

activity. He and the cleric Azzam had joined in creating a “Bureau of Services” (Mektab al Khidmat, or MAK), which channeled recruits into Afghanistan.²²

The international environment for Bin Ladin’s efforts was ideal. Saudi Arabia and the United States supplied billions of dollars worth of secret assistance to rebel groups in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet occupation. This assistance was funneled through Pakistan: the Pakistani military intelligence service (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISID), helped train the rebels and distribute the arms. But Bin Ladin and his comrades had their own sources of support and training, and they received little or no assistance from the United States.²³

April 1988 brought victory for the Afghan jihad. Moscow declared it would pull its military forces out of Afghanistan within the next nine months. As the Soviets began their withdrawal, the jihad’s leaders debated what to do next.

Bin Ladin and Azzam agreed that the organization successfully created for Afghanistan should not be allowed to dissolve. They established what they called a base or foundation (al Qaeda) as a potential general headquarters for future jihad.²⁴ Though Azzam had been considered number one in the MAK, by August 1988 Bin Ladin was clearly the leader (*emir*) of al Qaeda. This organization’s structure included as its operating arms an intelligence component, a military committee, a financial committee, a political committee, and a committee in charge of media affairs and propaganda. It also had an Advisory Council (Shura) made up of Bin Ladin’s inner circle.²⁵

Bin Ladin’s assumption of the helm of al Qaeda was evidence of his growing self-confidence and ambition. He soon made clear his desire for unchallenged control and for preparing the mujahideen to fight anywhere in the world. Azzam, by contrast, favored continuing to fight in Afghanistan until it had a true Islamist government. And, as a Palestinian, he saw Israel as the top priority for the next stage.²⁶

Whether the dispute was about power, personal differences, or strategy, it ended on November 24, 1989, when a remotely controlled car bomb killed Azzam and both of his sons. The killers were assumed to be rival Egyptians. The outcome left Bin Ladin indisputably in charge of what remained of the MAK and al Qaeda.²⁷

Through writers like Qutb, and the presence of Egyptian Islamist teachers in the Saudi educational system, Islamists already had a strong intellectual influence on Bin Ladin and his al Qaeda colleagues. By the late 1980s, the Egyptian Islamist movement—badly battered in the government crackdown following President Sadat’s assassination—was centered in two major organizations: the Islamic Group and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. A spiritual guide for both, but especially the Islamic Group, was the so-called Blind Sheikh, Omar Abdel Rahman. His preaching had inspired the assassination of Sadat. After being in and out of Egyptian prisons during the 1980s, Abdel Rahman found