



Book Osama bin Laden

Michael Scheuer
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Recommendation

Osama bin Laden’s jihad against the West continued years after September 11, 2001. While he remained a fugitive, his ideas and his al-Qaeda cells flourished despite global opposition and a relentless manhunt. Now that he is dead, how much continuing influence will his legacy have? Apparently, his machinations still threaten the US, the West, Israel, Christians in Arab lands, Jews, some Muslims and Arab efforts at building democracies. Michael Scheuer, who led the CIA’s bin Laden desk from 1996 to 1999, eloquently explains that defeating al-Qaeda requires understanding jihad’s history and deadly goals, like driving “infidels” out of Arab lands. Scheuer deeply criticizes US actions and policy – often controversially – but his analysis is engrossing, as is his informed, historical perspective on bin Laden, a lethally skilled leader who murdered ruthlessly in pursuit of his political and theological goals. While the opinions in this provocative, disturbing book are entirely the author’s, *BooksInShort* recommends this revealing, fully annotated work as a valuable reference, whatever your politics (for readers may well be throwing things before Scheuer is done, enraged by his criticisms or, depending on their views, by policymakers’ decisions). Little did he know that two months after his book’s publication, the US Navy would slide Osama bin Laden’s dead body into the trackless sea – where the dark ripples still circle.

Take-Aways

- Osama bin Laden was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on March 10, 1957.
- Personally, he is skilled, charismatic, smart, persistent and pious.
- In his initial jihadist ventures, he spent \$300,000 yearly to help Afghanistan beat the USSR.
- As one of the 1988 founders of al-Qaeda, bin Laden designed it to be a secretive insurgent organization, not an overt terrorist force.
- Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia as a hero, but left forever when the royal rulers allowed a US military base on Arab soil.
- He moved to Sudan where *takfiris*, who believe one Muslim can weigh another’s piety and kill anyone who is noncompliant, tried at least three times to murder him.
- Al-Qaeda attacked US embassies in Sudan and Kenya, and the *USS Cole* in Yemen, and conducted the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.
- Bin Laden eluded capture and managed to “lure the US” into war in Afghanistan.
- Al-Qaeda’s worldwide jihad is exceptionally dangerous and could last for decades to come.
- The next generation of jihadists will be more lethal, less religious, more secretive, better educated and more technologically adept. It also will have access to more recruits.

Summary

A Formidable Foe

“Pious, brave, intelligent, charismatic” are not adjectives most Westerners associate with terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. But to understand him, people need a

realistic, jargon-free portrait. Why doesn't the world really know bin Laden? How much information about him is myth and how much is true? Many "narratives" distort public opinion about bin Laden and al-Qaeda, including:

- **The "old hands" narrative** – This belief says that al-Qaeda is a new form of the "same old terrorism." It is not; bin Laden's al-Qaeda is "unique in the history of radical organizations." It has day-to-day operations among the global "diasporas of Muslims," a Web-linked worldwide membership and a figurehead [now dead] who inspires its people.
- **The "former comrades" narrative** – Bin Laden's former cohorts contribute greatly to how he's generally seen, but they have "an axe to grind," and their opinions are biased.
- **The "Riyadh" narrative** – The Saudi Kingdom is sensitive to bin Laden's misdeeds because 15 of the 19 perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were Saudi nationals. The Saudis insisted that bin Laden's actions were a product of his relationship with Egyptian jihadi fundamentalists, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, rather than a result of his Saudi education. The US's naive acceptance of this idea was a misstep.
- **The "bin Laden experts" narrative** – Many experts believe bin Laden's grudge against the US is just a matter of anti-American and anti-colonial sentiment. The truth is deeper. "Bin Laden and the Islamists are attacking the United States and its allies precisely because of the negative impact their governments' actions have in the Muslim world."

"My intention is not to praise Osama bin Laden but to help bury him."

Many people accept one or more of these narratives, but the combined long-term effect of such misplaced analyses and ideology is that US and Western policy makers continue to intervene in Arab nations, and that fuels al-Qaeda's drumbeat for terrorism. The better way to defeat Osama bin Laden and his ilk is to come to understand the man and his movement.

The Education of Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden (his first name means "lion") was born on March 10, 1957, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the 17th son in a large, wealthy family that valued work, perseverance, self-reliance, stern religious faith and risk taking. His father, Muhammad bin Laden, was an illiterate, self-made millionaire who created a successful construction company. He was a well-respected, religious, austere and distant man who had two passions: "work and women." He fathered 53 children – 29 boys and 24 girls – before he died in a plane crash on September 3, 1967. While Osama spoke of remembering his father fondly, his accounts of how much time they spent together vary. Outside verification supports what Osama told his sons – that he saw his father only five times.

"Bin Laden...poses every bit as much a threat to America's security – perhaps even its survival – as any enemy general ever has."

Educated in Saudi Arabia, Osama lived in Mecca, Medina and Jeddah before he left the country in 1991. He was well-versed in Islamic scriptures, in the teachings of Muhammad and his religious and military followers, and in violent jihad, or *hadith*, a military effort used to defend Islam. Remembered as "courteous" by his teachers, Osama probably ranked among the nation's top 50 high school students. In 1978, he enrolled in Jeddah's King Abdul Aziz University "to study economics, business administration and management." He apparently also studied religion, but he did not graduate. He read the works of Muhammad Qutb, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and "studied the imperatives and nuances of contemporary Islamic jihad."

"Al-Qaeda is a unique organization in the Muslim world due to its multiple nationalities, languages, religious practices and ethnicities."

As Osama worked on demolition projects for his father's company, he learned to use explosives, operate huge machines and analyze the structural weaknesses of buildings, knowledge he could have applied to the 9/11 attacks. Known as a "workaholic," he managed a labor pool of Arabs from different nations. In 1974, he married his cousin Najwa Ghanem. He moved his family to the mountains to avoid decadent urban life; the mountains also offered more places to hide.

"Al-Qaeda and its allies present an altogether different kettle of fish from traditional terrorist groups, and the old-hands experts have poignantly and dangerously ignored this."

Bin Laden's early years forged his belief in three main themes: First, urge young Muslims to defend Islam and use jihad to retake land "taken from Muslims in conquest, including Palestine, Spain, southern Thailand and Mindanao." Second, expand Islam worldwide. Third, unite to defend Islam against its enemies, like the West, Israel and the US presence in Muslim nations.

1984: Makhtab al-Khadamat

Starting in 1984, Osama bin Laden spent about \$300,000 a year to form and equip an NGO in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It set out to recruit, train and support Muslims fighting in Afghanistan. The Makhtab al-Khadamat soon opened offices worldwide and began publishing a monthly magazine, *Al-Jihad*. Bin Laden used this propaganda to recruit volunteers and donors. Finding his message blocked by Arab state-controlled media, he came to rely on uncensored Internet access.

"The 9/11 attacks undermined the Saudi regime's ability to keep Americans and their government believing the Kingdom was a true, dependable ally."

The Soviet army's defeat in Afghanistan in the late 1980s became a psychological turning point for Muslim fighters. The "barefoot" Afghan mujahedin achieved the first Muslim victory in hundreds of years. Many Muslims saw this triumph as proof that they could "beat God's enemies." From al-Qaeda's inception in 1988, its 15 founders, led by bin Laden, designed it around the Afghani model as an insurgent organization, not a terrorist one. With a web of global cells, it could withstand significant attacks from more powerful enemies. It had four sections – military, religious, propaganda and administrative – overseen by bin Laden's shura council.

"Bin Laden's message...would always be 'God helps those who help themselves,' and he would return to this tenet again and again to oppose the Muslim world's defeatism."

By 1989, bin Laden had become a militant follower of Salafism, "a puritanical form of Islam centered on the Koran, the hadith and...the 'pious ancestors'." He believed in pursuing and killing the "enemies of Islam" on a global level. He blamed Muslims for failing to use jihad to capture holy sites and rid their nations of infidels and Arab

tyrants. The public saw bin Laden as a hero, as he returned home after organizing and fighting in Afghanistan, and he re-entered the family business. At that stage, he still respected Saudi royal authority, but officials rebuffed him when he wanted to use trained Yemeni fighters to overthrow Yemen's Marxist government. He sponsored the assassinations of several of Yemen's leaders from 1990 to 1994.

“There is no either plausible or acceptable reason for Americans...to misunderstand bin Laden, the forces he commands and inspires, and the threat they pose to America and its allies.”

During this period, Saudi Arabian religious leaders pushed their government to end corruption and comply more deeply with Islamic law. Officials jailed religious leaders who challenged the royal family. When Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait and threatened to invade Saudi Arabia in 1990, bin Laden volunteered his construction machines to build a defensive barrier. The rulers ignored his offer and, instead, invited the US military to build a base inside the nation to protect the Arabian Peninsula. Bin Laden was shocked that the royal family invited infidel military forces, “invaders,” onto Islamic land. Then Saudi troops raided his farm, taking weapons away from his workforce of 100 Afghan war veterans. He felt betrayed by the royals' contradictory policies. His brothers intervened with officials to let him go to Pakistan, promising that he would come back; he betrayed their word (apologizing to them later) and never returned.

“It is my desire...that my children grow up in an atmosphere of jihad and absorb Islam in its true spirit. Believe me, when your children and your wife become part of your struggle, life becomes very enjoyable.” (Osama bin Laden)

By December 1991, bin Laden was living in Sudan, and plotting to attack US forces in Yemen and Somalia. He expanded his business to build a war chest and to employ al-Qaeda workers. He finalized his military priorities and bolstered his media operations. Bin Laden led a low-visibility life in Khartoum, but *takfir* there tried to kill him at least three times. Takfir believe that “one Muslim can...decide whether or not another is a good Muslim, and, if not, kill him.” While in Sudan, bin Laden planned attacks against US planes, the US embassy in Kenya, and President Bill Clinton and Pope John Paul II in Manila. He financed efforts in Saudi Arabia to impose Shariah law, fight al-Saud family corruption, redistribute oil revenue to more Saudis and use foreign policy to support only pro-Islamic nations. To announce his defensive jihad against his homeland, he blasted King Fahd and other leaders as anti-Islam.

The Conquering Hero

When bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in 1996, Taliban leaders welcomed him as a hero. As their revered guest, bin Laden received exceptional protection, which explains how he later evaded capture. In August, he declared war on the US because it financed corrupt Arab states, Israel and the “heretical Shia.” In May 1997, he moved to Kandahar at Mullah Omar's invitation. “Simply having bin Laden agree to live under Mullah Omar's authority and protection increased the Taliban regime's standing in the Muslim world.” In 1998, bin Laden arranged the bombings of US embassies in Sudan and Kenya, and then taunted US officials to capture him. In July 2000, he married his fifth wife, Yemeni Amal al-Sadab, age 18. Takfir and Saudi intelligence tried at least six times to kill him. Despite such threats, he remained in good health and did not suffer any of the ailments (like kidney disease) that Western intelligence wishfully attributed to him.

“Bin Laden got away to fight another decade.”

In October 2000, al-Qaeda bombed the *USS Cole* in Aden's harbor in Yemen. The US's weak response spurred a flow of new jihadist recruits and donations. Already bin Laden was “banking on” his planned attacks in the US to “lure the US into Afghanistan at long last.” Days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist assaults in New York and Washington, he awaited the US invasion of Afghanistan. He had already moved his supplies and people to Pakistan and Afghanistan's mountains for safekeeping, but the US gave al-Qaeda 26 more days after 9/11 to scatter and hide before launching its air attacks. Bin Laden escaped capture and proceeded to wage a successful media war. His messages claimed religious justification for attacks against infidels and apostate Muslim leaders.

“A war to defend America, operating on transparently false assumptions about bin Laden, is fatally inadequate, particularly when political, military and media leaders use these assumptions to misinform Americans about him and the threat he poses.”

Any failure or weakness in the US war effort bolstered al-Qaeda. As the US came to rely on a massive army in the field and the war progressed slowly, a Shia regime emerged in Iraq, US efforts to help craft an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement repeatedly faltered, and America found itself aligning with police states in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. When the US invaded Iraq, bin Laden trusted Egyptian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to lead al-Qaeda there. But al-Zarqawi disobeyed bin Laden, invoked takfirism, and undertook a murderous campaign against Sunni and Shia civilians who cooperated with infidel forces. In particular, bin Laden chastised al-Zarqawi for videotaping beheadings, which alienated local sympathizers. He said to shoot hostages instead to avoid bad publicity. In June 2006, “the US came to al-Qaeda's aid” and killed al-Zarqawi in an airstrike.

“This method...is costing America the war that bin Laden, al-Qaeda and their allies started, and we severely underestimate the chances of it reaching our shores.”

Bin Laden vehemently rejected charges that he practices takfirism (al-Zarqawi's actions notwithstanding), since that would erode his public support. Yet experts cite the killing of Muslims by other Muslims as a main reason bin Laden was losing the war in Iraq. A study by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center found that between 2006 and 2008, only 2% (12 of 661) of al-Qaeda's victims were Westerners, while 98% were in Muslim-majority countries. Al-Qaeda and bin Laden seem increasingly tolerant of non-Arab Muslims, since he needs them to promote his vision of religious unity. Given this, Westerners should understand that some Muslims apparently view bin Laden as a pious Salafi jihadist, though they may disagree with his terrorist actions. As evidence of this theological position, his Salafi co-religionists have not disowned him.

“We are...fighting a war for survival; if we do not win outright and irrefutably, we will surely lose in the same manner.”

Al-Qaeda, through its Salafi proxies, has expanded its operations and battled Hamas forces for control of certain areas of Palestine. Salafis are expanding into Gaza and the West Bank, where they exploit news of any Hamas negotiation with Israel as evidence that Hamas is drifting away from jihad and embracing a political solution. If al-Qaeda gains more power in Hamas-controlled areas, Israel will face a more violent, extreme enemy, which has vowed to attack Jews anywhere in the world. While the US remains bin Laden's main target, al-Qaeda's goal remains to inspire jihad. Data suggests that the next generation of jihadists will be more lethal, less devout, more secretive, better educated, more technologically adept and more media savvy. They will have access to better communications and more recruits in a war

that could endure for generations.

About the Author

Michael Scheuer led the CIA's bin Laden unit from 1996 to 1999 and remained a counterterrorism analyst until 2004. He is the author of many books, including the best-selling *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terrorism*.
