

The Making of a Modern Terrorist

Osama bin Laden seems like the last person destined to be a global terrorist. His journey from a life of wealth and privilege, as the scion of a multibillionaire Saudi family with close ties to the king and royal family, to the caves and military training camps of Afghanistan sounds more like the stuff of fiction than reality. What happened to transform a quiet, shy, serious, and wealthy Saudi young man into the world community's most wanted criminal? How are we to understand a man who has been described as "an Islamic zealot, a military genius, a poet, and an impassioned enemy of the United States"?¹

Osama bin Laden was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1957, the seventeenth (the seventh son) of fifty-two children. His father, Muhammad bin Laden, had come to the Kingdom from South Yemen around 1930 as an illiterate laborer. He started a small construction business and went on to become one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest construction magnates. He developed ties to the royal family and was awarded exclusive contracts. In the 1950s, Osama's father designed and built the al-Hada road, which permitted Muslims from Yemen to make the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), one of the five basic religious requirements of Islam, more easily. His company also received a multibillion dollar contract to restore and expand the Grand Mosques of Mecca and Medina, raising his company's prestige throughout the Muslim world and setting the stage for the company's expansion beyond Saudi Arabia. The bin Laden family established a large industrial and financial empire,

the Bin Laden Group, which became one of the largest construction companies in the Middle East.² Ironically, given Osama's recent outrage at the Saudi-American alliance and the presence of American forces in the Kingdom, the Bin Laden Group built many military support facilities in the Kingdom, including those used by U.S. forces during the Gulf War.

The relationship between the bin Laden clan and the royal family goes beyond business ties to include friendship and intermarriage. The bin Laden sons have attended the same schools as numerous princes of the royal family in Europe and America and have studied at and/or given money to some of the best universities, including Harvard, Oxford, and Tufts.³

Osama's father was a strong, hard-working, dominating, pious man who insisted on keeping all of his children in one household and raised them according to a strict moral and religious code. The family home was open to many Muslims, especially during hajj, and Osama was able at an early age to meet Muslim scholars and leaders of Islamic movements from all over the Islamic world.⁴ Like many in the Arab world, bin Laden's father is said to have felt passionately about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This appears in an anecdote that has the elder bin Laden seeking to contribute to the liberation of Palestine. One day, as the story goes, he demanded that his company's engineers convert two hundred bulldozers into tanks for the purpose of attacking Israel. Told that the task was impossible, he decided instead to produce as many sons as possible and convert *them* into fighters. But out of all the bin Laden sons, Osama became the only fighter.⁵

Information on Osama bin Laden's youth is limited and at times contradictory. Some maintain that he was a religiously committed young man protected from corruption by his early marriage to a Syrian girl.⁶ Other sources report that, like many wealthy youths of his time, he visited Beirut in the early 1970s, where he enjoyed the nightlife and women of this cosmopolitan city, known at that time as "the Paris of the Middle East."⁷ Like most young people, he would find or begin to define himself at university.

Bin Laden was educated in Medina and Jeddah, earning his degree in public administration in 1981 at Jeddah's King Abdulaziz University, where he studied management and economics. During his studies, he became more and more religiously oriented, influenced by his university experience and unfolding events in Saudi Arabia and the wider Muslim world. Osama's religious worldview was shaped both by Saudi Arabia's deeply conservative Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and by the revolutionary Islam that began to spread in the 1970s. Each of these influences would be formative in the development of his jihadist vision, mission, and strategy.

The Islamic Vision

Islam emphasizes action, performing the will of God. It more closely resembles Judaism with its focus on following the law than Christianity with its emphasis on belief. Muslims are enjoined to act, to struggle (*jihad*) to implement their belief, to lead a good life, to defend religion, to contribute to the development of a just Islamic society throughout the world. The life and experience of the early community provide the model for the spread and defense of Islam through *hijra* and *jihad*. When Muhammad and his Companions suffered unremitting persecution in Mecca, they emigrated (*hijra*) to Yathrib, later renamed Medina, "the city" of the Prophet. Having regrouped, established, and strengthened the community at Medina, Muhammad then set about the struggle (*jihad*) to spread and defend God's Word and rule. This pattern of *hijra* and *jihad* in the face of adversity, coupled with the concept of the *ummah* (the worldwide Islamic community), which stresses a pan-Islamic unity, has guided Muslims throughout the ages, including bin Laden and many terrorists today.

Jihad and the Creation of Saudi Arabia

Osama bin Laden's worldview was very much influenced by the religious heritage and political climate in Saudi Arabia and the

Arab world in the 1960s and 1970s. Key influences included the environment of Saudi Arabia, a self-styled Islamic state with a rigid, puritanical, Wahhabi brand of Islam, the militant jihad ideology of Egypt's Sayyid Qutb, whose disciples had found refuge and positions in the kingdom, and the devastating Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia from its earliest beginnings has relied on the blending of religion and political power. Its origins stretch back to the eighteenth century when an Islamic revivalist and theologian, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, formed an alliance with a local tribal chief, Muhammad ibn Saud of Dariyya (a town near modern-day Riyadh), to create a religiopolitical movement, Wahhabism. The movement swept across central Arabia, capturing Mecca and Medina and uniting its tribes in what its followers believed was a re-creation of Islam's seventh-century beginnings under the Prophet Muhammad. Although the movement was crushed by the Ottoman Empire, a descendant of the House of Saud, Abdulaziz ibn Saud (1879–1953), reasserted the family's claims to Arabia and led a religious and political movement that resulted in the establishment of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

The Wahhabi religious vision or brand of Islam, named after Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, has been a staple of the Saudi government, a source of their religious and political legitimation. It is a strict, puritanical faith that emphasizes literal interpretation of the Quran and *Sunnah* (example) of the Prophet Muhammad and the absolute oneness of God. The Wahhabis denounced other tribes and Muslim communities as polytheists or idolaters. Anything the Wahhabis perceived as un-Islamic behavior constituted unbelief (*kufir*) in their eyes, which must be countered by jihad. Thus jihad or holy war was not simply permissible: to fight the unbelievers and reestablish a true Islamic state was required.

Abdulaziz framed the development of Saudi Arabia using stories and symbols drawn from the life and struggles of Muhammad. He recruited Bedouin tribesmen to join the brotherhood of believers and, like Muhammad's community, engage in a process of hijra

and jihad. Like Muhammad and the early community, they emigrated to new settlements where they could live a true Islamic life and be trained religiously and militarily. They combined missionary zeal, military might, and a desire for booty to once again spread Islamic rule in Arabia, waging holy wars approved by their religious leaders. Abdulaziz used the banner of the puritanical Wahhabi to legitimate fighting other Muslim tribal leaders and seizing Mecca and Medina. As in the Christian tradition, death in battle merited martyrdom and eternal bliss in paradise; likewise, as in the Christian Crusades, victory meant not only the triumph of virtue but also the rewards of plunder and booty. Wahhabi history and paradigms were an essential part of Osama bin Laden's religious faith and sense of history, a heritage he would turn to in later life for inspiration and guidance.

During the 1970s many Islamic activists, both Saudi-born and foreigners, were to be found in the Kingdom. Among Osama's teachers at King Abdulaziz University was Dr. Abdullah Azzam, who would later become prominent in Afghanistan. Azzam, a Jordanian member of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and reportedly a founder of Hamas, had strong academic and Islamic activist credentials.⁸ Trained at Damascus University in theology, he earned a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence at Egypt's famed al-Azhar University. Azzam was an advocate of a militant global jihad ideology and culture, seeing it as a duty incumbent on all Muslims. Sometimes described as the Emir of Jihad or Godfather of global jihad, Azzam was a captivating speaker who preached a clear message of militant confrontation and conflict: "Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues."⁹ Azzam's jihad was global in scope, aimed at recouping the glories and lands of Islam. "This duty will not end with victory in Afghanistan; jihad will remain an individual obligation until all other lands that were Muslim are returned to us so that Islam will reign again: before us lie Palestine, Bokhara, Lebanon, Chad, Eritrea, Somalia, the Philippines, Burma, Southern Yemen, Tashkent and Andalusia [southern Spain]."¹⁰

Dr. Muhammad Qutb, a famous scholar and activist, was another of Osama's teachers. He was a brother of Sayyid Qutb, a leader of the militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood who was executed in 1966 when Gamal Abdel Nasser's government crushed and outlawed the Brotherhood. Sayyid Qutb is widely acknowledged as the father of militant jihad, a major influence on the worldview of radical movements across the Muslim world, and venerated as a martyr of contemporary Islamic revivalism. Qutb's writings and ideas provided the religious worldview and discourse for generations of activists, moderate and extremist. For those Muslims who, like bin Laden, were educated in schools and universities with Islamist teachers, Sayyid Qutb was a staple of their Islamic education.

Bin Laden was educated at a time when Islamic movements and religious extremist or jihad movements were on the rise in the broader Muslim world and within Saudi Arabia. The disastrous and humiliating defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli war, in which the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were beaten within hours by "tiny little Israel," was a major turning point in the history of contemporary Islam. It generated deep soul-searching about what had gone wrong with Islam, the modern failure and impotence of a Muslim world that for centuries after its creation had experienced unparalleled success and power. What came to be called The Disaster was countered in 1973 by a jihad against Israel fought by Anwar Sadat. Its code name was Badr, symbolizing the first great and miraculous victory of the Prophet Muhammad over a superior Meccan army. This was followed by another significant event in the world of Osama bin Laden. The Arab oil embargo, with its crippling impact on the West, gave Muslims a new sense of pride. The Arab world and the heartland of Islam seemed to reemerge as a major economic power after centuries of subservience to European imperialism.

The 1970s also witnessed an increase in the power and visibility of internal Islamic opposition and reform movements. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood along with a series of radical groups re-emerged as a major oppositional force. Iran's Islamic revolution

came as an inspirational rallying cry for Islamic activists across the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia itself was rocked by the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by militants who called for the overthrow of the House of Saud. Many of these militants were well-educated, pious activists who denounced the wealth and corruption of the "infidel" regime and the corrosive impact of the West on religious and social values. They wanted to purify and return to traditional Islam, re-creating a true Islamic state and society. While bin Laden does not seem to have sided with Saudi extremists, he could not help but be strongly affected by the activist mood of the 1970s in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

Jihad in Afghanistan: The Making of a Holy Warrior

A major turning point in Osama bin Laden's life, the beginning of his journey toward becoming a *mujahid*, or warrior for God, occurred with the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. As bin Laden would later say, "What I lived in two years there, I could not have lived in a hundred years elsewhere."¹¹ By the 1970s Afghanistan had become overwhelmingly dependent on the Soviet Union's patronage for its survival. Marxist and Maoist parties thrived while Islamist parties and movements were repressed. In July 1973 Prince Muhammad Daud, a former prime minister and cousin of the Afghan King Zahir Shah, overthrew the government, abolished the monarchy, and proclaimed himself president of Afghanistan. Five years later the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan staged a coup and established a new communist government. This was followed by the direct intervention and occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979. The occupation galvanized Afghanistan's diverse tribal and religious leaders and movements in a popular jihad. Afghanistan's tribal society had a fragile unity offset by the realities of its multiethnic tribal society comprising Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras divided religiously between a Sunni Muslim majority and a minority of

Shii Muslims. Soviet occupation, however, provided a common enemy and mission. The call for a jihad offered a common, though transient as history would prove, Islamic religious identity and source of inspiration. The *mujahidin* holy war to liberate Islam and Afghanistan from Soviet (atheistic) communist occupation would eventually drive out the Soviet military, defeat the Afghan communists, and lead to the establishment of an Islamic state in 1992.¹²

When the anti-Soviet jihad began, bin Laden was among the first to rush to the Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan, to meet with mujahidin leaders, some of whom he had already come to know during hajj gatherings at his home in Saudi Arabia. From 1979 to 1982 he collected funds and materiel for the jihad and made intermittent visits from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan. In 1982 he finally entered Afghanistan, bringing large quantities of construction machinery as well as funding, and becoming a full participant in the Afghan jihad. By 1984 increasing numbers of Arab mujahidin were arriving in Pakistan to join the holy war. Bin Laden responded by establishing a guesthouse in Peshawar for Arabs on their way to the front in Afghanistan. In 1986 Osama became more directly involved in the war, setting up his own camps and commanding Arab mujahidin forces who became known as Arab Afghans in battle. He subsequently created al-Qaeda (the base), to organize and track the channeling of fighters and funds for the Afghan resistance. Six-feet five-inches tall, with a long beard and piercing eyes, the wealthy and powerfully connected bin Laden was well on his way to becoming a poster-boy for the jihad, at first as a hero and later as a global terrorist.

Bin Laden's activities were applauded by the Saudi government, which, along with the United States, had made a heavy commitment to supporting the jihad against the Soviet Union. For America, this was a "good jihad." Ironically, although the United States had been threatened by Iran's revolutionary Islam and the violence and terrorism committed by jihad groups in Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere, our government was able to cheer and support Afghanistan's holy warriors, providing considerable funding as well as

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) advisers. Everyone was in agreement. For Osama bin Laden, as for Saudi Arabia and indeed Muslims worldwide, the Afghan jihad to repel foreigners from Islamic territory was eminently in accord with Islamic doctrine.

Bin Laden proved himself to be a selfless and dedicated mujahid, or holy warrior. Still young, he was more comfortable as an activist than as an ideologue, focused primarily on the jihad in Afghanistan rather than on Muslim international politics and activism. Ahmed Rashid, expert on the Taliban and al-Qaeda, writes of bin Laden:

Arab Afghans who knew him during the jihad say he was neither intellectual nor articulate about what needed to be done in the Muslim world. In that sense he was neither the Lenin of the Islamic revolution, nor was he the internationalist ideologue of the Islamic revolution such as Che Guevara was to the revolution in the third world. Bin Laden's former associates describe him as deeply impressionable, always in need of mentors, men who knew more about Islam and the modern world than he did.¹³

The Radicalization of a Saudi Elite

How did Osama bin Laden, member of the Saudi elite, mujahid, and hero of the war in Afghanistan, become radicalized? After Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia and a job in the family business. Though initially received as a hero, speaking at mosques and to private gatherings, he was soon at loggerheads with the royal family, vociferous in his warning of an impending Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait and the United States, had for many years, in particular during the Iraq-Iran War, been strong supporters of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, seeing it as a check on the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. When Iraq did invade Kuwait in August 1990, bin Laden quickly wrote to King Fahd, offering to bring the Arab Afghan mujahidin to Saudi Arabia to defend the kingdom. Instead,

the deafening silence from the palace was shattered by news that American forces were to defend the House of Saud. The admission and stationing of foreign non-Muslim troops in Islam's holy land and their permanent deployment after the Gulf war, bin Laden would later say, transformed his life completely, placing him on a collision course with the Saudi government and the West. He spoke out forcefully against the Saudi alliance with the United States, obtained a *fatwa* (legal opinion) from a senior religious scholar that training was a religious duty, and sent several thousand volunteers to train in Afghanistan.

Like other Arab Afghans who returned to their home countries, in Afghanistan bin Laden had enjoyed the freedom to think and act and to engage in a religious mission to overcome injustice and create an Islamic state and society. In Saudi Arabia he found himself bound within the confines of a regime whose policies and alliances he more and more came to despise as corrupt and un-Islamic. While many of the Arab Afghans who returned to Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere quickly became involved in radical opposition movements, bin Laden continued to struggle within the system. The government restricted his movement in an attempt to silence him. Finally, in April 1991 he escaped to Afghanistan via Pakistan. When he arrived, however, he found himself not in the Islamic state for which the jihad had been fought but in one mired in the religious and ethnic warfare of its aftermath.

Within a brief period after the Soviet withdrawal, the great Islamic victory had collapsed into interethnic and sectarian warfare, fueled by foreign patrons. The net result was chaos and the devastation of Afghanistan as various warlords vied to set up their own fiefdoms.

Despite the Afghan victory, the jihad had failed to develop a coherent ideology or basis for political unity. The United States walked away from an Afghanistan whose countryside was devastated by a ten-year Soviet occupation that had cost more than one million lives. Mujahidin groups, many of which today make up the Northern Alliance that with U.S. backing fought and defeated

the Taliban, represented competing ethnic, tribal, and religious groups. The country was gripped by a civil war that pitted the majority Pashtun population in the south and east against the ethnic minorities of the north—Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Turkmen. The conflict was further compounded by the intervention and competing agendas of outside powers. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported Sunni mujahidin groups while Iran backed an alliance of Shii minority organizations. The majority of Afghans found themselves caught in the middle of a prolonged civil war marked by heavy fighting, lawlessness, pillaging, rape, and plunder. Bin Laden was frustrated by his inability to contribute to the resolution of the problems of chaos and lawlessness. In 1992, after several months amidst the inter-mujahidin squabbling and fighting over succession after the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime, bin Laden moved to Sudan.

Sudan and the Entrepreneur-Mujahid

In January 1989, in a coup led by Colonel Omar al-Bashir, the National Islamic Front (NIF) had come to power in Sudan and established an Islamic republic. Bashir had enlisted the help of Hasan al-Turabi, the Sorbonne-educated leader of the NIF, regarded by many as one of the most brilliant and articulate of the Islamic activist leaders of political Islam internationally. Al-Turabi became the ideologue of the regime, holding a number of political positions, including speaker of the parliament. NIF members provided the backbone and infrastructure for the new government. The government, in a relationship that proved mutually beneficial, welcomed bin Laden. Bin Laden found a refuge and invested his wealth in much-needed construction projects as well as farms and other businesses in the fledgling Islamic state. During these years Sudan, with its open borders, was increasingly condemned by America and Europe for its links with revolutionary Iran and for harboring international terrorists and their training camps. In 1993 Sudan was placed on the State Department's list of countries that

sponsor terrorism. bin Laden was among those individuals whom U.S. intelligence identified as sponsoring terrorist training camps. Although he denied direct involvement and was never formally indicted, bin Laden voiced his approval for the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the killing of U.S. troops in Mogadishu, Somalia. American officials were divided as to whether he provided training and arms to those responsible.

Bin Laden's final break with Saudi Arabia came in 1994 when the Kingdom revoked his citizenship and moved to freeze his assets in Saudi Arabia because of his support for fundamentalist movements. From that point on, bin Laden became more outspoken in his denunciation of the House of Saud. Now pushed to the fringe, he joined with other dissident activists and religious scholars to create the Advice and Reform Committee, founded in Saudi Arabia but forced subsequently to move to London. This political opposition group strongly criticized the Saudi regime but did not overtly advocate violence.

By 1995, a series of events and accusations had catapulted the previously obscure bin Laden to center stage. U.S. intelligence sources claimed that he had established extensive training operations in northern Yemen near the Saudi border.¹⁴ Investigators charged that Ramzi Yousef, the captured mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing, had stayed at a bin Laden-financed guesthouse and had financial links to bin Laden. Bin Laden sent a letter to King Fahd advocating guerrilla attacks to drive the U.S. forces out of the Kingdom. Some charged that he was linked to an unsuccessful assassination attempt in Addis Ababa, in June 1995, against President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. When five Americans and two Indians were killed in a truck bombing in Riyadh in November 1995, bin Laden denied involvement but praised those who committed the attack.¹⁵ Responding to mounting international pressure, especially from the United States and Saudi Arabia, in May 1996 Sudan expelled bin Laden. Ironically, Sudan offered to extradite him to Saudi Arabia or America; both refused to take

him. Though some had urged the United States to take advantage of the tentative overtures that the NIF government was making, the Clinton administration chose otherwise.

Bin Laden fled back to Afghanistan.¹⁶ Shortly after, in June, a large truck bomb tore apart the Khobar Towers, a U.S. military residence in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing nineteen servicemen. Investigators were initially divided between placing the blame with bin Laden or with a militant Saudi Shi'ite organization.¹⁷ Bin Laden praised those behind the Riyadh and Dhahran bombings but denied direct involvement: "I have great respect for the people who did this. What they did is a big honor that I missed participating in."¹⁸ In June 2001 thirteen members of Saudi Hizbollah, a Shi'ite group from the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, were indicted in the United States for the Dhahran bombing.

The Taliban and bin Laden

In 1996, Afghanistan witnessed the rise of an improbable militia that would go on to unite 90 percent of the country and declare the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. After almost eighteen years of Soviet occupation followed by civil war, a seemingly endless cycle of carnage and chaos was abruptly reversed by the astonishing success of a new Islamic movement.

Late in 1994, as if out of nowhere, the predominantly Pashtun Taliban, a band of *madrassa* (seminary) students (*taliban*) who had been living as refugees in Pakistan suddenly appeared. Initially the Taliban were portrayed as having no military background. In fact many of their *mullahs* (religious leaders) and students were veterans of the Afghan-Soviet war who had returned to the *madrassas* after the departure of the Soviets. Within two years they swept across the country, overwhelming the Northern Alliance of non-Pashtun minorities. Denouncing the contending mujahidin militias, the Taliban claimed the mantle of moral leadership as representatives of the majority of Afghans who were victims of the internecine warfare.

At first the Taliban were hailed as liberators who promised to restore law and order, stability and security, and make the streets safe for ordinary citizens. They disarmed the population, cleaned up corruption and graft, and imposed *Shariah* (Islamic law). Initially, they enjoyed success and popularity as a reform movement. It was not until their capture of Kabul in 1996 that they revealed their intention to rule the country and to impose a strict puritanical form of Islam. With substantial support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, by 1998 they had subdued 90 percent of the country and driven the Northern Alliance into a small area of northeast Afghanistan.

The Taliban brand of Islamic radicalism has been significantly influenced by a militant neo-Deobandi movement in Pakistan. Ironically, the Sunni Deobandi began in the Indian subcontinent as a reformist movement. However, its political expression and ideology were transformed within Pakistan's Jamiyyat-i-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI), a religious party with a rigid, militant, anti-American, and anti-non-Muslim culture. Many of the Taliban were trained in the hundreds of JUI madrasas. Often run by semiliterate mullahs, these schools were first set up for Afghan refugees in the Pashtun-dominated areas of Pakistan, along the border with Afghanistan. Many were supported by Saudi funding that brought with it the influence of an ultraconservative Wahhabi Islam. Students received free education, religious, ideological, and military training. The Taliban teachers showed little knowledge or appreciation for their classical Islamic tradition or for currents of Islamic thought in the broader Muslim world today. They espoused a myopic, self-contained, militant worldview in which Islam is used to legitimate their tribal customs and preferences. The classical Islamic belief in jihad as a defense of Islam and the Muslim community against aggression was transformed into a militant jihad culture and worldview that targets unbelievers, including Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

When they came to power, the Taliban turned over many of their training camps to JUI factions, who in turn trained thou-

sands of Pakistani and Arab militants as well as fighters from South and Central Asia and the Arab world in their radical jihad ideology and tactics. Assisted by military support from Pakistan and financial support from the Wahhabi in Saudi Arabia, with JUI mentoring and influenced by Osama bin Laden's evolving radical jihadist political vision, the Taliban promoted their own brand of revolutionary Islam. They imposed their strict Wahhabi-like brand of Islam on Afghan society. They banned women from school and the workplace, required that men wear beards and women *chadors*, banned music, photography, and television, and imposed strict physical punishments on deviators. Their intolerance for any deviation from their brand of Islam expressed itself in the slaughter of many of Afghanistan's Shii minority (10 percent of the population), whom they disdained as heretics, when the Taliban overran Shii areas such as Mazar-e Sharif in northwest Afghanistan.

Many Muslim religious leaders around the world denounced Taliban "Islamic" policies as aberrant. Muslim governments as diverse as Iran and Egypt, along with Western governments and international human rights organizations, condemned Taliban violations of human rights. Despite their control of most of Afghanistan, by the fall of 1998, neither the United Nations nor most of the global community acknowledged their legitimacy. The Taliban government was recognized by only three nations, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Nevertheless, bin Laden found the Taliban's Afghanistan a comfortable haven and useful base of operations. The Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, had been quick to offer sanctuary and express his admiration for bin Laden's sacrifices and dedication to jihad. Bin Laden skillfully cultivated and developed his relationship with Mullah Omar and the Taliban, providing financial support, building roads and other construction projects, and sending his Afghan Arabs to fight alongside the Taliban in critical battles.

Bin Laden's entourage and followers grew steadily. He attracted Arab and other Muslim dissidents, many of whom had had to flee their native countries. Among them were several prominent Egyp-

tian radicals: Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a physician and a leader of the banned Islamic Jihad in Egypt; Rifai Taha Musa, leader of Egypt's banned Gamaa Islamiyya; and two sons of Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind Egyptian preacher indicted for involvement in the assassination of Anwar Sadat, suspected of involvement in the World Trade Center bombing of 1993, and later found guilty of conspiring to blow up major sites in New York City. Omar Abdel Rahman had visited Afghanistan several times during the war against the Soviets, when he and bin Laden had first met. Of these men, however, the one to wield the most influence over bin Laden would be Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri.

**Ayman al-Zawahiri:
From Medical School to Jihad University**

The story of Ayman al-Zawahiri is that of a gifted surgeon who became a leader of an Egyptian terrorist group on the road to becoming Osama bin Laden's confidant, reputed mentor, and successor. Ayman al-Zawahiri was born in 1953 into a prominent and conservative religious family. He grew up in Maadi, an upscale suburb of Cairo inhabited by wealthy Egyptians and foreign diplomats. His grandfathers were the rector of al-Azhar University, the Islamic world's oldest and most prestigious religious school, and president of Cairo University, Egypt's leading modern secular university.

Family and friends remember Ayman as a normal, well-adjusted young man—an intelligent, well-read, polite student who went on to become a physician. However, 1967 had been a defining moment for him as it was for many in the Arab world. After the disastrous Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli (Six Day) war and the disillusionment over Arab (secular) nationalism and socialism that followed, al-Zawahiri turned to political Islam. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood when he was only fourteen years old. By 1979, he had embraced a radical option and joined Islamic Jihad, a violent extremist group composed of small clandestine cells. He quickly

became one of its leaders and by 1983 was recruiting members, organizing secret cells and underground operations. After the assassination of Anwar Sadat, Zawahiri was arrested along with hundreds of others. Though no direct link to Sadat's death could be established, he was tried and sentenced to three years in prison on charges of possessing weapons. After his 1984 release from prison, where like many others he had been beaten and tortured, he briefly returned to medical practice in a clinic. The political climate in Egypt and his radical past and prison record, however, prompted al-Zawahiri to emigrate and take a position in Saudi Arabia. Within the year he went to Afghanistan, where he worked as a surgeon, treating wounded Afghan and Arab fighters in field hospitals.¹⁹ It was during this time that he met Dr. Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian Islamist activist who had taught bin Laden at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Azzam had gone to Pakistan to make his contribution to the war in Afghanistan. After a short stint teaching at the Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, he founded the Jihad Service Bureau, whose mission was the recruitment of Saudis and other Arabs through publications and other media. Azzam joined with bin Laden and Zawahiri in recruiting and training Muslims for the jihad against the Soviets. They formed a lasting friendship and alliance in their growing commitment to a global jihad. After the Soviet defeat in 1989, Zawahiri returned to Egypt and to his leadership role in Islamic Jihad.

Zawahiri played an important role during the 1990s, organizing underground operations and integrating former mujahidin into the ranks of Islamic Jihad. The violence and terrorism of Islamic Jihad were met with equal force by Egyptian military and police. Bloody confrontations were accompanied by the arrest, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment of thousands.

In 1992 Zawahiri moved to Sudan with bin Laden, and in 1996 both returned to Afghanistan. From there, al-Zawahiri continued to be involved in the jihad against the Egyptian state. He is believed to have been the mastermind behind terrorist attacks, including the massacre of fifty-eight tourists in Luxor in 1997, for

which he was sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court in 1999. He also merged Islamic Jihad with al-Qaeda and worked with Osama bin Laden to plot and execute their global jihad.

Many believed that Zawahiri possessed a deeper theological understanding and more international perspective than bin Laden, and that he was responsible for broadening bin Laden's vista for jihad beyond the Arab world to the wider Muslim world and to a jihad against America and/or the West. Hamid Mir, a Pakistani journalist who interviewed bin Laden, believes that al-Zawahiri also masterminded the September 11, 2001, attacks. Although only religious leaders can legitimately issue fatwas, bin Laden had nevertheless issued a fatwa allowing the killing of innocent people: "to kill Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." When Mir pressed him on how this was permissible in light of the fact that the Prophet Muhammad forbade Muslims to kill innocent civilians, he noted that bin Laden responded only after consulting with Zawahiri and checking some Islamic sources.²⁰ Others, however, contend that bin Laden has long had a global animosity toward America and Israel as well as the intellectual and financial means to pursue it, and that it is he who broadened the perspective of Zawahiri, who had spent the bulk of his formative years as a terrorist focused on toppling the regime and establishing an Islamic state in Egypt. Regardless of who influenced whom, the bin Laden and Zawahiri joint venture produced a powerful global ideology and agenda.

Afghanistan and bin Laden's Declaration of Holy War

Safely entrenched in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden assumed a more visible and vocal leadership role in international terrorism, calling openly for a jihad against America and its allies. In August 1996 he issued a Declaration of Jihad whose goals were to drive U.S. forces out of the Arabian peninsula, overthrow the Saudi gov-

ernment, and liberate Islam's holy sites of Mecca and Medina, as well as support revolutionary groups around the world. In November, he again repeated his threat to wage holy war against the United States and its allies if Washington did not remove its troops from the Gulf.²¹ By 1998, he seemed increasingly comfortable and astute in using the media to propagate his message and garner support in the Muslim world. From that time onward, his media appearances and statements were carefully crafted, emphasizing both his image and message.

In 2000 bin Laden announced the formation of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, an umbrella group of radical movements across the Muslim world, and issued a fatwa stating that it is the duty of all Muslims to kill U.S. citizens and their allies. The title of the organization summed up the man and his view of the world. Muslims were under siege, their lands occupied in a world dominated by their historic enemies, militant Christianity and Judaism. All true Muslims had an obligation to heed the call to a global jihad, a defense of the worldwide Islamic community. Global politics were indeed for bin Laden a competition and jihad, a clash of civilizations between the Muslim world and the West, between Islam and a militant Judeo-Christian conspiracy. Foreign influence and intervention in the Islamic world had once again underscored the traditional division of the world into the land of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the land of warfare (*dar al-harb*). Because of Western abuses, the entire world has been divided, he claimed, "into two regions—one of faith where there is no hypocrisy and another of infidelity, from which we hope God will protect us."²² If bin Laden and al-Qaeda's attempt to mobilize the world of Islam for their jihad further convinced most Muslim and Western governments of the magnitude of the Islamic threat, it also seemed to contribute to bin Laden's attraction for a growing number of Muslims, particularly in the younger generation. Like Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein before him, bin Laden seeks legitimacy and the mobilization of the "Muslim street" or general population through identification with many of the

perceptions and grievances of mainstream as well as extremist Muslims. He hijacks Islam, using Islamic doctrine and law to legitimate terrorism.

The major issues and themes of bin Laden's message reflect both his Arab roots and a growing awareness of the broader Islamic community. His primary focus was at first the presence of foreign troops in the Arab peninsula, the overthrow of the Saudi regime, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Bin Laden labeled America and Israel as crusaders and Jews and Zionists and condemned the Saudi regime as compliant and corrupt. He then extended his accusations to embrace the death of one million innocent Iraqis due to Western sanctions as well as struggles in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir.

Bin Laden played to the Muslim sense of historic oppression, occupation, and injustice at the hands of the West. After September 11, he charged, "What the United States tastes today is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years. Our nation has been tasting humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years."²³ He paints a world in which Muslims and Islam are under siege:

America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal. . . . The September 11 attacks were not targeted at women and children. The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power.²⁴

The heart of bin Laden's jihad against America starts with his outrage at the injustice in his homeland—the infidel's occupation of sacred territory and its support for a corrupt un-Islamic government: "The call to wage war against America was made because America spearheaded the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques over and above its meddling in Saudi affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt, and tyrannical regime that

is in control."²⁵ Refusing to any longer recognize Saudi Arabia by name, bin Laden referred to the sacred territory it "occupies." Interestingly, King Fahd and the House of Saud some years earlier had taken to using the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Sites" of Mecca and Medina because they recognized their vulnerability to Islamic critics who insisted that monarchy is antithetical to Islam.

Bin Laden also connected Western presence in the Gulf with a more international concern: America's complicity in Israeli expansionism, its support for "Jewish and Zionist plans for expansion of what is called Greater Israel."²⁶ Contrary to what many said in the aftermath of September 11, Palestine is a primary issue for bin Laden. His messages have consistently spoken of Zionist and Jewish offenses against Muslims. His passionate statements on the plight of the Palestinians, who have been living under Israeli military occupation in violation of UN Security Council resolutions for over forty years, graphically describe, capture, and appeal to the outrage of many in the Arab and Muslim world toward Israeli policy and the complicity of the international community:

For over half a century, Muslims in Palestine have been slaughtered and assaulted and robbed of their honor and of their property. Their houses have been blasted, their crops destroyed. And the strange thing is that any act on their part to avenge themselves or lift the injustice befalling them causes great agitation in the United Nations which hastens to call an emergency meeting only to convict the victim and to censure the wronged and tyrannized whose children have been killed and whose crops have been destroyed and whose farms have been pulverized. . . .²⁷

Bin Laden holds the American people, who elect their president and Congress, responsible for Israeli oppression of Palestinians: "their government manufactures arms and gives them to Israel and Israel uses them to massacre Palestinians."²⁸ He charges that the Jewish lobby has taken America and the West hostage. He calls upon the American people to rise up against their government as

they did during the Vietnam war and force it to give up America's anti-Muslim policies and massacre of Muslims. Muslims have the right, indeed the obligation, to defend themselves. He appeals then to the Islamic teaching that jihad in the defense of Islam and to correct an unjust political order is legitimate and required:

We are carrying out the mission of the prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him). The mission is to spread the word of God, not to indulge in massacring people. We ourselves are the target of killings, destruction, and atrocities. We are only defending ourselves. This is defensive jihad. We want to defend our people and our land. That is why we say, if we don't get security, the Americans, too, would not get security. This is the simple formula that even an American child can understand. Live and let live.²⁹

In bin Laden's view, charges of "terrorism" are specious in a world of immorality and oppression within which ostensible acts of terrorism are sometimes necessary and justified. He paints the modern world in polarities, a world of belief and unbelief, within which the forces of evil, oppression, and injustice assault the forces of good. The Muslim world and Islam are under siege:

They rob us of our wealth and of our resources and of our oil. Our religion is under attack. They kill and murder our brothers. They compromise our honor and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists.³⁰

Like a Muslim jurist, he legalistically distinguishes between "commendable" and "reprehensible" terrorism. To terrify the innocent is unjust; however, terrorizing oppressors is necessary:

There is no doubt that every state and every civilization and culture has to resort to terrorism under certain circumstances for the purpose of abolishing tyranny and corruption. . . . The

terrorism we practice is of the commendable kind for it is directed at the tyrants, the traitors who commit acts of treason against their own countries and their own faith and their own prophet and their own nation. Terrorizing those and punishing them are necessary measures to straighten things and make them right.³¹

Osama bin Laden plays to a centuries-long tradition of reform in Islam, most of it aimed in the last one hundred years toward the struggle over Muslim oppression by the West. Why do his calls for a defensive jihad resonate as truth for mainstream Muslims as well as for extremists who live today in the Muslim world? This is the question we will examine in the next chapter.