

Great Lives from History

The **20th Century**

1901-2000

SALEM PRESS

## OSAMA BIN LADEN

### Saudi Arabian terrorist leader

*The leader of the Islamic terrorist organization al-Qaeda, Bin Laden emerged as the spiritual symbol for many anti-Western Islamic fundamentalists in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.*

**BORN:** March 10, 1957; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Osama bin Mohammad bin Laden (full name); Usamah Ibn Laden

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Warfare and conquest, military affairs, crime, government and politics

#### EARLY LIFE

Osama Bin Laden (oh-SAH-mah bihn LAH-dihn) was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He was one of a reported fifty-five children of Muhammed bin Awad bin Laden, a

Yemeni peasant who became wealthy as a building contractor for the Saudi royal family. Muhammed, who was married twenty-two times, had Bin Laden with his tenth wife, Hamida al-Attas. Bin Laden's parents divorced when he was a child, and his mother then married Muhammad al-Attas and had four more children. Bin Laden was raised by his mother and stepfather, although he received significant financial support from his birth father. After his father's death in 1968, Bin Laden inherited several million dollars.

Bin Laden was an intelligent and diligent student. He attended a prestigious preparatory school, the Al-Thager Model School, from 1968 to 1976. During that time, he became increasingly attracted to the fundamentalist teachings of Sunni Islam. Bin Laden participated in Islamic study groups and supported radical groups such as



Osama Bin Laden. (AP/Wide World Photos)

the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. In 1974, he married for the first time, and he eventually had twenty-four children. (Bin Laden married four more women and was once divorced.)

Bin Laden studied economics, civil engineering, and business administration at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, but he failed to obtain a degree. While at the university, he was influenced by several professors who espoused a pan-Islamic philosophy that emphasized the importance of jihad, or holy war, to defend Muslim lands from foreign invaders and foreign influences. In addition to a regular curriculum, Bin Laden extensively studied the Islamic holy book, the Qurʾān, as well as Islamic law. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further radicalized Bin Laden. He supported the Afghan mujahideen (holy warriors) and joined the anti-Soviet insurgency, thereby transitioning from student to Islamic fundamentalist leader.

### LIFE'S WORK

In 1979, Bin Laden joined a former professor in organizing support for the mujahideen. They cofounded Maktab al-Khidmat (bureau of services), which recruited foreign fighters and raised money for the insurgency. Bin Laden used his fortune to provide material support for the insurgents and to publicize their cause. He developed close ties with many of the senior anti-Soviet leaders in Afghanistan. Through Maktab al-Khidmat (MAK), Bin Laden developed an extensive network of followers and agents throughout the Middle East. However, MAK provided mostly logistical support for the rebels, and Bin Laden increasingly sought a more radical, military role for MAK. In Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1984, he formed his own company of fighters, who participated in several minor battles against the Soviets.

In 1988, Bin Laden split from MAK and formed al-Qaeda (the base), a multinational Muslim alliance devoted to Islamist jihad. He embraced what many consid-

### BIN LADEN'S VENGEANCE

*In November, 2004, the Middle East news organization Aljazeera posted on its Web site a translation of Osama Bin Laden's message to Americans about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. An excerpt of the transcript follows.*

- [W]e fight because we are free men who don't sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation. So shall we lay waste to yours.
- No one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure. Whereas thinking people, when disaster strikes, make it their priority to look for its causes, in order to prevent it happening again . . . .
- So I shall talk to you about the story behind those events and shall tell you truthfully about the moments in which the decision was taken, for you to consider . . . .
- The events that affected my soul in a direct way started in 1982 when America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon and the American Sixth Fleet helped them in that. This bombardment began and many were killed and injured and others were terrorised and displaced . . . .
- I couldn't forget those moving scenes, blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed along with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents, rockets raining down on our home without mercy.
- In those difficult moments many hard-to-describe ideas bubbled in my soul, but in the end they produced an intense feeling of rejection of tyranny, and gave birth to a strong resolve to punish the oppressors.
- And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind and that we should destroy towers in America in order that they taste some of what we tasted and so that they be deterred from killing our women and children.
- So with these images and their like as their background, the events of September 11th came as a reply to those great wrongs. [S]hould a man be blamed for defending his sanctuary?
- Is defending oneself and punishing the aggressor in kind, objectionable terrorism? If it is such, then it is unavoidable for us.

ered to be an extremist understanding of the Qurʾān and emphasized jihad against all enemies of Islam, including Muslims who were deficient in their practice of Islam. Not formally trained as a cleric, Bin Laden nevertheless began to issue his own interpretations of the Qurʾān and Islamic holy law. The al-Qaeda leader asserted that any action was justified in the defense of Islam, including attacks on civilians.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990, Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia and offered to defend the kingdom against attack with a legion of troops. The Saudi government had earlier asked the United States for military support, fearing Iraq would invade Saudi Arabia as well. Bin Laden's proposal, however, was rejected by

the royal family, which angered the al-Qaeda leader. Bin Laden denounced the government and its dependence on Western, particularly U.S., military forces. He was especially critical of the presence of non-Muslim troops in Saudi Arabia. In response, the royal family attempted to arrest Bin Laden, who evaded capture and went into exile. He lived in Sudan from 1991 to 1996. His citizenship was revoked in 1994 and the Saudi government froze his family's assets in 1996, but al-Qaeda continued to enjoy clandestine support from a range of prominent Saudis, who provided the group with funding.

Bin Laden endeavored to create a new base for al-Qaeda in Sudan, but the government forced him to leave under U.S. and Saudi pressure in 1996. He returned to Afghanistan and became involved in the ongoing civil war that broke out after the Soviet withdrawal from that country in 1991. He supported the Taliban, an Afghan fundamentalist Islamic group that grew into the ruling government in Afghanistan, and provided it with money. In addition, al-Qaeda members fought alongside the Taliban. In return, the Taliban allowed Bin Laden to create a series of camps across the country to recruit and train foreign fighters.

In 1998, Bin Laden issued a fatwa, or religious decree, which called upon all Muslims to attack and kill Jews and Westerners, including Americans. The fatwa was controversial in a number of respects. One problem was that Bin Laden was not a cleric, leading many Muslim scholars to assert that his decree lacked legitimacy. Concurrently, al-Qaeda began a series of attacks on Western targets, including bombing the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which killed 225 people (mainly African civilians). In response, the United States, on the order of President Bill Clinton, launched retaliatory missile strikes on al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and Sudan. The raids failed to disrupt al-Qaeda.

Bin Laden expanded his campaign against the United States by providing increased funding for al-Qaeda operations. Bin Laden typically did not plan specific strikes, but he did coordinate attacks and link volunteers with missions, including the failed 2000 millennium attacks and the October, 2000, attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden, Yemen. Bin Laden was likely one of the key planners of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, which killed nearly three thousand people in three different locations. He was indicted by the U.S. government, which promised a \$25 million reward for his capture. The United States led an invasion of Afghanistan after the Taliban regime refused to surrender Bin Laden. By December, 2001, the Taliban had been disbanded (al-

though a smaller group remained), while Bin Laden and the remnants of al-Qaeda reportedly fled into the mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Forced into hiding, Bin Laden became less involved in the operations of al-Qaeda, but he continued to issue videotape and audiotape statements to the media, condemning the United States and its allies, especially as the focus of the anti-American effort shifted to Iraq after the 2003 invasion. Individual al-Qaeda cells became increasingly autonomous, and rival organizations emerged. Nevertheless, Bin Laden remained the inspirational leader of the jihad.

### SIGNIFICANCE

More than any other figure, Bin Laden was responsible for globalizing Islamic terrorism. Under his leadership, al-Qaeda forged links with other radical Muslim terrorist groups and coordinated strikes against Jewish and Western targets around the world. Al-Qaeda eclipsed existing terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah or Islamic Jihad, as the leading anti-Western radical organization. Whereas other groups had attacked civilian targets, no terrorist organization had attempted attacks of the size or scale of al-Qaeda's. Bin Laden adroitly understood the value of symbolism and purposely escalated the scope of terrorist strikes such as the catastrophic attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia.

Bin Laden's tactics forced Western governments to view terrorism as a major, if not *the* major, security threat of the twenty-first century. The strikes on the United States prompted the military actions in Afghanistan late in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which initiated the U.S.-led global war on terror. Bin Laden also emerged as a powerful symbol of Islamic strength for his ability to strike the West and to evade capture or punishment by the United States and its allies.

—Tom Lansford

### FURTHER READING

Atwan, Abdel Bari. *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Beginning with a short biography of Bin Laden, an examination of the rise of al-Qaeda and Bin Laden's political and religious philosophies as they relate to the concept of jihad.

Bergen, Peter L. *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

Based on extensive interviews, the book discusses Bin Laden's efforts to develop a global terrorist net-

work and the events that led to his war against the United States and its allies.

Corbin, Jane. *Al Qaeda: In Search of the Terror Network That Shook the World*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002. An elegant account by a prizewinning BBC reporter.

Lawrence, Bruce, ed. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*. Translated by James Howarth. New York: Verso, 2005. Contains translations of twenty-four public statements made by Bin Laden from 1994 to 2004.

Randal, Jonathan. *Osama: The Making of a Terrorist*. New York: Knopf, 2004. One of the best overviews of Bin Laden's early life, with an excellent analysis of his experiences in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000. Although focused on the Taliban, this book discusses the links between the

Afghan group and Bin Laden, especially in the context of the al-Qaeda leader's support during the Afghan civil wars.

Scheuer, Michael. *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*. 2d ed. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006. An examination of Bin Laden's life and how events shaped the al-Qaeda leader's goals and strategies.

**SEE ALSO:** Yasir Arafat; Saddam Hussein; Ayatollah Khomeini.

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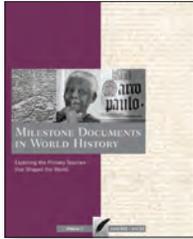
**1971-2000:** April 4, 1973: Opening of the World Trade Center; 1988: Osama Bin Laden Forms al-Qaeda; 1990's: Algeria and Egypt Crack Down on Islamic Militants; May, 1996: Sudan Expels Osama Bin Laden; February 23, 1998: Osama Bin Laden Declares Jihad Against "Jews and Crusaders"; October 12, 2000: Terrorists Attack USS *Cole*.

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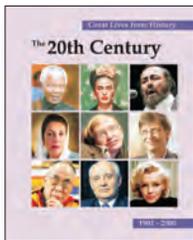
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*Milestone Documents in World History.*  
Ed. Brian Bonhomme & Cathleen Boivin.  
4 volumes; 1,872 pages.  
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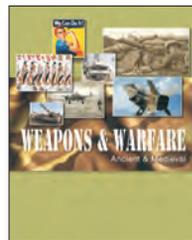
“George W. Bush’s Address to the Nation on September 11, 2001: Full Text and Document Analysis.”

*Milestone Documents in American History.* Ed. Paul Finkelman.  
4 volumes; 2,170 pages.  
ISBN: 978-0-9797758-0-2  
Dallas, TX: Schlager Group, 2008.  
LIST PRICE: \$385



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“The War on Terror.”

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