshevik revolution was Jewish in ideology, planning, funding and execution. Its philosopher and thinker was Marx, the grandson of the Jewish rabbi Mordechai Marx, and likewise with Lenin, who changed Marx's words into reality and revolution […] As for the funding (of the revolution), it was Jewish; the Brooklyn area of Eastern New York was the plotting base for the revolution; Trotsky was from there, and this area is still the center for the Jewish plotting to destroy mankind. […] All communist revolutions in the world are Jewish.[119]

ʿAzzām argues that communism was planted in the Arab world by Jews:

> The Jews orchestrated the organization and formation of communist parties in the Arab world; they are its leaders and planners […]. We have seen that all the communist organizations in the Arab world were controlled by the Jews […] as for

[118] One biographer noted: "[Azzam's] talk on the importance of jihad in Palestine leads us to the question that many people ask: How could the martyr ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām leave the land of ribāt and jihad around al-Aqsá in Palestine and move his efforts and his jihad to Afghanistan?"; Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 71. Another wrote: "Many of those who do not know the Martyred Imam well and who have not studied his writings think – wrongly – that the sheikh's heart swerved to Afghanistan and that he forgot Palestine. I heard several of our brothers in Palestine say this in all seriousness"; ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 1 (editor's foreword).
[119] *Ibid*., pp. 16-17 and 19.



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> communist leaders of Arab origin, they were trained by Jewish leaders after their minds had been changed and become Jewish.[120]

Thus this abomination made its way to young Palestinians:

> And they began to cultivate revolutionary culture in the youth!! The culture of Mao and Guevara. The revolutionary doctrine of Lenin and Stalin, the views of Marx, and the life of Castro. They taught the youth twenty key terms… imperialism, bourgeoisie, demagogy, proletariat… the youth thought they possessed something new and they substituted it for God's religion… so the battle changed from a jihad against the Jews and a struggle in God's path to a claim for territory and holy sites… to a war against the religion of God, to an internal conflict brought to every house between brothers, between father and son, daughter and mother.[121]

ʿAzzām's attitudes toward Palestinian leftists were coloured by his interactions with them during the Fedayeen period. The Islamists and the leftists did not get along at all. "Sometimes," he wrote, "we would encounter a group of them and we would stop and make the call to prayer, and they would chant leftist slogans back."[122] The following colourful passage from *The Red Cancer* is worth quoting at some length:

> We saw them in their bases from up close, with their nicknames such as Abū Jahl, Abū Lahab, Mao, Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh!! And their passwords were curses of religion and the Lord. As for their food, they would shoot dogs with their guns and eat them, because for them there was no difference between dogs and sheep; the distinction was a superstition brought by a man from the desert named Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him. […] We saw them; when Muslim, weapons-carrying, striving youth made the call to prayer in the Fedayeen gatherings, the sons of Lenin and Mao Tse Tung would babble on and raise their voices saying 'I don't care, I am an internationalist Marxist-Leninist.' […] The socialist revolutionaries have no values or manners. They had so many mistresses!! They beguiled them in the name of Palestine. You would enter their bases, especially in the offices in the cities such as

[120] *Ibid*, pp. 18 and 37.
[121] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[122] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 75.



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> Amman you would see them wearing tight trousers, sleeping to music, and waking to Oud strings mixed with Beatles and Hippies music!! And during a demonstration at the University of Jordan in 1979 they were saying loudly: 'our demands are bread, security, freedom, and gender equality.'[123]

The tensions generated more than just annoyances. At one point, ʿAzzām was summoned to a PLO military tribunal because he had insulted Che Guevara. He had reportedly asked one of the leftists "who is Che Guevara?" and "what is the religion of Fatah?" When the leftist said "Guevara is a noble freedom fighter and Fatah does not have a religion", ʿAzzām said "my religion is Islam, and Guevara is under my foot."[124]

ʿAzzām's second stated reason for not fighting in Palestine was that the battlefield was physically inaccessible. Not only did Israel guard its borders extremely well; her immediate neighbours Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon also prevented prospective fighters from even getting within striking distance of Israel.[125] For him personally, he added, it had been even more difficult because he had been thrown out of Jordan in 1981.[126] ʿAzzām was very bitter about the role of Arab governments in the Palestinian struggle. In his view, Arab rulers had done nothing but exploit Palestine for their own benefit: "I have not seen an issue with which traders have done more trading, with which the speculators have made more profit, and whose true friends have been oppressed more than in Palestine."[127]

ʿAzzām notably thought the Jordanian King Ḥusayn had been much too heavy-handed in its suppression of the Fedayeen, and he bitterly resented the regime's ban on anti-Israeli military activity from Jordan. After Black September, he remarked, possessing "a bullet became a crime, anyone who had one could be brought to military court, the same with mines and bombs."[128] In 1985 he wrote with acrimony: "chances come once in a lifetime ... do not let the chance for jihad in Afghanistan slip by you, like the chance we had in 1967-1970 when the borders were open on the Jordan River".[129]

The bottom line, in ʿAzzām's view, was that he had not had a choice of where to fight. He summed up his trajectory as follows:

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[123] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, pp. 40-41.
[124] ʿAzzām, *Ḥamās*, p. 74.
[125] Abū Rummān and Saʿīd, *al-ʿĀlim*, pp. 85-87; ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh*, p. 321.
[126] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 5.
[127] ʿĀmir, *al-Shaykh*, p. 119.
[128] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 4.
[129] ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām, "*Al-Ghurabāʾ*", *al-Jihād*, no. 3 (1985), p. 4.



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> God aroused in my heart the great hope to taste the sweetness of jihad in Palestine in 1969-1970. Afterwards, the activity of sacrifice was eradicated in Jordan, the borders were closed, jihad waned, and jihadist thinking was forbidden. I thought, "Where is the jihad?" I found a parcel of land called Afghanistan, and I tried getting there. God showed me the way there.[130]

Thus ʿAzzām came quite close to describing his own involvement in Afghanistan as mere opportunism. "For me", he wrote, "Afghanistan is not greater than Palestine, and Kabul is not holier than Hebron, but it was an opportunity I grasped after the oppressors expelled me […] so I went out to the land in which I found a path for *daʿwa* and a space to move.'"[131]

*Afghanistan as a strategy for the liberation of Palestine*

ʿAzzām subsequently articulated a strategic argument according to which the jihad in Afghanistan was a necessary stage in a process that would eventually lead to the liberation of Palestine. "He considered that the jihad in Afghanistan […] was just a means to the end of jihad in Palestine", one biographer bluntly put it.[132] According to ʿAzzām's pragmatic argument, victory in Afghanistan would strengthen the *umma* militarily through two mechanisms. The first was morale-boosting. Afghanistan, he argued, was the Muslim nation's best opportunity since 1948 to build a purely Islamic resistance movement. The Afghan jihad could thus serve as inspiration for the Muslim nation and mobilize the latter for the eventual liberation of Palestine.

The second mechanism by which the Afghanistan effort would help the Palestinian cause was through acquisition of territory. The only way to build a Muslim army strong enough to reconquer Jerusalem, he argued, was to have a contiguous piece of territory – a solid base [*qāʿida sulbá*] – on which to train and equip fighters.[133] In his view the best choice for such a base was in Afghanistan:

> Those who think that the jihad in Afghanistan is a distraction of the Islamic cause in Palestine are confused and misled and do not understand how one prepares leaders,

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[130] Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda, and Hamas," p. 83.
[131] Jarār, *al-Shahīd*, p. 73.
[132] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[133] This is the same position as that held today by Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī; see Joas Wagemakers' article in this special issue.



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how one builds a movement, how one founds a core around which a big Muslim army can be gathered to cleanse the earth of the big corruption.[134]

*Ḥamās must be supported*

One of the things that set ʿAzzām apart from subsequent al-Qaida-linked ideologues of Palestinian origin was his close relationship with Ḥamās. ʻAzzām greeted the latter's rise in the late 1980s with great enthusiasm and expressed admiration for Aḥmad Yassīn and other Ḥamās leaders.[135] By contrast, salafi-jihadi ideologues such as Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and Abū Qatāda al-Filastīnī have criticised Ḥamās heavily on theological grounds in recent years, accusing them of pursuing nationalist rather than religious objectives, and of displaying too much pragmatism. ʿAzzām had no such concerns. Of course, ʿAzzām only knew Ḥamās in its early and more uncompromising stage, and Asaf Maliach is probably right in arguing that ʿAzzām would not have appreciated Ḥamās's agreement to ceasefires and to participation in elections in the 2000s.[136] Still, his Muslim Brotherhood background would probably have made him slightly more inclined to tolerate a degree of pragmatism than Al-Maqdisī and Abū Qatāda.

## Conclusion

Although ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām left Palestine in 1967 and became famous for his role in Afghanistan, the Palestinian cause was very important to him. Unlike subsequent Palestinian ideologues of transnational jihad, ʿAzzām actually fought against Israel for an extended period and was happy to work with Ḥamās. He deeply resented the occupation of his homeland and wished to take part in its liberation. He did not personally fight Israel more often because he did not have the opportunity.

Did ʿAzzām become an advocate of transnational jihad despite or because of his Palestinian background? The evidence presented here lends more support to the latter suggestion than to the former. ʿAzzām's Palestinianness nudged him toward transnationalism in three main ways. First, it shaped his preferences and worldview. His family's loss of land in 1948 and his experience of life under occupation gave him a grievance. The successive failures of neighbouring states to liberate his homeland made him skeptical of military strategies led by nation-states. Second, ʿAzzām's rights and opportunities were somewhat

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[134] ʿAzzām, *Dhikrayāt Filastīn*, p. 1 (editor's foreword).
[135] *Ibid*., p. 82ff; Maliach, "Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda, and Hamas", p. 87.
[136] *Ibid*., p. 86.



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constrained in his new host states because he was a refugee. For example, when ʻAzzām criticized the Jordanian government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was encouraged to leave the country. As a result he moved to Saudi Arabia and from there to Pakistan. One can make plausible counterfactual argument that if ʻAzzām had been an East Bank Jordanian, he could not so easily have been expelled, and thus would not have ended up in Pakistan, at least not as early as he did. Third, and by contrast to his domestic constraints, his Palestinianness afforded him certain advantages in the transnational arena. Palestine's status as a symbol of Muslim suffering probably gave him a certain emotional power of persuasion vis-à-vis donors, for example in the Gulf. Moreover, Palestinian diaspora networks provided him with logistical support for his travels and with information from faraway places in an era without the Internet.

Of course, ʿAzzām's Palestinian background was at best a necessary cause of his transnationalism. Most other Palestinians in exile did not do the same as him. There are several other sides to his biography – not least his Muslim Brotherhood background – that must be considered in any explanation of his ideological trajectory. Still, Palestine looms large in the story of why ʿAzzām went global.



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