

Handout 4. Profile of a Terrorist: Osama bin Laden

Below is material about Osama Bin Laden. The first is from a U.S. Department of State publication, and the second from an interview broadcast on ABC.

From U.S. Department of State,

Usama [Osama] bin Muhammad bin Awad bin Laden is one of the most significant sponsors of Sunni Islamic terrorist groups. The youngest son of Saudi construction magnate Muhammad Bin Laden, Usama joined the Afghan resistance almost immediately after the Soviet invasion in December 1979. He played a significant role in financing, recruiting, transporting, and training Arab nationals who volunteered to fight in Afghanistan. During the war, Bin Laden founded al-Qaida—the Base—to serve as an operational hub, predominantly for like-minded Sunni Islamic extremists. The Saudi government revoked his citizenship in 1994 and his family officially disowned him. He had moved to Sudan in 1991, but international pressure on that government forced him to move to Afghanistan in 1996.

In August 1996, Bin Laden issued a statement outlining his organization's goals: drive U.S. forces from the Arabian Peninsula, overthrow the Government of Saudi Arabia, “liberate” Muslim holy sites in “Palestine,” and support Islamic revolutionary groups around the world. To these ends, his organization has sent trainers throughout Afghanistan as well as to Tajikistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen and has trained fighters from numerous other countries including the Philippines, Egypt, Libya, and Eritrea. Bin Laden also has close associations with the leaders of several Islamic terrorist groups and probably has aided in creating new groups since the mid-1980s. He has trained their troops, provided safehaven and financial support, and probably helps them with other organizational matters.

Since August 1996, bin Laden has been very vocal in expressing his approval of and intent to use terrorism. He claimed responsibility for trying to bomb U.S. soldiers in Yemen in late 1992 and for attacks on them in Somalia in 1993, and reports suggest his organization aided the Egyptian al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya in its assassination attempt on Egyptian President Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995. In November 1996 he called the 1995 and 1996 bombings against US military personnel in Saudi Arabia “praiseworthy acts of terrorism” but denied having any participation in those bombings. At the same time, he called for further attacks against US military personnel, saying: “If someone can kill an American soldier, it is better than wasting time on other matters.”

* The different spelling of Osama bin Laden reflects U.S. State Department preference in 1997.

Below is an interview with Osama bin Laden by ABC's John Miller (conducted on May 28, 1998). The interview presents a number of different insights concerning the origins of terrorism (such as the psychological, ideological, and strategic). You will note the extent to which bin Laden attempts to speak on behalf of all of Islam—which of course in reality he does not.

JOHN MILLER Mr. bin Laden, to Americans you are an interesting figure: A man who comes from a background of wealth and comforts who ended up fighting on the front lines. Many Americans would think that's unusual.

OSAMA BIN LADEN Thanks be to Allah. It is hard for one to understand if the person does not understand Islam. In our religion we believe that Allah created us to worship him. Allah is the one who created us and blessed us with this religion, and orders us to carry out the holy struggle jihad to raise the word of Allah above the words of the unbelievers.

We believe this is a form of worship we must follow despite our financial ability. This is a response to Westerners and secularists in the Arab world who claim the reason for the awakening and the return to Islam is financial difficulties. This is untrue. In fact, the return of the people to Islam is a blessing from Allah, and their return is a need for Allah.

This is not a strange issue. During the days of jihad, thousands of young men who were well off financially left the Arabian Peninsula and other areas and joined the fighting—hundreds of them were killed in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. We pray Allah grants them martyr status.

JOHN MILLER You have been described as the "World's Most Wanted Man." There is word that the American government intends to put a price on your head in the millions for your capture. Do you think about that? Does it worry you?

OSAMA BIN LADEN Praise be to Allah. It does not worry us what the Americans think. What worries us is pleasing Allah. The Americans impose themselves on everyone who believes in his religion and his rights. They accuse our children in Palestine of being terrorists. Those children that have no weapons and have not even reached maturity. At the same time they defend a country with its airplanes and tanks, and the state of the Jews, that has a policy to destroy the future of these children.

Clinton stands after Qana and defends the horrible massacre that severed the heads of children and killed about 100 persons.* Clinton stands and claims Israel has the right to defend itself. We do not worry about American opinion, or the fact they place prices on our heads.

* Qana is a village in Lebanon where, on April 18, 1996, Israeli artillery shelled a compound in response to an attack allegedly launched by forces housed in the village. Some 800 civilians had taken refuge in the compound, and over 100 died in the attack. The Israeli government claimed that the compound had been in the hands of Hizballah, a terrorist group opposed to Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

We as Muslims believe that our fate is set. If the whole world decides to get together and kill us before our time has come, we will not die, our livelihood is set. No matter how much pressure America places on the regime in Riyadh to freeze our assets and to prevent people from contributing to this great cause, we rely on Allah.

Questions for Consideration

What insight or understanding does the psychological perspective give us about this terrorist? What insight or understanding does the ideological perspective give us? What insight or understanding does the strategic perspective give us?