

THE LAST REFUGE

YEMEN, AL-QAEDA, AND
THE BATTLE FOR ARABIA

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ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

First published in Great Britain and the Commonwealth
by Oneworld Publications 2013

Originally published in the US by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.,
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110, USA

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A CIP record for this title is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-85168-940-8
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-78074-118-5

Design by by Chris Welch
Printed and bound by CPI Mackays, Croydon, UK.

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3SR

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PROLOGUE

Centuries ago, somewhere in the middle of the Arabian desert, an illiterate former shepherd gathered together his band of rebels and outcasts for some final words. Most of the men had broken with their families and tribes – the social glue of seventh-century Arabia – to follow the former shepherd and his stories of an angelic revelation. Muhammad’s claims had scandalized much of Mecca, on Arabia’s western coast. Chased out of his hometown by an assassination plot, Muhammad had fled north looking for help. He had already despatched some of his followers across the Red Sea into what is now Ethiopia, keeping only a handful of supporters by his side. Exhausted and on the run, it looked like the end for the small band of men who remained. Looking at the few who had followed him into the desert that day, Muhammad said, “When disaster threatens, seek refuge in Yemen.” If this failed, if Muhammad didn’t survive, those were their orders. Yemen was the last refuge.

History, of course, turned around. Muhammad’s desperate flight north didn’t fail. It was a success, the modest beginnings of an empire that would soon stretch across continents. That flickering moment of despair and doubt passed, but his words would remain,

instructions for what to do in case of emergency. Muhammad was speaking to more than just the present; he was speaking to the future. Someday disaster would come and his followers would need a last refuge. Those were the men he addressed that day in the desert: the future generation who would flee to Yemen. His words were for them, whoever they might be.

FOR MOST MUSLIMS, Muhammad's desperate order to flee to Yemen is apocryphal. But for others, the handfuls of men and women down the years who considered themselves the only true believers left, his instruction spoke to them and their situation. And for that, if for no other reason, it was believed. Faith trumped evidence.

Scattered around the world in isolated pockets and secluded villages, the small bands of believers never quite needed the refuge that Yemen promised. There was always another mountain hide-out, another untouchable sanctuary where they could find safety. Kings and rulers, mortal men bound by time and space, had their limits. But by the end of the twentieth century, those ancient bonds were slipping. A powerful state had arisen, and it could strike anywhere in the world. Robotic drones fired missiles at their meetings, while warships and planes harassed them out of their homes and villages. More than 1,400 years after Muhammad's battlefield speech, the moment had finally come. Surely, this was the disaster their Prophet had foreseen. The men and women of the early twenty-first century were his chosen generation, and they needed a last refuge.

IN EARLY JANUARY 2009, several of these men gathered for a meeting in a tiny two-storey safe house in the Yemeni highlands, just north of the capital, Sanaa. They came from all over the Arab world – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Gulf – and from Africa and South Asia. Within months, a handful of Americans and Europeans

would join them. For such young men, they had surprisingly long histories. Nearly all of them had fought and failed elsewhere. Some had been imprisoned, locked away in some of the world's darkest corners. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, Guantánamo Bay and Yemen, they had paid for their failures. In dank prison cells, the men had been tortured and interrogated, deprived of sleep and burned. But they had survived, and now they had fallen back on Muhammad's last refuge.

The men in the safe house that day had come to Yemen in boats, smuggled across the Gulf of Aden by human traffickers, lost in the daily waves of refugees from Africa. Some of the Saudis had driven south, speeding across the invisible line in the sand that acted as an international border. Others had landed at Sanaa International Airport claiming to be Arabic students or tourists. At least one of them had, like Muhammad's earliest supporters, ridden his camel to this latest jihad, crossing hundreds of miles of desert to reach the safe house. No matter how they arrived, they were all ready for what was coming.

Halfway around the world, Barack Obama, then President-elect of the US, was not prepared for what was about to happen. Sitting in a temporary office at the luxurious Hay-Adams Hotel next door to the White House, Obama was preparing to implement the changes he had promised during his campaign. At the top of his list was closing the prison at Guantánamo Bay. The detention facility had bothered him for years, harming America's image abroad and splitting voters at home. Domestic courts picked away at its legal underpinnings while stories of torture spilled out of Guantánamo's metal cages.

Although Obama didn't know it at the time, the handful of men meeting in the Yemeni safe house were about to force his hand. In the coming days, they would compel him to renege on his campaign pledge and, in the process, pose one of the most difficult questions of his administration: how could the US fight an agile

and stateless enemy without yet another costly invasion that would only make the problem worse?

Obama came into the presidency prepared to deal with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but he'd spent little time considering Yemen or its militants. In the early days of January 2009, Yemen was a secondary issue. By the end of his first week in office, however, Obama would have to address the situation in some way.

A few days before Obama's inauguration on 20 January 2008, the handful of men in the dusty building staged their own coming-out party. It had none of the pomp of a major international event, just four men sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of a white sheet and a black flag. The rest of the world wouldn't hear about it until days later, well after Obama had signed his executive order announcing his intent to close Guantánamo. But the men in Yemen knew what they were doing. From their cramped desert hideout, using only a camera and a few laptop computers, they embarrassed the President of the United States and his Arab allies – the Saudis and Yemenis – with a single video. Even the way they released the information was calculated to maximize its impact. First a teaser: a press statement posted on jihadi Web forums in the days leading up to the inauguration; and then, only after Obama was sworn in, the finished product.

THE NINETEEN-MINUTE video confirmed the worst fears of the allies in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: someone who had once been in custody was now free and threatening to kill those who opposed the jihadi cause. "We tell the American people that since you support the leaders who kill our women and children... we have come to slaughter you", the video proclaimed. Said al-Shihri, a former Guantánamo Bay detainee from Saudi Arabia who had been released more than a year earlier, had rejoined al-Qaeda. Sitting on the ground in a black robe with a bandolier of bullets draped over one shoulder and a rocket launcher resting on the floor

in front of him, he shook his finger at the camera. He was here, he said, to announce the merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda into a single organization: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. As he spoke, al-Qaeda technicians flashed his name, title, and internment serial number at Guantánamo, 372, across the bottom of the screen.

Shihri wasn't alone. Another former Guantánamo Bay detainee from Saudi Arabia, Muhammad al-Awfi, also appeared in the video. Sitting next to Shihri, wearing a suicide vest and a red checked headdress, was a Yemeni named Qasim al-Raymi, the group's new military commander. In the centre of the semicircle, dwarfed by the two large Saudis on either side of him, sat AQAP's new commander, Nasir al-Wihayshi. The tiny Yemeni with a jutting beard and soft-spoken manner had spent four years as Osama bin Laden's understudy in Afghanistan. He had been the al-Qaeda commander's personal secretary and aide-de-camp, and now he was branching out on his own.

Yemen was back in the game. Five years earlier, it had been a success story, an early victory in the West's war against al-Qaeda. Now those gains were lost and al-Qaeda was back. President Obama and his allies would need to work out how to fight a different kind of war, and they were going have to do it in one of the most inhospitable countries in the world, a place that was collapsing into civil war and violence as food prices soared and wells ran dry.

This is that story. It is the story of the rise, the fall, and the ultimate resurrection of al-Qaeda in Yemen. It is a story with heroes and villains, successes and failures, but mostly it is a story of America and its allies, and its enemies, and how we choose to fight our wars in this new century.

I

RISE AND FALL

A Far-Off Land

1980s

The call came late in the morning, the sharp ringing of the telephone echoing off the heavy stones in a Sanaa house. On the other end of the line, an unfamiliar voice crackled through miles of static. “Hisham has been martyred,” the man announced. “Congratulations.”

That was all the family would get, a handful of words from a stranger two thousand miles away. There was no body to bury and no final message to pass along. By the time the call came through from Pakistan, Hisham had been dead twelve days.

A member of one of Yemen’s great religious families, Hisham al-Daylami had left for Afghanistan months earlier to fight in the jihad against the Soviets. Abd al-Wahhab, the patriarch of the family, had twelve sons and a handful of daughters, but Hisham was his favourite. Physically, the two looked nothing alike. Abd al-Wahhab was tall and thin with a lopsided face that sloped down towards his right shoulder. A wiry beard forked down off his chin in a pair of red tangles that he liked to tug at when he was deep in thought. Hisham often made the same motion, stroking his hairless chin in imitation of his father, though the pudgy teenager lacked his father’s beard and his tall, striking looks. Still, the two shared a

special bond that had been obvious since Hisham was a boy. When his friends were outside playing football, Hisham was studying the Quran. When they discovered girls in secondary school, shadowing them through Sanaa's twisting streets, he was devouring the works of the Egyptian radical Sayyid Qutb. Nothing touched the heart of the forty-nine-year-old religious shaykh quite like the sight of his chubby son hunched over his books.

An exacting father, Abd al-Wahhab made no secret of his preference. He loved his other sons, but Hisham was special. And now those other sons, who had received the phone call while their father was out, had to give him the news. It was 12 September 1987, and Abd al-Wahhab's favourite son was dead.

SEPTEMBER IS ONE of the most beautiful times of the year in Sanaa. The mid-afternoon rains from the monsoon clouds that get caught in Yemen's high northern mountains as they blow off the Indian Ocean in late summer have passed, but the morning frost of winter has yet to set in and turn dawn prayers uncomfortably cold. Temperatures in the early autumn are mild enough for shirtsleeves and sandals as the city's inhabitants shuffle across the hourglass-shaped mountain basin upon which the city is built. On a clear day, one can easily make out the peak of Nabi Shuayb in the distance, which, at just over 3650 metres, is the highest point in the Arabian peninsula.

On that September morning in 1987, Abd al-Wahhab struggled to speak as he listened to his sons tell him about the phone call from Pakistan. As they talked, Abd al-Wahhab's mind drifted back to the ancient story of Jacob, and how the Hebrew patriarch had handled the loss of his own favourite son. But there was little comfort in that either. "My heart was sad and my eyes welled up," he recalled. "I wanted my son."

Eventually the full story emerged. Days earlier, Hisham had been part of an operation against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The

nineteen-year-old had attempted to fire a rocket without a launcher – an incredibly risky procedure that required balancing the rocket on a rock while using a string as a trigger – and miscalculated, killing himself and wounding two others, who like him had no previous military experience. The teenagers had been posted to a windy outpost in eastern Afghanistan known only as Maasada, or the Lion's Den, under the command of a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden.

In the years leading up to his son's death, Abd al-Wahhab had been part of a loose network of clerics and shaykhs who recruited for the jihad, encouraging young men like Hisham to travel to Afghanistan. The clerics preached wherever they could, in unfinished mosques of rebar and bare concrete and in the tiny back rooms of sympathetic shopkeepers. Across the Middle East, mainstream preachers in gleaming mosques ignored the wild-eyed clerics and their ranting sermons, but for the frustrated youths and unemployed young men their simple message struck a chord. Like Muhammad, who had built an army out of society's discards, clerics like Abd al-Wahhab transformed a movement of ex-cons and outcasts into a jihad. Drawing them in with his rhythmic and strangely looping speeches, Abd al-Wahhab had been one of the best, convincing dozens to travel thousands of miles to a land they had never heard of.

By 1986, the years of listening to his father's sermons had convinced Hisham. On a trip to Saudi Arabia to perform the hajj, the pilgrimage Islam requires of all believers, the precocious teenager told his father he was dropping out of school to travel to Afghanistan. Standing in the shadow of the Kaabah, the large cubic structure at the centre of Mecca's massive mosque and the holiest site in Islam, Abd al-Wahhab listened to his son's carefully rehearsed speech. He was surprised but not really shocked, and eventually promised Hisham his blessing on condition that he finished school first.

Even though he followed his father's instructions and waited an extra year, Hisham was still a child when he arrived in Peshawar, Pakistan – the dusty gateway to the war next door in Afghanistan. A border town full of shifting loyalties and backbiting politicians, Peshawar was nothing like the Islamic utopia he had dreamed of back in Sanaa. There was no sense of purpose and little unity. Instead of towering warriors and Islamic heroes, Hisham found a city of refugees.

In a picture taken days after he stepped off the plane in Pakistan, Hisham looks lost, a little boy drowning in his father's clothes. Within weeks of the snapshot he was dead, a martyr to the jihad. His father was supposed to be congratulated, not consoled. In time, Abd al-Wahhab would find the comfort his religion promised, even taking pride in his son's sacrifice, but on that day in September 1987 the pain was still too new. He wanted his son.

AFGHANISTAN SHOULD NEVER have been Hisham's war. A Cold War struggle in central Asia, it had little to do with Islam and nothing to do with Yemen. On the chessboard of great power politics, religion was an accident of geography. But driven by something deeper, something more elusive than politics or power, the Arabs were drawn to the war in Afghanistan, stumbling into a country they never quite understood.

The Afghanistan these Arab volunteers found was one of long, colourless winters and bleached deserts that cracked and crumbled underfoot. The bunched mountains in the east, twisted and broken with jagged, river-laced valleys, were nothing like the sweeping deserts and cramped cities most of the jihadis called home. The gritty backwash of a country at war was played out through fractious tribes and drugged-out warlords, petty criminals, spies, and prostitutes. That was the Afghanistan of history and experience. But there was another Afghanistan that existed beyond the chaos and mess. Nurtured to life in the pristine minds of teenage boys

like Hisham who would come to form terrorism's popular armies of the next century, their Afghanistan had always been more of an idea than a destination.

The Soviet Union's 1979 Christmas Day deployment to shore up the Communist government in Kabul sparked the initial fighting. But the Arabs soon transformed war into jihad. They hadn't travelled thousands of miles to stem the tide of Communism or fight for national liberation. Instead, the Arabs saw themselves as part of a long tradition dating back to the Prophet. Just as Muhammad had fought unbelievers and infidels, they were battling atheists and Communists. It was a myth, of course, but in time the myth created its own reality.

Unlike other Arab governments, who publicly supported the jihad while privately discouraging their young men from travelling to Afghanistan, North Yemen, then a separate state, sent scores of its best and brightest. For an entire generation of young Yemenis, a trip to the front lines in Afghanistan became a rite of passage. There were three channels that fed Yemen's pipeline to Afghanistan. The first was the government headed by President Ali Abdullah Salih, a short, leathery military commander who in the mid-1980s favoured an Afro and aviator shades. He had come to power nearly a decade earlier, in 1978, as North Yemen's fifth president. Salih invited recruits to the presidential palace, seating the awkward teenagers in huge, overstuffed chairs. Lost in the flowery opulence and gilded edges of the presidential décor, the boys listened as Salih compared them to Muhammad's earliest companions.

The second channel drew from Yemen's tribes, which often acted as a state in their own right, controlling territory and imposing their own laws in the country's rugged mountains. North of Sanaa two large tribal confederations, Hashid and Bakil, held sway. Referred to as the two wings of the state, the tribes were Yemen's most enduring social institution. Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the stately-looking head of the massive Hashid tribal confederation and

its thousands of armed fighters, often hosted video parties at his walled compound in downtown Sanaa, screening grainy videos from the front lines and organizing lectures by returning fighters from Afghanistan.

The third channel was Yemen's network of mosques. Every Friday, in sermons across the country, clerics echoed government ministers and tribal shaykhs, telling their congregations that they had a duty to fight. Along with Abd al-Wahhab al-Daylami, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, a tall, well-built preacher with a carrot-coloured beard, spearheaded the effort. A former student actor who had found religion in the late 1950s, Zindani knew how to work a room. He mesmerized audiences with tales from his trips to Afghanistan. Zindani told the eager-eyed young men of the miracles of jihad: of angels falling to earth to fight beside men and of corpses refusing to decompose. With signs like these, he explained in a booming voice, God was calling them forward.

OUTSIDE SANAA, part-time preachers in small villages across Yemen took their cues from clerics like Abd al-Wahhab and Zindani, repeating from their own pulpits the stories they had heard in the capital. Around the same time Hisham was petitioning his father for permission to go to Afghanistan, another young Yemeni was coming to a similar decision. Mustafa Badi, a curly-haired Yemeni in his twenties, was just back from a stint working in Saudi Arabia when he headed to the local village mosque one Friday with his cousin. "The sermon that day," he remembered years later, "changed the course of my life for ever."

The Shaykh spoke about Afghanistan, a place few in the audience had ever heard of. "I didn't even know where Afghanistan was," Badi confessed. Glancing at his cousin kneeling beside him, he asked in a whisper if he knew. His cousin shrugged a response with his eyes.

Afghanistan, the Shaykh's voice rang out from the front of the

mosque, is a land where Muslims are under attack. Soviet pilots strike from the air, murdering entire families in their homes as they sleep, he said. Communists rape women and disguise mines as toys, maiming children too young to pray. As he spoke, a few of the men kneeling in front of him started to cry. Slowly the sobs worked their way back through the congregation, washing over the worshippers. Touching his cheek with his hand, Badi felt his own tears.

Armed with nothing but their faith in God, the Shaykh continued, the Afghans were fighting back. But they needed help. Pausing slightly in his delivery, the Shaykh waited for the sniffing and muffled sobs to fade. He wanted every man's face turned towards his. His eyes swept across the room, taking in the worshippers and the wordless promises that were already forming. When he spoke again, his voice was a challenge. Badi didn't need to hear any more. The next morning he bought a ticket to Pakistan.

Days later, on the flight to Karachi, Badi considered what he was doing. He didn't know anyone in Pakistan or Afghanistan and had no idea what to do or where to go when the plane landed. A week earlier he hadn't even heard of Afghanistan, and now he was on his way there.

In a queue to use the plane's lavatory, he struck up a conversation with a pair of young Yemeni men. The two listened as Badi repeated the Shaykh's sermon, telling them of the crimes the Soviets were committing in Afghanistan. The men had told Badi they were students on their way to the Islamic University in Pakistan, but as the plane crossed over the Arabian Sea, they let slip that they too were headed to Afghanistan. The Yemenis took Badi under their care, guiding him through the wild port city of Karachi to a quiet hotel and getting him a ticket on their flight across the country to Peshawar.

In the arrivals lounge a Palestinian, who introduced himself simply as Abu Turab, was waiting for them. Along with a grubby Afghan fighter who didn't seem to speak, the jihadi packed the

Yemenis into a tiny bus, dropping them across town in front of a house in the University Town section of Peshawar. This, Abu Turab explained, was the Services Bureau, a hostel and bureaucratic clearing house for Arab volunteers run by Abdullah Azzam, the godfather of the Arab jihad in Afghanistan. Inside, the three surrendered their passports, identity cards, and money and selected new identities. The jihadi names, they were told, would protect them during their time in Peshawar's underground. Badi chose the name Ibrahim after his favourite prophet, the Old Testament and Quranic figure Abraham. For the rest of his time in Afghanistan he would be known only as Abu Ibrahim.

ABDULLAH AZZAM BECAME a father figure to the young men who arrived at his door in Peshawar. In Azzam's deep voice and expressive eyes, the teenagers and young men like Hisham and Badi found a man who could articulate the secret desires of their hearts. Azzam even looked like a leader. In Afghanistan, he had adopted the *pakul*, a soft woollen cap favoured by the mujahidin, and let his beard grow until it reached past his collar, two white streaks that turned back to black beneath his chin.

A Palestinian by birth, Azzam was seven years old when the state of Israel was created in 1948, and the shock of its founding shaped the arc of his life. Two decades later, the 1967 Arab–Israeli war pushed him out of Palestine and into exile. A graduate student at the time, Azzam moved to Cairo, where he completed his PhD at the prestigious al-Azhar University in 1973 before accepting a university position in Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia had struggled for supremacy of the Arab world, fighting their own version of a cold war on proxy battlefields across the Middle East. Egyptian dissidents found refuge in Saudi Arabia, while the kingdom's critics fled to Cairo. In Saudi Arabia, Azzam fell in with Egyptian exiles like Muhammad Qutb, the younger brother of Sayyid Qutb, the radical thinker and Islamist who had

been sent to his death by Egypt's President Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1966. Saudi Arabia put Egyptians like Qutb on a salary, giving them positions in state mosques and schools where they would go on to mould a generation of students with their understanding of the Quran and jihad.

By the time the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Azzam was ready to put his theories into practice. He took a job at the Islamic University in Islamabad in 1980. But life in the quiet, tree-lined Pakistani capital was still too far from the war he sought. Within months of his arrival in Pakistan, Azzam had uprooted his family a second time and moved them 120 miles west to Peshawar. Here, in the shadow of the Khyber Pass and the jihad that lay just beyond its snowcapped mountains, he found his life's work.

On trips across the border, Azzam watched the Afghan mujahidin push back repeated Soviet offensives with little more than antique rifles and their faith in God. Their courage under fire impressed the Palestinian exile, who believed his own homeland had been stolen by invaders. Soon Azzam was back in Peshawar, developing a vision for a pan-Arab army that would travel the world liberating Muslim lands from foreign occupation. In 1984, he distilled his thinking down to a religious ruling known as a fatwa. In it, Azzam argued that jihad in Afghanistan was a duty incumbent on all Muslims. That same year he established the guesthouse and office in Peshawar that he called the Services Bureau. The nerve centre of Arab efforts in Afghanistan, the Services Bureau was designed to catch the expected flow of volunteers. But for the first few years after Azzam's fatwa there was only a trickle, teenagers and young men like Hisham and Badi.

When the men wouldn't come to Afghanistan, Azzam brought Afghanistan to them. On recruiting trips across the Middle East, he roused crowds with his booming voice and onstage theatrics. "Jihad and the rifle alone," he shouted, shaking a rifle in the air. He repeated the performance wherever there were Muslims, travelling

to Europe and the US to recruit fighters for his war. The US, eager to see the Soviets bogged down in their own Vietnam, allowed Azzam to establish satellite centres across the country, in cities like Brooklyn, New York; Kansas City, Missouri; and Tucson; Arizona. The broad-shouldered Palestinian in his Afghan cap was a tireless recruiter, screening videos and delivering speeches night after night. “Your brothers and sisters in Afghanistan need you,” he beseeched the uncertain crowds.

Listening to Azzam, one jihadi recalled years later, “made me want to find a blanket and withdraw from the world”. The men that emerged were Azzam’s soldiers, pledging their loyalty and obedience to him. Everything Azzam did – the lectures, the videos, and especially his battlefield stories, when he would grab his listener by the hand, clenching his calloused fist around their fingers while he whispered what he’d seen on the front lines – was designed to attract the pious and the adventurous.

By the late 1980s, just as the Soviets were preparing to withdraw, the trickle of Arab volunteers had turned into a flood. Many of these men gravitated to Azzam and his Saudi protégé, Osama bin Laden, on 15 February 1989. The final Soviet soldier in Afghanistan, General Boris Gromov, walked across the concrete and steel Friendship Bridge and into Soviet Uzbekistan. That doesn’t matter, bin Laden told the legions of new fighters who had gathered around him in Peshawar. The Soviets had left behind a puppet government in Kabul, and bin Laden wanted to finish the job. The thirty-one-year-old Saudi was full of confidence after the Soviet retreat, and he was planning one final trip over the border into Afghanistan. No one expected much of a fight. In Langley, Virginia, the headquarters of the CIA, analysts agreed with the mujahidin’s assessments, and together with Pakistani intelligence they put together a plan to support the rebel fighters as they pushed west out of Pakistan towards Kabul. Already the subject of fawning articles back home in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden wanted to reach a wider audience. His

march to Kabul would be a victory lap that would secure his reputation as a hero of the jihad.

On the other side of the Khyber Pass, the Arabs reassembled in the freezing mountains outside the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. Tucked inside the city, protected by a winding river fed by the winter snows and lines of Russian mines, sat several thousand soldiers loyal to Afghanistan's Communist government. Along with bin Laden's Arabs, several groups of Afghan mujahidin had taken up positions in the mountains around the city in March and April, all hoping to deliver the knockout blow before advancing on Kabul, just over one hundred miles to the west. This was the loose alliance of shaggy-haired rebels and warlords that had impressed Azzam years earlier and which had eventually chased the Soviets out. Despite a decade of war, few of the mujahidin commanders had experience in taking a city. They had been guerrilla fighters, slipping out of the mountains to disable Soviet tanks or popping up from behind pine trees to bring down low-flying helicopters with Stinger missiles. Many of the commanders had been rivals for the foreign funding and arms that fuelled the war, and the years of competition had fostered a culture of mistrust.

Early efforts to take the city failed, as Communist fighters easily turned back the mujahidin's wild frontal assaults. Suspicious commanders, who worried their rivals were playing a double game and holding out for more cash now that the war was winding down, blamed one another for the setbacks. Instead of the quick romp to victory predicted by the CIA, the mujahidin coalition fractured and fell apart. Bin Laden tried to steer clear of the rivalries and suspicions in the Afghan ranks, but he couldn't defeat the Communists on his own. Most days, the Saudi commander despatched fresh raiding parties from his mountain base in a vain attempt to break the stalemate. Through the spring, dozens of Arab fighters lost their lives in bin Laden's poorly planned forays. One Yemeni fighter was killed when he attempted to rush a tank position. Others were

killed in the steady bombardment of missiles and cluster bombs from the Afghan Communists' ageing fleet of fighter planes.

Fifteen weeks after that first hopeful rush, in the heat of late summer in Afghanistan, Jalalabad finally fell to the mujahidin. The victory was a hollow one. The fissures that the siege of Jalalabad had exposed continued to grow as the fighting in Afghanistan collapsed into civil war between the various mujahidin commanders. Instead of enjoying his victory, bin Laden withdrew back to Pakistan in disgust, having lost more than eighty men in the weeks of fighting.

BOTH AZZAM AND bin Laden were troubled by the debacle at Jalalabad and the bickering fallout among their Afghan allies. Azzam wondered if his dream of a pan-Arab army had been a mistake, while bin Laden tried to work out where his battle plan had gone wrong. Each went looking for answers. Azzam travelled eight days on foot through the Hindu Kush to the northern Panjshir Valley on the border with Soviet Tajikistan to visit Ahmad Shah Massoud, a brilliant guerrilla commander who had stayed out of the fighting at Jalalabad. Bin Laden sought solitude and space. In late 1989, shortly after Azzam returned to Peshawar, the two spoke one final time. Then bin Laden flew home.

Azzam remained in Peshawar and tried to rebuild his dream. In November, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, the Yemeni cleric with the carrot-coloured beard, arrived in Peshawar to consult with his old friend and mentor. Zindani wanted to talk about the future and what to do after Afghanistan. Let's speak after Friday prayers, Azzam told him. The Palestinian commander was exhausted from the political backbiting in the border town, which by now had attracted thousands of unaffiliated fighters looking for a war. In the face of so many men entering Peshawar, Azzam had lost control of the movement. Like the Afghan mujahidin, the Arab alliance was breaking down. The Services Bureau couldn't keep up with the

paperwork of registering everyone in Azzam's antiquated database, and newer fighters began gravitating towards uncompromising figures like the Egyptian radical Ayman al-Zawahiri, who whispered that Azzam was the problem. Rumours and lies swirled through the city's markets and mosques. Instead of uniting Azzam's fighters, victory had divided them.

On 24 November 1989, the day Azzam was scheduled to meet with Zindani after Friday prayers, the veteran jihadi said goodbye to his wife and left for the mosque with two of his sons. Azzam's afternoon was packed with meetings, and he wanted some quiet time before prayers. As their car neared the mosque, a bomb that had been hidden in a drainage culvert exploded, splitting the car into two jagged pieces and killing all three men instantly. The twenty kilograms of TNT were powerful enough to propel the body of Azzam's twenty-three-year-old son, Muhammad, into a nearby tree, while the legs of his younger son, fourteen-year-old Ibrahim, became entangled in electrical wires overhead. The boy's hands landed across the street in a gory spray of metal and body parts that coated nearby buildings. Azzam's body, however, was barely touched. "There was just a little blood coming from his mouth," his nephew recalled.

A final miracle or not, the godfather of the Afghan jihad was dead. Weeks earlier, a cleaning crew at the mosque had discovered a massive bomb hidden under the pulpit he used for Friday sermons. Yes, there are threats, admitted Azzam at the time, telling one journalist, "My destiny is already written. Nothing I can do will prevent what is meant to happen."

At Azzam's funeral, days later, a broken-hearted Zindani tried to hold the movement together. Standing before hundreds of mourners on a hill outside Peshawar, he made an impassioned plea, his voice rising and falling in the microphone, as he praised Azzam's ability to reconcile different factions and called for unity now

that Azzam was gone. But Zindani couldn't replace Azzam. No one could.

Azzam's death ended whatever command-and-control structure existed among the squabbling Arabs. Absent the Soviets and Azzam's guiding hand, the fighting in Afghanistan went on, directionless and purposeless, a nationwide crime spree masquerading as war. Frustrated and outmanoeuvred, Zindani gave up on Afghanistan, following bin Laden back to Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family set him up in his own institution. Within months, the shine was off the new position. Lecturing and research was dull compared to a decade of jihad. Like Azzam, Zindani couldn't find it in his heart to be an academic. He hadn't even finished the two degrees he had started. His first, in pharmacy studies, he had abandoned when he found religion in Cairo. His next attempt, in Islamic studies at al-Azhar University, had been similarly short-lived. Looking to recapture some of the lost magic of the Afghanistan campaign, Zindani turned his back on Saudi Arabia's oil money and headed home to Yemen. He would soon find a new jihad.

WITH TIME TO think away from the battlefields in Afghanistan, bin Laden reflected on Azzam's assassination and his own failure at Jalalabad. Like Azzam, he had dreamed of a movement that would unite the Muslim world, restoring it to the greatness of the early caliphate, when Islam had reigned over an empire that stretched from Spain to Asia. The problem in Afghanistan, bin Laden believed, was a lack of unity. But he could fix that. Along with Tariq al-Fadhli, a twenty-two-year-old Yemeni veteran of Afghanistan, bin Laden was already working on plans for the next jihad. This time, he would be in control.

Fadhli was a thin, hawk-faced fighter with a goatee who favoured the same oversized black turban that would later be made famous by the Taliban. He had been with bin Laden in the mountains around Jalalabad, and had even been wounded in the fighting.

Both men had grown up in Saudi Arabia, but each saw Yemen as his homeland. Bin Laden's father, Muhammad, had been a Yemeni day labourer who travelled north to the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and turned himself into a construction magnate. Nasir al-Fadhli, on the other hand, had been born into leadership as the heir to the sultanate of Abyan, a region in southern Yemen famous for its coastal fishing and rugged mountains. Backed by the British Empire, which had established Aden first as part of the British East India Company, and then as a Crown colony, the Fadhli family thrived for much of the early twentieth century. The Sultan, a British client, had managed to hold onto his lands and title throughout much of the civil war against colonial rule that had begun in 1963 and soon devolved into infighting between Yemeni groups. In 1967, months after Tariq was born, the British abandoned Aden, leaving their former friends exposed. Marxist militias soon forced the Fadhli family off their farms and into exile in Saudi Arabia. Growing up in the kingdom, Fadhli was indoctrinated in the same theological school that would produce bin Laden and eventually al-Qaeda. By the time young Saudis started to head to Afghanistan in the mid-1980s, Fadhli had been uniquely prepared by both his father's stories and Saudi Arabia's strong anti-Communist ideology to combat the Soviets and their allies. The twin pillars of his life, family and faith, were allied against the same enemy.

Many of the Saudi volunteers who went to Afghanistan were rich dilettantes playing at jihad. But for Fadhli, fighting Communism was less an adventure holiday than a testing ground. Afghanistan prepared him for his real jihad in Yemen. The boy who went off to central Asia on jihad came home a leader of men. Fadhli had seen war and survived. The vague, youthful expression was gone, replaced by creases of tension around his eyes that deepened and widened as he grew older.

Recovering in Saudi Arabia from the wound he sustained at Jala-labad, Fadhli was as shocked by the news of Azzam's assassination

as bin Laden had been. Both men had trouble recognizing the movement they had helped mould. In Peshawar, Azzam's would-be heirs were bickering over the future of jihad, but in the steamy Saudi port city of Jeddah, bin Laden and Fadhli charted their own course. Bin Laden talked less than the others, but he planned more. And he had something no one else had: money.

In the months after Azzam's assassination, bin Laden and Fadhli sat up late in the evening, enjoying the cool sea breeze, as they sketched out the future of jihad in bin Laden's apartment. They were both drawn to Yemen, the land of their fathers, a place they knew only through family stories and snapshots. Said to be the Arab world's Afghanistan, Yemen was full of tribes and mountains and, at least in the south, was ruled by Socialists. But mostly it was a blank map onto which the two young jihadis could project their ambitions.

After months of conversations and lengthy strategy sessions, the pair produced a plan that looked remarkably like the one Azzam had used in Afghanistan. Bin Laden would supply the funding while Fadhli led a group of Arab fighters into the southern mountains, where they would initiate a guerrilla war. In bin Laden's mind, the Yemen campaign would be the first in a series of steps to renew and reinvigorate the Muslim world. But first he had to rid the Arab world of the Communists. The jihadis, bin Laden believed, had defeated them in Afghanistan; surely they could beat them in Yemen. At once grandiose in objective and simple in design, bin Laden's plan, like Azzam's original, would benefit from decisions made elsewhere. As in Afghanistan, a state and a band of jihadis were about to find they had a common enemy.