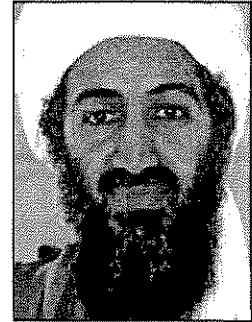


Osama bin Laden

Wealthy Saudi exile is a terrorist mastermind

by David Johnson

Considered the world's foremost terrorist, Osama bin Laden is the leader of a terrorist organization known as Al-Qaeda, or "The Base." Bin Laden is the alleged perpetrator of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center, damaged part of the Pentagon, and resulted in a plane crash in Pennsylvania. At first he denied involvement in the attacks, referring to them, through an aid, as "punishment from Allah." In recent years he has taken responsibility for "inspiring" the events of Sept. 11, 2001.



Alleged U.S. Embassy terrorist Osama bin Laden. (Source/FBI)

Bin Laden has been implicated in a string of deadly attacks on the United States and its allies: the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; the 1998 bombings at the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed more than 200; and the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* in Yemen. Bin Laden also claims responsibility for a 1993 gunfight that killed 18 U.S. troops in Somalia and the 1996 bombing of the Khobar military complex in Saudi Arabia that left 19 U.S. soldiers dead.

Born with a Silver Spoon

Bin Laden was born in Saudi Arabia around 1957 to a father of Yemeni origins and a Syrian mother. His father, Mohammed bin Laden, founded a construction company and with royal patronage became a billionaire. The company's connections won it such important commissions as rebuilding mosques in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Mohammed bin Laden took numerous wives and fathered about 50 children. Osama was either the 17th son, or the 25th son, depending on various reports. Regardless, in a society where status within a family is highly important, bin Laden would have been of relatively low rank.

Bin Laden studied management and economics at King Abdul Aziz University in Jedda, Saudi Arabia, coming under the influence of religious teachers who introduced him to the wider world of Islamic politics.

USSR Invades Afghanistan

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan galvanized bin Laden. He supported the Afghan resistance, which became a jihād, or holy war. Ironically, the U.S. became a major supporter of the Afghan resistance, or mujahideen, working with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to set up Islamic schools in Pakistan for Afghan refugees. These schools later evolved into virtual training centers for Islamic radicals.

By the mid-1980s, bin Laden had moved to Afghanistan, where he established an organization, Maktab al-Khidimat (MAK), to recruit Islamic soldiers from around the world who later form the basis of an international

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network. The MAK maintained recruiting offices in Detroit and Brooklyn in the 1980s.

The Taliban, the former rulers of Afghanistan, arose from the religious schools set up during the mujahideen's war against the Soviet invasion. After the Soviet army withdrew in 1989, fighting erupted among mujahideen factions. In response to the chaos, the fundamentalist Taliban was formed and within two years it captured most of the country. The Taliban gave bin Laden sanctuary in 1996.

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An International Network

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia and worked in his family's construction business. He founded an organization to help veterans of the Afghan war, many of whom went on to fight in Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, and the Philippines. Scholars have suggested these loosely connected bands of seasoned soldiers, ready to fight for Islamic causes, form the basis of bin Laden's current support.

In 1990, in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Saudi government allowed American troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden was incensed that non-believers (American soldiers) were stationed in the birthplace of Islam. He also charged the Saudi regime with deviating from true Islam.

Bin Laden was expelled from Saudi Arabia in 1991 because of his anti-government activities. He eventually wound up in Sudan, where he worked with Egyptian radical groups in exile.

Anti-U.S. Attacks

In 1992 bin Laden claimed responsibility for attempting to bomb U.S. soldiers in Yemen and for attacking U.S. troops in Somalia the following year. In 1994 pressure from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia prompted Sudan to expel bin Laden, and he returned to Afghanistan.

In 1998 bin Laden called for all Americans and Jews, including children, to be killed. He has since been accused of increasing his terrorist activities, such as the 1998 bombings at the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The date, Aug. 7, was the anniversary of the deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia.

U.S. cruise missile attacks against targets in the Sudan and Afghanistan in Aug. 1998 are not believed to have seriously hampered bin Laden's network. Bin Laden continues to call for the destruction of the U.S., Israel, and the Saudi monarchy, stating that with these obstacles removed, Islam's three holiest sites, Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, would then be liberated.

International Terrorist Network

Yet, even as he is reviled in the West, bin Laden is a hero in parts of the Islamic world, according to intelligence reports. His organization is called al-Qaeda, "the Base," and has approximately 3,000 followers, which he funds with his estimated \$250 million fortune. Experts have said that bin Laden could represent a new trend in terrorism—privatization. Until his emergence, most large-scale terrorist organizations are believed to have been connected to governments. With his money and disciplined followers, however, bin Laden is believed to have the ability to launch even more devastating terrorist attacks. He has not denied that he is seeking nuclear or chemical weapons, saying that it is a religious duty to defend Islam.

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Bin Laden has been disowned by most of his family, including a brother, Sheik Bakr Mohammed bin Laden, who has established scholarship funds at Harvard Law School, and the Harvard School of Design. In 1991 his Saudi citizenship was revoked.

Wanted: Dead or Alive

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the U.S. issued an ultimatum to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to turn over bin Laden—this was just the last of several such demands made by the U.S. and the UN after bin Laden was implicated in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa (the U.S. also responded then by launching retaliatory missile attacks on Sudan and an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan). Binding their fate to bin Laden's, the Taliban became the target of air strikes by the U.S. and Britain beginning in October 2002 that swiftly toppled the regime within two months. But Bin Laden, the object of the military campaign in Afghanistan, remained at large. He was believed to have fled to the mountainous region of Tora Bora, but the heavy U.S. bombing campaign that followed failed to vanquish him.

Since the attacks, Bin Laden has released several video tapes broadcast on Qatar's Al Jazeera network, the first of which praised the Sept. 11 hijackers, but stopped just short of claiming responsibility for them. In subsequent tapes, he threatened that more attacks against "the infidel" will occur and warned that "America will not live in peace." Bin Laden's whereabouts remain elusive, but he is thought to be somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The FBI has placed a \$25 million bounty upon his head.

