



RESEARCH BRIEFING MARCH 2017



TRIBUTES FOR A JIHADIST GODFATHER:
from Moazzam Begg to
Al Qaeda Central

INTRODUCTION

Death and martyrdom are key parts of jihadist ideology. It is, therefore, vitally important to note the reactions to the deaths of leading jihadists: whether by actual terrorist groups, or by those British Islamists who push victimhood narratives.

The below image was released by GreenBirdsMedia, an Al Qaeda-linked outlet, after the group's revered 'blind Sheikh' Omar Abdel Rahman¹ recently died in an American prison. A leading jihadist since the 1970s, he was imprisoned on numerous conspiracy charges that included his followers' role in the 1993 terrorist plot² to try and destroy³ New York's World Trade Center (using explosives not passenger jets).

As you can see, the Al Qaeda image shows Rahman and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. It calls Rahman 'a source of inspiration', 'a great example', adding, 'May Allah have mercy on his soul'.

Globally, Al Qaeda has led the tributes to Rahman, including calls for attacks to avenge his death. In Britain, eulogies came from Moazzam Begg⁴ of CAGE, Dilly Hussain⁵ of 5 Pillars, the Islamic Human Rights Commission⁶,

Fahad Ansari, Sheikh Hani al-Sibai and Sheikh Dr Khaled Fikry.

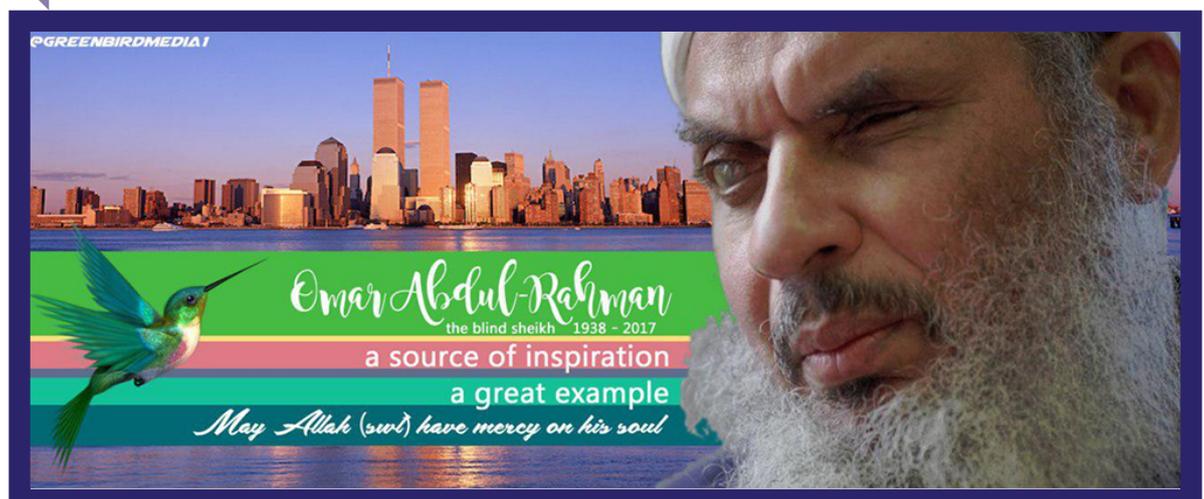
These non-violent British Islamists do not praise Rahman for his role in terrorism, far less call for revenge attacks. Rather, they vary from claiming his innocence to praising him as a martyr and a unifier of Muslims. They promote Rahman as a Muslim role model and victim par excellence.

The tributes are similar to a crime movie, in which the mafia godfather dies and the FBI inevitably watch his associates gather at the funeral. Some are wanted murderers, others run legitimate businesses. All do their duty, distinguishing themselves from normal society by coming to the funeral like moths to a flame, regardless of reputational risk.

Of course, those dead or in prison cannot publicly mourn. This part is played by the Al Muhajiroun⁷ group: previously noisy agitators for Rahman's release, they are now banned for having been Britain's leading supplier of Jihadist terrorists to Al Qaeda, Islamic State etc.

Step forward then, Moazzam Begg of CAGE, strongly promoted on and off campus by left-

Omar Abdul Rahman, GreenBirdsMedia



1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/18/omar-abdel-rahman-blind-sheikh-dies-world-trade-center-bombing>

2. http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-2nd-circuit/1011788.html#footnote_2

3. <https://www.911memorial.org/1993-world-trade-center-bombing>

4. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155084997897915&set=a.33686212914.56375.566637914&type=3&theater>

5. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155171206341042&set=a.10151491666371042.539211.695526041&type=3&theater>

6. <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/activities/press-releases/11857-press-release-usasheikh-omar-abdul-rehman-world-has-lost-a-man-of-principle-and-unshakeable-faith>

7. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1384353/Osama-bin-Laden-mock-funeral-Fury-erupts-outside-US-Embassy-London.html>

wing and soft Islamist groups, desperate to depict Government anti-extremism initiatives as being anti-Muslim, rather than anti-terrorist and pro-social cohesion.

Similarly, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, but from its pro-Hizbollah and pro-Iranian angle. (Jeremy Corbyn MP attended⁸ an IHRC hosted event as recently as December 2016, publicly praised the IHRC⁹ in 2010, and led Stop the War during much of its own continuing association with the IHRC.)

Considering Sheikh Rahman's role in advancing concepts of contemporary violent jihad,

as well as his US conviction over bombing conspiracies, the eulogising of this dead leader raises serious concerns and prompts important questions:

Who was Rahman and what is his legacy to jihad and terrorism?

Which British groups have supported Rahman?

Why do British human rights campaigners laud a convicted terrorist revered by al-Qaeda?

The answers detailed in this CST Research Briefing should trouble us all.

8. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ihrc/sets/72157673599228334>

9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lJdXENl13g>

The 1990s Bombing Conspiracies

Omar Abdel Rahman, before his passing on 18 February 2017, was serving a life sentence in a US federal prison since 1996. His obituaries aid a fuller understanding of his background and activities, including the spiritual guidance he offered to the al-Gama'at al-Islamiya (The Islamic Group, which the UK proscribed in March 2001) and other Egyptian jihadist groups in the 1970s-80s; his travels in the 1980s to Pakistan and Afghanistan, which brought him into contact with Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden; and his extremist speeches and interactions after immigrating to the United States.

Rahman and several co-defendants were convicted¹⁰ in 1995 on numerous charges, including seditious conspiracy, conspiracy to conduct bombings, soliciting the murder of then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak

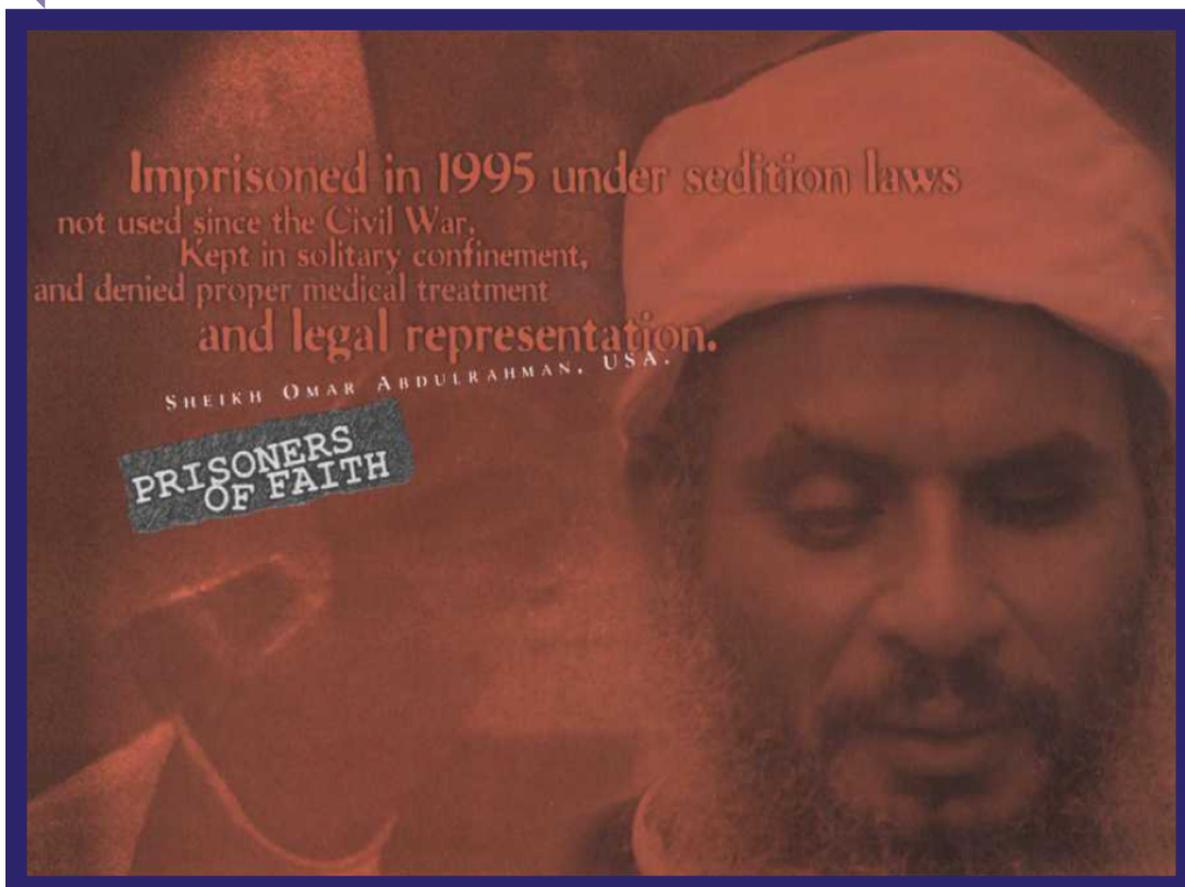
and soliciting an attack on American military installations. The bombing conspiracies included the bombing attack at New York's World Trade Center on 26 February 1993, as well as a further plot in New York in Spring 1993 to simultaneously bomb the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels and the United Nations complex. One defendant was also convicted of the 1990 assassination of the extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane in a New York hotel.

British Supporters of Sheikh Abdel Rahman

Support for Sheikh Abdel Rahman in the UK is not new and has been expressed within a cross-section of often rival British Islamist groups.

Already in the late 1990s, the now-defunct website Azzam Publications (named after

IHRC photo of Omar Abdel Rahman



10. http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-2nd-circuit/1011788.html#footnote_2



Mock funeral for Osama bin Laden outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, May 2011

Abdullah Azzam, godfather of the earlier Afghan jihad against the USSR's invasion) distributed, in English, Rahman's incendiary Ramadan message:

'So O Muslim youth in every corner of the earth, rush to it with a tremendous, strong and thundering eruption...Chase from behind them with strength and force so that they may remember; announce the Islamic Jihad in every land of Jihad, and multiply the effort...Erupt upon the people of oppression and tyranny, remove them from the surface of the earth, and bury them in its depths. Cleanse the life from this impurity and filth, those who make people taste distress, and cram the Muslim youth into prison camps. So it is upon you, O youth of Islam, that you should wake up, and rouse from your heedlessness, for the period of sleep is over...and the time for Jihad and fighting has started; sacrifice, generosity and Jihad in the way of Allah.'

Azzam Publications¹¹, which Babar Ahmad launched in 1996s and ran for many years, was a repository of jihadi literature glorifying Western Muslims who died fighting jihad, and

advising volunteers on how to raise money and fight abroad. The website also published¹² Osama bin Laden's 1996 Declaration of War Against the Americans.

The pro-Iranian Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) has, since the 2000s, campaigned for Abdul Rahman's release as part of its 'Prisoners of Faith' project. IHRC's old campaign pack¹³, which remains on its website, urged supporters to engage in a letter writing campaign and stated that,

'Sheikh Omar needs even more prayers and support, therefore IHRC requests you to do your best and to strive your utmost in campaigning for his release.'

As part of this campaign, IHRC also used to distribute postcards with Abdel Rahman's photo (see image on opposite page).

Upon Rahman's death, IHRC's press release-cum-encomium, described him as 'a rare man of principle' whose 'death will only make him a martyr', doubling down on its affection and admiration for him.

11. <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2016/03/16/babar-ahmad-ideal-of-jihad-is-still-a-problem>

12. <http://web.archive.org/web/20010122062500/http://www.azzam.com/html/articlesdeclaration.htm>

13. http://www.ihrc.org.uk/attachments/5355_PFOmarAbdelRahmanFinal.pdf

'The death of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rehman in a US penitentiary has robbed the world of a rare man of principle who refused to be cowed by state bullying and terror...IHRC had long campaigned for the release of Sheikh Omar in the knowledge that his conviction was unsafe and that he had been set up by the US government solely for his influential religious and political views. His death will only make him a martyr and more of an inspiration for people who continue to resist foreign backed autocracy and imperialism in the Muslim world.'

Groups like al-Muhajiroun and its successors, which the IHRC denounced, also supported Rahman. During the 2000s, activists in al-Muhajiroun circles, such as Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades (MAC), would hold placards calling for Rahman to be freed. This was perhaps most blatant when MAC held its 'mock funeral'¹⁴ for Osama bin Laden outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square in May 2011.

On the day of Rahman's death, Moazzam Begg, the outreach director of CAGE, posted¹⁵ a tribute on Facebook.

Asim Qureshi, the research director of CAGE, 'liked' Begg's post, using a 'crying' emoji.

Fahad Ansari, an immigration solicitor who has contributed articles on the websites of both IHRC and CAGE, also liked Begg's post and posted¹⁶ his own Facebook tribute stating that it is 'Very sad to hear about the passing of Sheikh Umer Abdul Rahman' who was 'forgotten by the world at the time of his death but left this world with dignity and honour.'

Begg's post quotes what Rahman reportedly stated at his sentencing, 'By the Lord of the Kaaba I am successful' and 'everything comes from Allah.' Begg also called Rahman 'a scholar of Islam and an opponent of the Egyptian regime.' In particular, Begg praised Rahman's intra-Islamic ecumenism, writing that he 'had been a strong proponent of Shia/Sunni cooperation and unity before his incarceration.'

Begg had made similar remarks at the July 2011 Universal Justice Network conference in Malaysia. In a video from the event on IHRC's YouTube channel¹⁷, Begg stated that he wanted Rahman's guidance on building relationships between Sunnis and Shia. In discussing some of the steps towards bridging Sunni-Shia

Facebook post by Moazzam Begg



Moazzam Begg

18 February at 18:20 · 🌐

Sheikh Omar Abdur Rahman passed away today after almost 25 years of solitary confinement in American prisons. He was a scholar of Islam and an opponent of the Egyptian regime, where he had also been imprisoned. However, it was in America where this blind, old man ultimately met his demise after being convicted - many say falsely, based on the testimony of an agent provocateur - of inspiring acts of terrorism in America.

He said his only crime was speaking the truth against powerful leaders and seeking divine justice.

Notwithstanding his connection to groups and individuals in the Sunni "jihad" movement Sheikh Omar AbdurRahman had been a strong proponent of Shia/Sunni cooperation and unity before his incarceration.

Despite numerous pleas for clemency as well as appeals against contested aspects of the trial the sheikh remained imprisoned, largely forgotten.

Upon receiving his life sentence he is reported to have said: "فرت و رب الكعبة"

"By the Lord of the Ka'bah, I am successful".

لما أخذ وله ما أعطى وكل شيء عنده بأجل مسمى



14. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1384353/Osama-bin-Laden-mock-funeral-Fury-erupts-outside-US-Embassy-London.html>

15. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155084997897915&set=a.33686212914.56375.566637914&type=3&theater>

16. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154141203577102&set=a.101050410440322102.349469.595222101&type=3&theater>



Dilly Hussain Facebook post

differences, Begg cited his discussion with a 'sister' from Hizbollah, suggesting that Sunni-Shia reconciliation will emanate from a shared pride in fighting and defeating 'oppressors' such as Israel:

'...her experience of being with that organisation and how they took on the Israeli entity and by the grace of Allah (swt) defeated it. Even though they were regarded as the Shia and in part of the Sunni Muslim world who would generally have been completely rejected. Had it not been for the fact that victory came in the form of the Hizbollah against the Israelis, and that this was something that we could share from her experience, and something that actually gave some pride to the Sunni world. And so it showed that there was an extension beyond simply being a Shia or Sunni, rather it was fighting and raising up against oppression and defeating the oppressor.'

Immediately after this, Begg referenced Rahman and expressed his wish to see Rahman freed from prison:

'There is a person's name, a great scholar's name that has been mentioned quite often. That's Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman who is imprisoned in the United States of America, and he was one of the people who early on spoke out against the demonisation of the Shia community and in fact encouraged Sunnis to stretch their hands across in brotherhood and friendship with the Shia community from the Sunnis. And I would like to see it some point, I'd like to see him freed of course with the new Egyptian regime hopefully calling for his release. I would like to hear also, if possible, just a small statement from him, if it's possible, in relation to this. There are a great number

of people in the Sunni world and particularly those who are particularly anti-Shia who also greatly respect Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman. So I would like his statement and his statements of support for working with Shia community to be brought out, so that it can once and for all put pay to any of the ideas that help to foster more hatred between us.'

Many others in the UK, including Sheikhs Hani al-Sibai¹⁸ and Dr Khalid Fikry¹⁹, have also posted tributes on their Facebook pages. Dilly Hussain²⁰, deputy editor of 5Pillars, described the 'Heartbreaking news of the passing of Sheikh Omar Abdur Rahman.'

17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxxyIT4-Gp4>

18. <https://www.facebook.com/mohibidrhani/photos/a.297278376999540.67815.297266940334017/1321976511196383/?type=3>

19. <https://www.facebook.com/dr.khaledfikry/photos/a.542552415793287.1073741828.541335515914977/1177952712253251/?type=3&theater>

20. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155171206341042&set=a.10151491666371042.539211.695526041&type=3>

Al-Qaeda's Reverence of Sheikh Abdel Rahman

All the tributes noted above, however, cannot be read in isolation. They must be considered within the context of other eulogies pouring out for Abdel Rahman.

Al Qaeda Central released its statement lauding his legacy and bemoaning that 'parting with you O sheikh of the mujahideen [holy warriors] makes us grieve.'

The message openly states that over the years Al Qaeda has carried out kidnappings of Americans and Westerners in order to exchange them for Rahman. In 2006, for example, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir²¹, the then leader of Al-Qaeda Iraq (the forerunner to what is now ISIS / Da'esh), called for jihadists in Iraq 'to strive to capture some of the dogs of the Christians so that we can liberate our imprisoned sheikh [Rahman]'

Al Qaeda Central's eulogy blamed US authorities for killing Rahman (by withholding his medications) and explicitly calls for revenge attacks against Americans:

'Do not leave the Americans to enjoy living in safety and security. Kill them, lie in wait for them everywhere, plunge terror inside their hearts, and avenge your Sheikh.'

Meanwhile, AQ affiliates AQAP (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) released a joint statement calling Rahman 'a brave leader of the leaders of the Mujahideen, the lion of knowledge and jihad.' AQAP also released its own memorial film. AQ's east African affiliate Al-Shabaab released a message, as did another AQ-linked group, GIMF (Global Islamic Media Front). The GIMF statement posted an English translation of Rahman's final will in which he calls for his death to be avenged:

'If they kill me – and they inevitably will – publicize my funeral, and send my corpse to my...and do not forget my blood and do not waste it. Instead, avenge me with the most powerful and violence revenge. Remember a brother who told you a word of truth and was killed in the Way of Allah.'

Al-Qaeda's current tributes for Rahman are entirely understandable within the group's historical development and current context. An appreciation of Rahman's contribution to contemporary jihad requires an understanding of how much Al-Qaeda revered him.

Peter Bergin²², the terrorism analyst and biographer of Osama bin Laden, has incisively chronicled the importance that AQ's leaders attached to Rahman's rulings and spiritual guidance. As early as 1997, bin Laden, speaking in his first-ever televised interview²³, praised Rahman's guidance and derided his imprisonment:

'Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman is a Muslim scholar well known all over the Muslim world. He represents the kind of injustice that is adopted by the US. A baseless case was fabricated against him even though he is a blind old man.'

In May 1998, bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Hafs al-Misri hosted a landmark press conference in Afghanistan announcing the inauguration of their group, then known as the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and the Crusaders (initially announced in February 1998). According to reports, two of Rahman's sons also attended this conference; they distributed cards with a printed fatwa in Arabic that included a photo of their father and that was signed²⁴ 'Your brother Abdel Rahman, from inside American prisons.' The actual text, which was ostensibly smuggled out of the sheikh's cell in the US, called for Muslims to attack Jews and Christians. It included:

21. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5389794.stm

22. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/19/opinions/9-11-spiritual-guide-dies-bergen/>

23. <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0109/29/pitn.00.html>

24. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/19/opinions/9-11-spiritual-guide-dies-bergen/>

'Divide their nation, tear them to shreds, destroy their economy, burn their companies, ruin their welfare, sink their ships and kill them on land, sea and air.'

AQ material in the 1990s and 2000s often referenced Abdel Rahman, and in September 2000, a year before the 9/11 attacks, AQ leaders met in Afghanistan for an event²⁵ titled the 'Convention to Support Honorable Omar Abdel Rahman.'

Overall, Bergin considers Abdel Rahman's fatwas as providing AQ with the scholarly and religious justification for its violent jihad against the West.

In Bergin's words: 'As someone with a doctorate in Islamic law, Sheikh Rahman was

able to rule that it was legally permissible, and even desirable, to carry out attacks against American planes and corporations.'

Do CAGE, IHRC and their leftist sympathisers want British Muslims to revere a martyred jihadist godfather whom Al Qaeda venerates?

Do they want British Muslims to parallel their own challenges with that of the imprisoned, now dead, Sheikh Rahman?

If the answer to these questions is no, then why are they eulogising Rahman's death?

If the answers are yes, then what does it say about their true character and goals?

CONCLUSION

Since Sheikh Abdel Rahman's incarceration, his contributions to earlier and contemporary manifestations of violent jihad may have faded from public consciousness. He was, however, a pivotal figure who advanced the religious justifications that Al Qaeda and its affiliates have relied upon in their declaring war upon the West.

Despite his importance to Al Qaeda, Rahman's British supporters clamoured for his release.

Now, ostensible human rights activists, such as Moazzam Begg and the IHRC, mourn his passing with reverence and admiration that appear to be entirely sincere.

This mourning of Rahman is not a private matter. It is also intended for a British Muslim audience that faces real and significant challenges of racism and integration.

25. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/19/opinions/9-11-spiritual-guide-dies-bergen/>

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- To represent British Jews on issues of racism, antisemitism, extremism, policing and security.
- To promote good relations between British Jews and the rest of British society by working towards the elimination of racism, and antisemitism in particular.
- To facilitate Jewish life by protecting Jews from the dangers of antisemitism, and antisemitic terrorism in particular.
- To help those who are victims of antisemitic hatred, harassment or bias.
- To promote research into racism, antisemitism and extremism; and to use this research for the benefit of both the Jewish community and society in general.
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