

The Sanctification of Aafia Siddiqui

By [Anne-Christine Hoff](#) (January 2025)



Aafia Siddiqui

John F. Kennedy once said, “The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived, and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.” The myth surrounding the former Al-Qaeda operative Aafia Siddiqui is surely all those things—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. The myth about her is radically idealized, and it stands in opposition to the [court records](#) and the eyewitness testimonials of those whom she was convicted of attempting to murder back in 2008.

Siddiqui's sentencing is now over a decade old, and yet organizations like [The Aafia Foundation](#) continue to rally for both her release and the overturning of her 86-year sentence. If the rhetoric is to be believed, [Siddiqui's foundation advocates](#) are on the side of peace and justice, superheroes who are "the AGENTS OF DEFENSE of human rights for all no matter the race, class or religion of the person." They are the ones who understand that Dr. Siddiqui (known by her fans as 'Dr. Aafia') is not a cold-blooded killer, but "a passionate Pakistani Muslim activist with a neuroscience degree and loving family" who was "unfairly imprisoned and tortured" and then "wrongfully convicted" of attempted murder.

Who is the woman described in such glowing terms? A Pakistani national, it is true that Aafia Siddiqui is academically gifted in the sciences. She graduated in 1995 with a B.S. in biology from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and her suitemates described her as "[just nice and soft spoken](#)." Six years later, she received a Ph.D. from Brandeis University in cognitive neuroscience.

Siddiqui's FBI interrogation in 2008 paints a more complicated picture. According to that interview, Siddiqui was so radical in her jihadi goals that the then-mother of three (including a one-year-old) left her parents' house in Karachi, Pakistan in 2003 to go into hiding with the infamous al-Baluchi family. In her [book](#), Deborah Scroggins reports that while Siddiqui was in hiding, she married the notorious 9/11 terrorist mastermind Anwar al-Baluchi in order to avoid living under the same roof with an unrelated male.

According to Siddiqui's [sentencing document](#), when the Afghan National Police (ANP) took her and her twelve-year-old son in for questioning in Ghazni City, Afghanistan in 2008, she carried with her approximately two pounds of sodium cyanide (ingesting just half a gram is [enough to kill](#) a 160 lb. human being), a thumb drive that referenced "enemies" and detailed how to make weapons with chemical compounds, and handwritten

documents about how to create a dirty bomb, among other things.

These handwritten notes present Siddiqui as a deeply troubled woman, obsessed with jihad and mass murder. She writes:

- “Do the unthinkable: Attack enemies on gliders ... Attack using laser beams.”
- “To kill or mess up drones etc. How about thin pointed ‘charged towers’ that discharge their electricity upon the drone as it approaches near or over them.”
- “Bomb (mine sniffer sub): remote controlled sniffer destroys underwater mines (US navy).”
- “A ‘mass casualty attack’... NY City monuments: Empire State Bldg, Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn Bridge, etc.”
- “Dirty Bomb: Need few oz. radioactive material (e.g. cobalt 60 from food irradiation facility) ... wrap cobalt 60 around a [u/i] bomb, detonate it & shower a city with deadly fall out.”
- “To detect dirty bombs, gamma and other radiation sensors at airports [or] seaports [or] police depts (but still not all covered in America) ... Practical dirty bomb would work by causing FEAR, not much deaths.”

A handwritten note in Urdu suggests the radical nature of her jihadi belief system: “It is better to die while fighting infidels than to die or become handicapped by one’s own negligence and carelessness when making weapons.” The message goes on to highlight Siddiqui’s belief that even to die by an accident is somehow a divinely beautiful event: “If, despite exercising cautions, God has willed that the person gets wounded or becomes a martyr from his own weapons, then let it be! God is great!”

The court transcript further records her violent hatred of all

things American. According to witness statements, after Siddiqui was disarmed, she threw herself at the interview team, punching, kicking, slapping, biting, and spitting at them. As she assaulted the officers, she screamed abuse at them, such as the following statements that the interview team recalled hearing, including "Death to America," "I'm going to kill all you Americans. You are going to die by my blood," and "I hate you."

Her actions on that day also indicate her disappointment that she did not die in the attack. According to the records, when the medic (at whom she had just shot) treated her gunshot wound, she responded that she wished that the interview team would "just kill her." The medic wrapped gauze around the wound, checked her pulse, and determined that she was stable. Members of the team carried her down the stairs while she kicked them. Captain Snyder was reportedly kicked 8-10 times.

Since 2008, a lengthy list of jihadis have taken up Siddiqui's cause by demanding her release in exchange for American, Israeli, or European captives. Radical, militant Islamic organizations such as the Islamic State, the Taliban, and various al-Qaeda branches have embraced an aggressive campaign of hostage taking for Siddiqui's release. Even 'lone wolf' actors like Malik Akram, a British national who, in January 2022, held four members of the Beth Israel Congregation in Colleyville, Texas hostage for more than 11 hours, were willing to die for the goal of liberating Siddiqui.

Then, there is the case of Humam Khalil Muhammed Abu Mulal al-Balawi, who on behalf of the Pakistani Taliban, filmed a video a few days before the December 30, 2009 attack on Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan that killed several CIA employees and contractors. In the video he [explicitly mentioned Siddiqui](#) and another female jihadist, Sajida Rishawsi, and stated that this attack was meant on behalf of their unjust treatment.

Why is Siddiqui such a common cause of jihadis and Islamists? In an [article](#) published in West Point's *CTC Sentinel*, Bennett Clifford of George Washington University's Program on Extremism explored the reasons for Siddiqui to be cast as a *jihadi cause celebre*. In March 2022, he wrote, "No incarcerated jihadi has elicited the same support, propagandization, and effort by jihadi organizations to release them from prison."

One of his theories is that Siddiqui is particularly valued *not* as an al-Qaeda operative, but as a *female* al-Qaeda operative. According to Clifford, gendered narratives within the jihadi movement are often effective recruiting tools, for such propaganda can elicit a response through arousing jihadi followers' conception of masculinity. Recruiters then can use her cause as a way "to highlight Muslim men's lost honor and awaken feelings of chivalry in their psyche by calling on them to join jihad."

He notes that calls for her release are common not just among jihadis but also among Islamists, mainstream Muslims, and other parts of American society. These actions were evident in the aftermath of the Colleyville hostage crisis when various Islamist actors in the Dallas-Fort Worth area sought to distance themselves from Malik Akram's actions while simultaneously arguing that Siddiqui was innocent, denying her violent, antisemitic, anti-American, and extremist actions.

The Council on American Islamic Relations' (CAIR's) actions following the Colleyville Hostage Crisis in January 2022 illustrate this concept particularly well. According to [an article in Forward](#), the Dallas-Fort Worth office of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-DFW) helped Siddiqui's family and her lawyers craft a public statement condemning the Colleyville hostage taker, Malik Akram. The then-executive director of CAIR-DFW, Faizan Syed, made sure that Siddiqui and her family disassociated themselves from Akram. Syed stated, "[Siddiqui's family and her lawyers] want

to let the world know that Dr. Aafia Siddiqui and her family are completely against using any violence, or any action of this nature, that's used in their name."

It's important to mention that no one was hurt in the hostage taking event in Colleyville except for Akram himself, who was shot and killed. In contrast, [the sentencing document](#) indicates that Siddiqui yelled "Allahu Akbar" as she shot at U.S. army personnel.

DFW lawyer Khalid Hamideh of the Islamic Association of North Texas (formerly the Dallas Central Mosque) also made a statement disavowing Akram: "I swear to my lord and maker, that there is no act that can justify going into a holy place of worship and holding people hostage." He continued, "Antisemitism is real, and we feel with our Jewish brothers and sisters." Hamideh's statement is yet another example of the lockstep protection of Siddiqui while throwing the less prominent faces of jihadist terrorism, like Malik Akram, under the bus.

Following the Colleyville attack, former CAIR-DFW executive director Alia Salem posted an [editorial in The Dallas Morning News](#) in which she described Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, the rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue, as "her kind friend." Like Khalid Hamideh, she also distanced herself from Malik Akram and stated that she too was "concerned that Siddiqui was wrongfully convicted when she was sentenced to 86 years in a federal prison." In her editorial, Salem campaigns for Siddiqui's release while ostensibly decrying violence:

Ours is a peaceful movement that calls for justice through the normal judicial process; we unequivocally condemn violence of any kind, and we collectively reject violence done in Aafia's name ... It is unequivocally not OK to strike fear and terror into the hearts of anyone[,] especially

innocent civilians.

Over the years, CAIR has continued to campaign for Siddiqui's release. Just a few months before the Colleyville Hostage Crisis, in September 2021, [CAIR held a rally](#) for Siddiqui in Fort Worth. On 10 November 2021, its Houston branch held [an informational session](#) on attempts to free Siddiqui. On 27 November 2021, the executive director of CAIR San Francisco, Zahra Billoo, [delivered a speech](#) at the Muslims for Palestine conference in Chicago, warning Muslims not to take Zionists as friends. "When we talk about Islamophobia, we think oftentimes about the vehement fascists," Billoo said. "But I also want us to pay attention to the polite Zionists. The ones that say, 'Let's just break bread together.' They are not your friends," she said.

Over fourteen years have passed since Siddiqui's sentencing in July 2010. The court records are there for anyone to view. Through [Wikileaks Gitmo files](#), Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and other high-level Al Qaeda operatives corroborate [Siddiqui's high-level involvement with Al Qaeda](#). They also verify her marriage to Anmar Al-Baluchi, who himself [admitted to transferring](#) more than \$119,500 dollars to the 9/11 hijackers in an interview with FBI agent James Fitzgerald in January 2007. When Islamist organizations like CAIR, and American Islamist activists like Khalid Hamideh and Alia Salem, talk publicly about peace and justice, and then organize a rally promoting Siddiqui as an innocent victim, they reveal who they really are, despite all their proclamations to the contrary.

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Anne-Christine Hoff is an associate professor of English at

Jarvis Christian University. She lives with her daughter and her two dogs in Mineola, Texas. Her work has appeared in *LifeSite News*, *American Thinker*, *Middle East Quarterly*, *The Barcelona Review*, and *New English Review*.

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