CHAPTER 4

Who Is Fighting Jihad?

The religion was totally ingrained in her. She only lived for that.
Liliane Degauque, describing her daughter, the first European female convert to Islam to carry out a jihadist suicide mission.¹

Who exactly is carrying out this global jihad? Who are the movement’s leaders, who comprises the rank and file of this self-proclaimed Islamic army? How do jihadists make their way to the global jihad? Are they recruited? What inspires them? Are they motivated by a sense of desperation or a vision of a new world order?

Leadership

The leader of the global jihad movement is, of course, Usama bin Laden (b. 1957), the head of the movement’s lead organization, al Qaeda. As we have already learned, al Qaeda grew out of the thousands of “Arab Afghans” who flocked to fight jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s, to save their fellow Muslims from the Soviets. General Hamid Gul, the head of Pakistan’s intelligence service, who played a role in unleashing these Arab Afghans, described them as “the first international brigade” of Muslims in “modern time,” pointing out that “the Communists had their international brigades, the West has NATO,” and then posed the rhetorical question, “Why should we Muslims not unite to one common front?”²

As we have already learned, this “international brigade” of Muslims originally came together under Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989), a Palestinian cleric who used the worldwide system of Sunni mosques, Islamic cultural organizations, professional unions, informal prayer circles, Koranic study groups, and Muslim student associations, and the new audio and videotape technology, to call his fellow Muslims to join a jihad against the godless communists who invaded Afghanistan in 1979. When the war with the Soviets finally wound down at the end of the 1980s, Azzam now joined by bin Laden, decided that instead of
dismantling the force they had organized, they should build upon it as the foundation of a global Islamic army. Thus, over time, the “Bureau of Services” (or, in Arabic, the *Maktab al Khidmat*), the organization they had created to manage the flow of fighters into Afghanistan metamorphosed into a global jihad movement, or *al Qaeda*, which in Arabic means *the base*. By the time Azzam was murdered in a roadside bombing on his way to mosque in 1989, bin Laden was already the group’s undisputed leader.

Who exactly is bin Laden and how did he come to head up the global jihad movement? Where did he learn his organizational skills? What do we know about his personality and the factors that motivate him?

Bin Laden first found his way to jihad soon after graduating from college in 1981. The wealthy young Saudi was the son of a Yemeni, Mohamed bin Laden (1895–1968), who in 1930 trekked over a thousand miles through the harsh desert to the holy lands of Islam in order to escape what would have likely been his fate had he remained in his native Yemen: the back-breaking life of a dockside laborer.

In Saudi Arabia, the bin Laden patriarch first found work as a porter in Jeddah assisting pilgrims going to Mecca. However, within only a couple of decades he was the head of his own construction company, winning contracts from the royal family to build palaces and reconstructing the highway between the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. “He couldn’t read or write and signed his name with a cross all his life, but he had an extraordinary intelligence,” recalled a French engineer who worked with him in the 1960s.

The senior bin Laden also “changed wives like you or I change cars,” according to the French engineer. Under Islamic law, he was entitled to have up to four wives at a time as long as he treated them equally, both emotionally and financially. In all he is believed to have married some twenty-two women. He is alleged to have stayed married to the first three wives but kept the fourth-wife slot as a temporary post, using it to marry and divorce beautiful women, some as young as fifteen.

Bin Laden’s mother was one of these revolving fourth wives, perhaps his tenth or eleventh. She was at the time of her marriage to Mohamed, a 22-year old Syrian beauty, who is said to have shown a preference for Chanel suits over the traditional Saudi veil. Though bin Laden was his father’s seventeenth child out of a total of some fifty, he was his mother’s only child with his father because soon after he was born, his parents divorced.

Bin Laden’s mother later married one of her ex-husband’s employees with whom she had another four children. There are conflicting accounts about his early childhood but the likelihood is that Bin Laden lived with his mother until the age of nine when, as is the law in Saudi Arabia, he went to live with his father. What is certain, however, is that any time he would have spent with his father was cut short because when he was just eleven, his father died in an airplane crash (some press reports contend it was a helicopter crash). Incidentally, Bin Laden would continue the practice of polygamy, marrying at least four times and fathering anywhere from a dozen to some twenty children. His first marriage to a cousin on his mother’s side occurred when he was just seventeen.