

# Osama bin Laden: Humble megalomaniac

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## **Keywords**

Psychology of terrorism, Osama bin Laden, Ideological violence, Ideological, extremism, Humiliation, Damaged masculinity, Mass murder,

## **Abstract**

This article first examines Osama bin Laden in the context of Islam, al-Qaeda, and other extremist ideologies. The analysis critiques his use of collective guilt to justify killing innocent people and his misuse of Islam as a rationale for terrorism, highlighting the extent of his bigotry and paranoia. Next, the theme of humiliation is discussed at both the cultural and the personal level. It is hypothesized that bin Laden utilized violence to overcome his humiliation and damaged masculinity. Finally, his ideology, terrorist acts, and behavior within his family are discussed in the context of Theodore Millon's work on personality disorders, noting avoidant, compulsive, masochistic, sadistic, paranoid, antisocial, and narcissistic traits.

# 1. Introduction

The study of terrorists draws on literature in many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, political science, and criminology, as well as more specific domains such as radicalization, conspiracy theories, political extremism, religious fundamentalism, bigotry, anti-Semitism, and more. Though it is not possible within the confines of a journal article to review the potentially relevant literature in all these areas, it is important to recognize that multiple perspectives may shed light on terrorism in general and bin Laden in particular.

Osama bin Laden was a complex, multi-faceted person. He was often described as devout, soft-spoken, and humble. Yet he reveled in causing the deaths of thousands of people. How do we understand this? According to Scheuer, “Bin Laden and the Islamists have attacked the United States and its allies precisely because of the negative impact their governments’ actions have had in the Muslim world” (2011, p. 2). This was certainly bin Laden’s view of his motivation, but there were deeper issues. After all, most Muslims do not commit such attacks, regardless of U.S. actions. Whatever causes terrorists cite to justify violence, the deeper reasons lie elsewhere. In the words of Post, “The cause is not the cause” (2007, p. 6). Or, to use other terminology, the rationale is not the reason.

It is often said that terrorists are psychologically normal: “Most terrorists are ‘normal’ in the sense of not suffering from psychotic disorders” (Post, 2007, p. 3). This may be true, but the lack of psychosis does not mean a lack of psychopathology. This article seeks to shed light on Osama bin Laden through a critical examination of both his ideology and his personality.

## 2. Method

My guiding principle in studying bin Laden was to focus as much as possible on original sources, including bin Laden's speeches, interviews, and public documents, as well as private letters and documents from within al Qaeda that were discovered after bin Laden's death. These sources allow bin Laden to speak in his own voice and hopefully minimize any bias in interpretation. It must be noted, however, that we only know what bin Laden said and wrote, not what he thought. He may have knowingly made false statements to whip his followers into action. Because of the consistency of his message and his dedication to his cause, however, this article presumes that he believed what he said.

Secondary sources include people who knew bin Laden personally, such as his brothers, wife, and son, as well as coworkers from the family business and colleagues in al Qaeda. These sources all had first-hand knowledge of bin Laden's personality and behavior.

Efforts to find relevant sources included conducting searches for Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, terrorist, terrorism, jihadi, jihadist, radicalization, ideological extremism, extremist violence, and ideological violence on multiple websites including Google, Google Scholar, Amazon, and ResearchGate. These search terms were then combined with numerous other terms such as psychology, psychological, mental health, mental illness, personality, personality disorder, paranoia, paranoid, and delusion.

Other searches included looking for reports relating to terrorism in general or bin Laden in particular on government websites such as the National Counterterrorism Center, the United States Secret Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Finally, once relevant sources were found, the lists of references in each were used to identify further relevant materials. This latter proved to be a particularly fruitful way to locate sources.

The analysis presented here approaches bin Laden from several angles. His claims of persecution are compared to those of other ideological killers to highlight the patterns found among such perpetrators. Other statements of bin Laden are examined in the light of his family history, the history of Saudi Arabia, and Islam. There are, of course, many variations in Islamic belief and practice. For this article, I sought to find Islamic scholars who were authoritative voices in the Muslim community.

The primary analysis of bin Laden is conducted through the lens of psychology; more specifically, it draws on Theodore Millon's research on personality disorders. Other psychological concepts or approaches can provide insights into bin Laden, but the perspective of personality disorders is particularly useful for two reasons. First the

range of personality disorders, and the subtypes articulated by Millon, allow for a sophisticated analysis. Second, Millon's model can account for personality changes over time. One of the critical questions to be answered is how someone—particularly someone who was meek and gentle in his youth—evolves into a mass murderer. Millon's work provides insight into this process.

## 3. Preliminary issues

### 3.1. Bin Laden's hatred in the context of Islam

Bin Laden viewed Jews and Christians as enemies of Islam; he routinely referred to them as “infidels” (and occasionally as polytheists), expressing loathing for them as people. In Islam, however, Jews and Christians are not seen as polytheists or infidels, but fellow monotheists, and are referred to as “People of the Book”. Historically, “All People of the Book were simply treated as ‘believers’ within their respective religious communities” (Dakake, 2009, p. 20). Regarding the purpose of jihad, Dakake said, “The point of the jiha<sup>ḥ</sup>d was not to establish a world populated only by Muslims; it was to create a social order in which the freedom to practice the worship of God was guaranteed, for Muslims as well as for the People of the Book” (2009, p. 23). Regarding bin Laden's hatred of Jews, Shah-Kazemi wrote that it is essential to “debunk the pernicious lie that is circulating in our times, the lie that there is in Islam an inherent, deep-rooted, theologically sanctioned hostility to Judaism” (2009, p. 125).

The fact that bin Laden justified killing in the name of Islam is bizarre. Islam includes detailed moral guidelines, and there are clear prohibitions against killing civilians, women, children, and the elderly (El Fadl, 2005). Rather than following the dictates of Islam, bin Laden violated fundamental values and laws of his own religion. The entire terrorist mission is contrary to everything that Islam stands for: “Muslim scholars have pointed out that the terror attacks are totally devoid of any legitimacy in terms of Islamic law and morality” (Shah-Kazemi, 2009, p. 120). In addition,

Properly understood, the traditional doctrine of jiha<sup>ḥ</sup>d leaves no room for militant acts like those perpetrated against the United States on September 11th. Those who carried out these crimes in the name of God and the Prophet, in fact, followed neither God nor the Prophet... The notion of a militant Islam cannot be supported by any educated reading of the source materials (Dakake, 2009, p. 28).

More specifically, “Islamic law even prohibits the use of fire against opponents in war, ruling out the type of attacks on September 11th as well as nuclear bombs” (El-Ansary, 2009, p. 205). Similarly, “Islamic law also prohibits poisoning the wells of opponents, ruling out chemical and biological warfare” (El-Ansary, 2009, pp. 205–206). Despite this, bin Laden said that “Acquiring nuclear and chemical weapons is a religious duty” (Bergen, 2006, p. 336).

According to El-Ansary, bin Laden “is certainly not qualified to render Islamic legal judgments” (2009, p. 206). Similarly, Zaki Badawi (a Muslim leader in Britain) said, “Osama bin Laden is not a religious authority and he has no right either to issues fatwas or to declare jihad against America on behalf of the whole umma [international Muslim community]... The form of Islam espoused by al Qaeda is nonsense” (Atwan, 2008, p. 98).

### **3.2. The fallacy of collective guilt**

Timothy McVeigh cited the incidents at Ruby Ridge and Waco, in which lives were lost due to government actions, as justification for violence against the government. He viewed all federal employees as legitimate targets and said, “Think about the people as if they were storm troopers in Star Wars... They may be individually innocent, but they are guilty because they work for the Evil Empire” (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 166).

Similarly, bin Laden declared that all Americans and Jews anywhere in the world were legitimate targets because of American and Israeli government actions against Muslims. This has no more moral legitimacy than McVeigh’s use of collective guilt. According to Islamic scholars, even legitimate grievances do not justify violence: “Acts of brutality committed against Muslims are not an excuse for Muslims to respond in kind” (Dakake, 2009, p. 26); “There is nothing in Islam that justifies the killing or injuring of civilians, nor of perpetrating any excess as a result of hatred, even if that hatred is based on legitimate grievances” (ShahKazemi, 2009, p. 130); “Islam is not a religion in which ‘the ends justify the means,’ and no Muslim is allowed to return one injustice with another injustice” (El-Ansary, 2009, p. 205).

Bin Laden’s biographer, Hamid Mir, said, “He cannot prove through the Koran that the killing of Americans is Islam” (Bergen, 2006, p. 201). The Grand Mufti of Egypt called the 9/11 attackers “heretics” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 141, n. 3). In Saudi Arabia the Grand Mufti stated, “Bin Laden is among the earth’s most corrupted individuals, spewing on about paths both evil and corrupt” (Miller, 2015, p. 264). In fact, AlQaeda’s “fatwa stating that it was permissible to kill ‘Crusaders and Jews’ met with widespread opposition among its sympathizers, even from within its own membership” (Atwan, 2008, p. 285). Even bin Laden’s ambassador in London objected to killing Americans simply because of the government’s actions (Atwan, 2008, p. 285). An al-Qaeda member said of 9/11: “The Koran and Islam expressly forbid the death of women, children and old people. What leaves a rather bitter taste in my mouth was that planes were used, on which there were innocent people and perhaps even children” (Bergen, 2006, pp. 312–313). Another member of al-Qaeda called bin Laden’s use of collective guilt as “very naive,” noting “it’s not logical” (Bergen, 2006, p. 379). Even among the terrorist subculture of al-Qaeda, bin Laden was an outlier.



### 3.3. Bin Laden's hostility toward Muslims

Though it is tempting to view bin Laden as simply pro-Muslim and anti-West, he was more complicated than that. He had assassins kill Muslim leaders he objected to and bombed mosques and other Muslim sites (Bergen, 2006, p. 116). In fact, bin Laden railed against a wide range of Muslims, including Shi'as, Baathists, communists, socialists, and secularists (Miller, 2015, p. 154). Just as he saw conspiracies in the West to conquer Saudi Arabia, he also feared a Shi'a invasion from the East (Miller, 2015, p. 124).

One author stated that Muslims were "fast becoming al-Qa'ida's primary victims (Miller, 2015, p. 4). In fact,

Of twenty-six attacks by al-Qa'ida from 1995 to 2003, 88 per cent were in Muslim-majority countries, the vast majority of whose victims were non-Westerners... In Iraq alone, more than one thousand people were being killed every month in Al-Qa'ida attacks by the spring of 2008... After a string of plots and assassinations broke out in Saudi Arabia during this time, Sunnis found special cause to denounce bin Laden's legacy" (Wright, 2015, pp. 364–365).

Bin Laden's terrorist attacks in Muslim nations drew widespread condemnation from his own colleagues. One criticized his actions: "I do not know anyone who is a scholar, an intellectual, or a preacher who supports these actions or views them as legitimate... The damage inflicted on innocents... as result of targeting them was prohibited by God" (The Osama bin Laden files, 2012, pp. 164; 167). Adam Gadahn, an al-Qaeda spokesperson, also criticized bin Laden, noting that the jihadi movement was being punished by God "because of our sins and injustices" (The Osama bin Laden Files, 2012, p. 32). Even to fellow extremists, the killing of civilians was neither religion, nor morality, nor justice—it was murder.

### 3.4. Bin Laden in the context of violent extremism

Berger (2018, p. 46) defines violent extremism as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for violent action against an out-group". This occurred in Nazi Germany, where Hitler believed that Jews posed an existential threat to the German people; this necessitated the extermination of all Jews. Hitler's paranoid, absurd, baseless belief found a massive audience willing to not only accept it, but act on it.

Extremists often claim their homeland is being invaded, occupied, and/or colonized, that their people are being displaced or killed, that they are being enslaved and their women raped, and that they are fighting for their very survival. Anders Breivik (Norwegian bombing and massacre) claimed Muslims in Europe were invading, killing, raping,

enslaving, and committing genocide against white Christians. Dylann Roof (Charleston church massacre) claimed blacks sought to commit genocide against whites and were raping white women. Robert Bowers (Pittsburgh synagogue massacre) made claims of invasion by foreigners and white genocide by Jews. Brenton Tarrant (New Zealand mosque massacres) made claims of invasion, enslavement, and genocide by Muslims. None of these claims was grounded in reality. The white race is not on the brink of annihilation—not from blacks, Jews, or Muslims.

There were no invasions and no occupations, no ubiquitous rapes of populations, and no enslavement.

Similarly, bin Laden saw existential threats to the international Muslim community and made similar claims of invasion, occupation, rape, enslavement, and annihilation. He viewed Saudi Arabia as “an

American colony” and said it was under “dual American-Israeli occupation” (Atwan, 2008, pp. 162–163). He complained that Americans “captured” Saudi Arabia (Miller, 2015, p. 19). He referred to U.S. troops as “an invading infidel enemy” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 70). He claimed that Israeli Jews were raping Muslim women with impunity (Bergen, 2006, pp. 242; 291). He feared that Christians and Jews would enslave Muslims (Scheuer, 2002, p. 53). He believed in a conspiracy to destroy Islam:

“They are keen to destroy the Islamic identity in the entire Islamic world” (Coll, 2008, p. 569); “1200 million Muslims are being slaughtered” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 153); “Very few Islamic lands remain... Only you are left” (Miller, 2015, p. 152). Like Hitler and others, bin Laden justified violence as a defense against an annihilation that was not happening.

### **3.5. Alternatives to terrorism**

Even in the face of realistic grievances, mass violence is not the only path available. Gandhi had legitimate grievances against the British in India, but did not engage in a campaign of killing them. Instead, he conducted a nonviolent campaign of passive resistance. Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr., dealt with racial oppression not by encouraging African Americans to rise up and kill whites, but by preaching love and teaching people how to engage in nonviolent protests.

If bin Laden truly cared about the international Muslim community, he could have entered politics or earned a degree in international relations and worked to improve conditions within and between nations. He could have used his wealth to provide humanitarian aid where it was needed. He could have promoted peace between rival Islamic groups and people of different faiths. He could have started a program like Seeds of Peace that

brings together in a camp setting Jewish children and teenagers from Israel with Muslim children from the ‘occupied’ Palestinian Territories, Jordan,

and Egypt... They sleep together in the same bunk-houses, play together on the same sport teams, work together on projects. The friendships formed make it more difficult to sustain a stereotyped hatred of the other (Post, 2007, p. 255).

Bin Laden could have contributed millions of dollars to this or similar programs, dedicating his life to promoting harmony between Palestinians and Israelis. Instead, he chose to kill people.

## 4. Exploring bin Laden's rationales for violence

Osama bin Laden clearly articulated his rationales for violence. As noted by Bergen, “What he condemns the United States for is simple: its policies in the Middle East” (2001, p. 222). Bin Laden’s two primary justifications for attacking the United States were America’s support for Israel and the American military presence in Saudi Arabia. There is no direct line of causation, however, from these issues to killing Jews/ Christians/Americans anywhere in the world. The facts cited by bin Laden do not lead inevitably to mass murder. Thus, we need to look deeper.

### 4.1. Rational objections vs. irrational hatred

By focusing on political realities—the U.S. did support Israel and there were American troops in Saudi Arabia—bin Laden presented himself as a rational man who objected to American foreign policy.

Other statements, however, make clear the depth of his bigotry:

Every Muslim... from the moment they realize the distinction in their hearts, hates Americans, hates Jews, and hates Christians. This is a part of our belief and our religion. For as long as I can remember, I have felt tormented and at war, and have felt hatred and animosity for Americans (Coll, 2008, p. 204).

The idea that “every Muslim” hates Americans, Jews, and Christians is absurd. Also, according to bin Laden, hatred was at the foundation of his being. This suggests that it was not based on any particular action by Jews, Christians, or Americans—any actions by them that he found objectionable presumably fed and justified his pre-existing hatred, but the hatred came first.

After 9/11 bin Laden said, “This war is fundamentally religious... Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels. For, the enmity is based on creed” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 17). In fact, he viewed Jews and Christians as “God’s basest creatures” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 53). Rather than working toward peace, he sought to prolong hatred, claiming that it was “incumbent that women suckle our children on the enmity of Jews and Christians” (Miller, 2015, p. 44). He claimed he had “religious

authorization to kill up to ten million Americans” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 214). He even had “future plans to destroy the West” (Sasson, 2012, p. 277). This was an ongoing theme for bin Laden, who said, “God willing, the end of America is imminent” (Scheuer, 2002, p. xix). Beyond destroying America, bin Laden envisioned conquering the world: “It is from this land that we will dispatch our armies all over the world to smash all kuffar [infidels] all over the world” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 158). Bin Laden told his son, “One day Muslims will rule the world” (Sasson, 2012, p. 221).

Similarly, bin Laden did not simply object to U.S. support for Israel—he was rabidly anti-Semitic. He embraced classic anti-Semitic ideas about Jews, money, the media, and political influence. He said to America, “the Jews have taken control of your economy, through which they have then taken control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life making you their servants” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 167). He owned *Secrets of the Federal Reserve*, by Eustace Mullins, a Holocaust denier and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist (Naylor, 2015). He believed that Jews controlled the United States government: “We speak of the American government, but it is in reality an Israeli government” (Bergen, 2006, p. 291). He even called the United Nations a Zionist organization (Lawrence, 2005, p. 219), despite its long history of bias against Israel (Bard, 2020).

Beyond controlling the government, bin Laden thought that Jews had enslaved the nation: “The system is totally in control of the American Jews... the American people themselves are the slaves of the Jews” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 140). Not only did bin Laden view “the Jews” as in control of America, but he believed the classic anti-Semitic idea that there is an international Jewish conspiracy to control the world; he even owned the “*Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,” the most infamous anti-Semitic document in history (Coll, 2008, p. 464).

According to Coll, “Osama presumed the power and relentlessness of Zionist and Jewish conspiracies” (2008, p. 571). What conspiracies? Bin Laden said, “They [Israelis] make use of America to further their plans for the world, especially the Islamic world” (El-Ansary, 2009, p. 216); he stated Israel “is behind all the attacks on states in the Muslim world” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 67). Bin Laden believed Jews sought a “Greater Israel” that would include “large parts of Iraq and Egypt... as well as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, the whole of Palestine, and a large part of Saudi Arabia” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 189).

To appreciate the extent of bin Laden’s paranoia some context is required. Whereas Christians are 30% of earth’s people and Muslims 22.5%, Jews constitute less than 0.2%—not 2%, but two-tenths of 1%, of the world’s population (Johnson & Grim, 2013). If the population of Cairo were reduced by 25%, there would still be more people in the city than there are Jews in the world. From a global perspective, Jews barely exist. Muslim-majority countries constitute a greater land mass than the United States, Canada, and Europe combined; Israel is approximately the size of New Jersey. Jews are hardly poised to take over the world. Despite this, bin Laden “hates Jews and Israel and wants both annihilated” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 233). His hostility toward Jews

was not rational political analysis, but paranoia, bigotry, and dreams of genocide. Bin Laden's view of Jews was essentially that of neoNazis (Ezekiel, 1995).

Bin Laden's son, Omar, testified to his father's virulent anti-Semitism. In bin Laden's camp, a soldier killed a baby monkey. He announced "that the baby monkey was not a monkey at all, but was a Jewish person turned into a monkey by the hand of God. In his eyes, he had killed a Jew!" (Sasson, 2012, p. 166). Omar said his father convinced the soldier of this bizarre idea.

Finally, bin Laden sought to de-legitimize Jews and Judaism. He claimed that Jews are not the true descendants of Moses: "It is the

Muslims who are the inheritors of Moses... If the followers of Moses have been promised a right to Palestine in the Torah, then the Muslims are the most worthy nation of this" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 162). This de-legitimizing of Jews is found in the Christian Identity movement that is embraced by many white supremacists, as well as in other extremist ideologies. De-legitimizing Jewish heritage denied Jews of any claim to the land of Israel, transforming Israeli Jews into invaders and usurpers.

## 4.2. Additional conspiracy theories

Though bin Laden knew that U.S. troops were in Saudi Arabia at the request of the King, he spewed numerous conspiracy theories about America. For example, "Osama voiced a fear that America had a secret plan to use its presence in Saudi Arabia to 'secularize Saudi Arabia'" (Coll, 2008, p. 379). Bin Laden believed this conspiracy "was planned, decades ago, with the aim of subjecting the Islamic world to laws other than those revealed by God" (Miller, 2015, p. 124).

He believed the United Nations was "a tool to implement the Crusaders' plans to kill the causes of the nation of Islam and its peoples" (Scheuer, 2011, p. 97). Though Sunnis and Shi'as have been at odds for 1400 years, bin Laden blamed their conflict in Pakistan on the United States (Miller, 2015, p. 310). At times, he included India or Hindus in his paranoia, referring to "Crusader-Zionist-Hindu" conspiracies and the "U. S-Jewish-Indian alliance against Muslims" (Reidel, 2008).

Bin Laden saw plots everywhere. When former president, Jimmy Carter, visited Sudan, bin Laden said this was "part of a global campaign orchestrated by America and the Jews to deprive Muslims of the very best of what they own!" (Miller, 2015, p. 184). In 1992, when civil war and famine were devastating Somalia, the U.S. and twenty-seven other nations (including Muslim-majority countries) sent humanitarian aid, along with troops to protect the workers. To bin Laden, this was another invasion that was "part of a larger American strategy to take over the Islamic world" (Bergen, 2006, p. 137). Bin Laden made the bizarre claim that the Rwandan genocide in 1994 was orchestrated by America (Wright, 2006, p. 272). When the BBC began broadcasting programs in Arabic, bin Laden claimed that "their primary concern was with destroying the Arabs via the media" (The Osama bin Laden Files, 2012, p. 188). He even

called AIDS—which originated in Africa—“a Satanic America Invention” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 168).

### 4.3. U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia

Perhaps bin Laden’s biggest issue with the United States was that in 1990 it sent troops to Saudi Arabia. He used the fact of American troops on Saudi soil as one of his primary pretexts for killing Americans. In the context of the nation’s history, the bin Laden family history, and the nation’s political situation at the time, this makes no sense.

Bin Laden viewed American troops in Saudi Arabia as “one of the worst catastrophes to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet” (Wright, 2006, p. 234). In his view, “America has committed the greatest mistake in entering a peninsula which no religion from among the nonMuslim nations has entered for fourteen centuries” (Atwan, 2008, p. 162).

The truth is otherwise. Jews lived in what is now Saudi Arabia prior to the existence of Islam and survived there for a thousand years afterwards (Newby, 2009). The Arabian peninsula also includes Yemen, where Jews have lived from ancient times into the 21st century (Nordland, 2015). Similarly, Christian communities existed in Saudi Arabia for hundreds of years after Islam began (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 10; 188). In the 1830s, American traders set up shop in Arabia and by the 1890s American missionaries and medical workers were active on the peninsula (Oren, 2007, pp. 117, 288). In recent decades, hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Christian foreign nationals have worked in Saudi Arabia (Library of Congress, 2006, p. 7). Calling the U.S. Army the first non-Muslims in the Arabian peninsula for 1400 years was nonsense.

Furthermore, bin Laden’s father, who ran the premiere construction company in Saudi Arabia, hired non-Muslims from around the world (Coll, 2008). He even leased a hotel to the U.S. military and worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Coll, 2008, pp. 76; 102–103). Obviously, bin Laden’s father had no objection to non-Muslims—including the U.S. military—being in Saudi Arabia. Neither did the Saudi king, who in the 1940s allowed the United States to build an airbase near Dhahran (Oren, 2007, p. 461). Later, Crown Prince Faisal “prevailed upon President John F. Kennedy to send American forces to protect the Kingdom during the border war against Yemen” (Wright, 2006, p. 87). American troops in Saudi Arabia were nothing new.

In 1990, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the royal family of Saudi Arabia feared Hussein would invade their nation. They knew they did not have the military power to fend off Iraq, so the King asked the U.S. for military support. Like their father, bin Laden’s half-brothers (who ran the company after his death) cooperated with the U.S. military on multiple projects including accommodations, roadways, and telecommunications (Coll, 2008, pp. 376–377). Whereas bin Laden said, “Never has

Islam suffered a greater disaster than this invasion,” viewing it as “a back-breaking calamity” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 114), his brothers worked with the U.S. military to assist with the defense of their homeland.

Saeed Thabit, a journalist, had no issue with American troops being on Saudi soil as long as they did not enter the prohibited holy places: “Do the Americans enter Mecca?. .. If they do not there is no problem with the Americans” (Bergen, 2001, p. 174). Abdullah al-Turki, secretarygeneral of the Muslim World League, said, “The Prophet had never objected to Jews and Christians traveling in the region or helping to defend it” (Coll, 2004, p. 223). Bin Laden’s objection to non-Muslims being in the land had no basis in history or Islam.



## 5. Exploring reasons for bin Laden's violence

If bin Laden's rationales made no sense, what were the reasons for his violence? A common theme in his writings, videos, and interviews was redeeming Muslims from humiliation (Bergen, 2006; Lawrence, 2005; Miller, 2015). He seemed obsessed with the issue of humiliation. The possible reasons for this will be discussed first at the cultural level, then at the personal level.

### 5.1. Cultural humiliation

Israel's victory against multiple Arab nations in 1967 sent a shock wave through the Muslim world. In Saudi Arabia, Prince Turki commented, "You can't imagine the state of total depression and sense of failure that struck the Arab world" (Coll, 2004, p. 79). Wright stated:

It was a psychological turning point in the history of the modern Middle East. The speed and decisiveness of the Israeli victory in the Six Day War humiliated many Muslims... They had lost not only their armies and their territories, but also faith in their leaders, in their countries, and in themselves (2006, p. 38).

Just as Hitler and the Nazis grew out of Germany's defeat in World War I, Islamic extremism grew out of Israel's victory in 1967: "The profound appeal of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt and elsewhere was born in this shocking debacle" (Wright, 2006, p. 38).

Israel's victory was not simply a demonstration of military strength. Isam Darraz, an Egyptian journalist, said, "It wasn't a military defeat... It became a civilization defeat. We didn't know we were so backward, we were so retarded, so behind the rest of modern civilization" (Scheuer, 2011, pp. 46–47). In other words, the Arab defeat highlighted the issue of modernity. Bin Laden was hostile toward modernity; he was also hostile toward the West. Perhaps these two hostilities were really the same. This might explain his desire to annihilate America. In Wright's view, by attacking America, "he was fighting modernity itself" (2006, pp. 234–235).

In the mid-twentieth century, the issue of modernity also arose with the development of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia:

There was a widespread feeling... that this torrent of progress was eroding the essential quality of Arabia, which was its sacredness. Unimaginable wealth had fallen on these austere desert nomads... Paradoxically, this gift was undermining every facet of their identity (Wright, 2006, p. 86).

As expressed by El Fadl, “The likes of bin Laden are the children of a profound dissonance and dysfunctionism experienced toward both the Islamic heritage and modernity” (2005, p. 101). Modernization posed the question of how to live as a traditional Muslim in a modern world. Bin Laden’s son, Omar, said his father “had become increasingly obsessed with the notion that anything convenient or modern was bad for a Muslim” (Sasson, 2012, p. 187). Omar reported that his father said, “Islamic beliefs are corrupted by modernization” (Sasson, 2012, p. 52). In response, bin Laden wanted to live with the dress and customs that prevailed in the days of the Prophet (Coll, 2008, p. 203).

Bin Laden’s disdain for anything modern led him to deny his family toys, television, central heating, air conditioning, and even access to modern medical care. They could not drink with straws because there were no straws in the Prophet’s time (Coll, 2008, p. 208). When Omar asked his father for a bicycle, bin Laden told him he could have a goat (Sasson, 2012, p. 144).

Despite this, bin Laden maintained a “passion for expensive cars that was indulged well into his latter years” (Miller, 2015, p. 34). He utilized airplanes, video, computers, and modern telecommunications. He tried to get Muslims to boycott American goods, but used an Apple computer (Bergen, 2001, p. 94). He objected to modernity but could not live without it. The recognition that he needed what the West offered may have added to his humiliation and rage.

Bin Laden’s brothers—unlike him—were educated in the West. This may have implied that education in the Muslim world was inferior. Similarly, when bin Laden was young, he injured his eye and went to England for treatment (Coll, 2008, p. 209). Again, this implied that the West was superior to Muslim nations because it was more modern.

Another noteworthy aspect of bin Laden’s campaign against the U.S. is that he refused to acknowledge American support of Muslims. During the jihad against Russia in Afghanistan, the U.S. contributed \$3 billion to support the Afghans (Bergen, 2006, p. 60). Similarly, American troops were in Saudi Arabia to defend the nation, and the United States led the international coalition that freed Kuwait from Iraqi domination. When Muslims were being massacred in Bosnia, the U.S. helped to end the violence with the Dayton Accord. When masses of Muslims were dying from famine and starvation in Somalia, the United States sent humanitarian aid. This is not to deny any American misdeeds in Muslim nations, but it shows that far from trying to destroy Islam, America repeatedly took steps to save and protect Muslims.

Bin Laden’s response to U.S. monetary support in Afghanistan is noteworthy. At times, he acknowledged this support, stating, “History recounts that America sup-

ported everyone who waged jihad and fought against Russia” (Coll, 2008, p. 292; see also Wright, 2006, pp. 151–152). Elsewhere, however, he denied it: “The Americans are lying when they claim they helped us at any point” (Coll, 2008, p. 293). Why would he deny this? Perhaps because he could not acknowledge it and maintain his accusations against the U.S. Also, to acknowledge U.S. assistance in Afghanistan or other Islamic nations would be humiliating, because it signified that Muslim nations could not take care of themselves.

He blamed Muslims for what he perceived as their humiliation—but ultimately the blame was directed at Jews and Christians (i.e., the West) for polluting Muslim nations with decadence:

If every Muslim asks himself why has our nation reached this state of humiliation and defeat, then his obvious answer is because it rushed madly for the comforts of life... The Jews and Christians have tempted us with the comforts of life and its cheap pleasures and invaded us with their materialistic values before invading us with their armies, while we stood like women doing nothing (Coll, 2008, p. 565).

Israel’s victory and the struggle with modernity had a profound impact on bin Laden. In addition, he grew up with multiple sources of personal humiliation.

## **5.2. Personal humiliation and damaged masculinity**

Little is known about bin Laden’s mother. She married at 14, and the marriage quickly ended in divorce. Osama was the only child she bore to his father. She may have been a servant or maid prior to marriage.

Family members reportedly referred to her as “the slave” and to Osama as “the son of the slave” (Post, 2007, p. 194). If true, then his life began with shame.

Even if this is not true, there were undercurrents regarding bin Laden’s mother: “Osama always felt his mother wasn’t with the rest of the mothers, because she was from a lower social class. Osama always felt broken and felt he didn’t get his share” (Coll, 2008, p. 351). The comment, “Osama always felt broken” suggests deep psychological pain. It was also reported that due to the “weak status of Osama’s mother within the family... Some of the brothers would sneer, and the sisters would feel sorry for him and pat poor little Osama” (Coll, 2008, p. 487). Bin Laden was something of a misfit in the family. His preoccupation with humiliation may have had deeper—and more personal—roots than the 1967 Israeli victory.

Bin Laden had virtually no contact with his father, who had over fifty children with many wives. Reportedly, bin Laden was only in his father’s presence on five occasions, and four of these were large gatherings (Sasson, 2012, p. 238). His son, Omar, thought that Osama’s distance from his father, as well as his parents’ divorce, weighed heavily on him:

My father's life did not evolve as he wished. Like most children of divorced parents, he felt a loss, for he was no longer as intimately involved with his father's family... it is believed that he keenly felt his lack of status, genuinely suffering from his father's lack of personal love and care (Sasson, 2012, p. 49).

In 1967 (the year of the Israeli victory), bin Laden lost his father at the age of 10. He became more subdued after this (Sasson, 2012, p. 10), but details of the impact of this loss are unknown.

Bin Laden may also have felt humiliation from a physical injury. When he was young, a metal fragment shot into his right eye—this was why he saw an eye doctor in London. Bin Laden apparently felt shame from this, hiding the injury from virtually everyone. His son said, “In our culture it is believed that any physical disability weakens a man” (Sasson, 2012, p. 197). Bin Laden was not the only mass murderer with a physical challenge to his sense of self. The significance of body-related issues and damaged masculinity among killers is discussed elsewhere (Langman, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b).

Other events may have contributed to bin Laden's sense of humiliation. He reportedly was a mid-range student who was insecure and fearful of making mistakes (Wright, 2006, p. 75; Coll, 2008, p. 144). He left his university without receiving a degree (Sasson, 2012, pp. 35–36).

Though he worked in the family business, he did not do well. In one case, “the project Osama supervised lost more than \$15 million” (Coll, 2008, p. 253). He apparently was neither liked nor respected in the company: “He just basically made a giant pest of himself and everybody wanted him gone” (Coll, 2008, p. 282). This suggests further humiliation within the family due to his own ineptitude. Perhaps his greatest humiliation, however, occurred after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia had 70,000 soldiers; Iraq had 2 million. Bin Laden had grandiose ideas about himself as a military leader. He proposed to the royal family that he could defend Saudi Arabia against Iraq with 12,000 men (Sasson, 2012, p. 102). The King dismissed this offer. This was humiliating, not just as a private slap in the face, but because bin Laden had announced his offer: “The rejection was distasteful, for he had told family, friends, and acquaintances that he had offered his military services to the royal family” (Sasson, 2012, p. 103).

Not only was bin Laden humiliated, but he was outraged when he learned that the King requested America's help: “Bin Laden told me that the Saudi government's decision to invite US troops to defend the kingdom and liberate Kuwait was the biggest shock of his entire life” (Atwan, 2008, p. 45). Bin Laden told the King, “You don't need Americans. You don't need any other non-Muslim troops. We will be enough” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 114). Again, he was rebuffed.

There is yet another twist. When the American troops arrived there were women among them. This was a further outrage and humiliation.

Bin Laden exclaimed, “Women! Defending Saudi men!” As expressed by his son, “No insult could be worse!” (Sasson, 2012, p. 104). That “infidel” women were brought in to defend Muslim men was staggering to bin Laden. He apparently took this to mean that his manhood was rated lower than the strength of foreign women—another blow to his masculinity. He said the royal family “deliberately shamed the army when they ‘imported women of the Christian armies’” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 221).

The issue of masculinity appears repeatedly with bin Laden. He complained that various regimes and the media sought “to strip us of our virility—we believe that we are men” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 89). Elsewhere he said, “perhaps the virility of the rulers in this region has been stolen, and they think people are women” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 90). He connected masculinity with violence, praising the bombers of two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998 as “real men, the true personification of the word men” (Scheuer, 2002, p. 200), and the 9/11 attackers as “these heroes, these true men, these great giants” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 155). When he gave a speech in Saudi Arabia, he declared, “By God, there are real men here!” (Miller, 2015, p. 128).

In contrast, he mocked the alleged “weakness, frailty and cowardice of the U.S. troops” (Bergen, 2001, p. 20), and said, the “U.S. arsenal is full of weapons, it does not have men” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 90). He gloated over Americans as cowards as he celebrated terrorists as examples of true masculinity. He seemed to measure his manliness against America, and every American killed confirmed his superior masculinity.

### 5.3. A personal look at bin Laden

People described bin Laden in his youth as shy, diffident, selfeffacing, and even effeminate. As noted by Coll, he was “a reticent, almost painfully shy man... a young man with the attitude of a shy girl.

He was always looking at his feet” (2008, p. 252). A childhood friend described him as “calm, shy, and almost girlish” (Wright, 2006, p. 75). He was “a shy, pious, even priggish young man admired by friends and family alike for his piety, but at the same time regarded, even within his own family, as someone who was a little bit different” (Bergen, 2006, p. 23).

Bin Laden seemed averse to, or uninterested in, normal pleasures. One of his brothers said, “He did not like to listen to music or to watch TV... I thought that was odd” (Bergen, 2006, p. 20). He also was emotionally restrained. According to Najwa, his first wife, who was also a cousin and had watched him grow up, he “was the most serious person I’ve ever known” and “rarely expressed even the most casual amusement” (Sasson, 2012, p. 42). Unlike the “flamboyant” Muslim weddings Najwa was used to, their wedding was solemn: “Everything lively was banned. There were no musicians... Those with dancing feet were instructed to remain motionless. Laughter and jokes were discouraged” (Sasson, 2012, p. 16).

As a husband, bin Laden prohibited his wives from pursuing careers (Sasson, 2012), even though two of his four wives had Ph.D.s. This went against the cultural norm: “In most Muslim countries, women attend colleges at all levels, and serve as lawyers, doctors, and judges” (El Fadl, 2005, p. 279). Despite this, he prohibited his daughters from going to school (Sasson, 2012, p. 134). This was not how his sisters were raised, nor how women were treated in Saudi Arabia, nor a result of Islam.

Constricting the lives of females was bin Laden’s personal demand.

As a father, he was strict and abusive. He often beat his sons with a cane, raising welts and on at least one occasion, breaking the cane (Sasson, 2012, pp. 55–57; 143). Bin Laden did not like jokes, wanting his children to always be serious (Sasson, 2012, p. 76). He prohibited laughter and did not even like to see their teeth when they smiled; he counted their teeth and let them know if they were exposing too many (Sasson, 2012, pp. 72; 76; 201).

Bin Laden enforced an austere lifestyle. The home could not be decorated, nor could it have heat, air conditioning, or a refrigerator. Their food had to be simple. The children were forbidden to have toys; when an uncle brought toys for them, bin Laden destroyed them (Sasson, 2012). He forbid television, photography, and anything artistic; there could be no pictures on the wall, and no music in the home because “Music is the flute of the devil” (Wright, 2006, p. 167).

Though bin Laden’s austere lifestyle was often viewed through the lens of religiosity, as if asceticism equals piety, Islam does not prohibit enjoying good food, being comfortable, decorating one’s home, listening to music, or laughing. This was not piety, but personality. In fact, among al-Qaeda’s collection of taped sermons, there is one that states: “Asceticism should not be observed in the wrong way, leading one to neglect and weaken one’s worldly life. God created good and lawful things in this world so that they may be enjoyed” (Miller, 2015, p. 31).

Bin Laden forced his wives and children to hike in the desert with little to no water, and even sleep overnight in the desert with no tents, sleeping bags, or blankets (Sasson, 2012, pp. 74; 121–122). His son, Omar, had asthma but bin Laden objected to his using his inhaler (Sasson, 2012, p. 192). When bin Laden and several of his sons contracted malaria, he refused medical attention for himself and for them, until they became dangerously ill, at which point he relented (Sasson, 2012, pp. 124–125). He told his children that suffering was good for them (Sasson, 2012, p. 142).

His sons liked when their father was gone for months (Sasson, 2012, p. 55). When he returned, if the boys had obtained pets, he threatened to kill the animals if they did not get rid of them (Sasson, 2012, pp. 146; 236). According to his son, Omar, “nothing sparked his fatherly warmth”

(Sasson, 2012, p. 55). Omar reported that his father told him, “You hold no more of a place in my heart than any other man or boy in the entire country.” Omar observed, “His heart remained untouched by a father’s love... My father hated his enemies more than he loved his sons” (Sasson, 2012, pp. 346–347). When bin Laden fled to the mountains of Afghanistan, he took his family with him. Omar and some of his brothers talked of

escaping, but feared that if they were caught their father would have them imprisoned or killed (Sasson, 2012, p. 318).

## 5.4. Personality analysis

This brief summary of bin Laden's demeanor and behavior presents several noteworthy traits: emotional constriction, avoidance of pleasure, extreme rigidity, coldness and callousness toward his family, and a focus on making them suffer. Using Millon's research on personality disorders (1996), these traits—along with his terrorist acts—suggest several personality types.

First, the many descriptions of bin Laden in his youth as shy, timid, and insecure suggest an avoidant personality disorder. People who are avoidant are anxious in social situations and fearful of “rejection and humiliation” (Millon, 1996, p. 253).

His seriousness and asceticism appear to fit Millon's description of the compulsive personality. For example, “Compulsives are contemptuous of those who behave ‘frivolously and impulsively’; emotional behavior is considered immature and irresponsible... They tend to minimize the importance of recreational and leisure activities... Most restrain warm and affectionate feelings” (1996, pp. 515–516; 518). Compulsives are serious in demeanor, rigid in their thinking, and cold in relationships. This describes bin Laden's interactions with his family.

Alternatively, bin Laden's austerity may have been a result of a masochistic personality. Masochistic traits include a “self-effacing and unassuming manner” and being “reluctant to seek pleasurable experiences.” For such people, “There is a taboo on most forms of enjoyment and self-enhancement” (Millon, 1996, pp. 584–585). Whether we understand bin Laden's asceticism as a product of compulsive or masochistic traits, or a combination of them, by themselves these do not account for his murderous violence. In fact, because compulsives tend to be moralistic and rule-abiding, they may seem particularly unlikely to engage in violent, criminal behavior.

When compulsive traits mix with paranoid traits, however, this creates what Millon calls the “puritanical compulsive.” Such people are notable for “distinct features of the paranoid personality, including bigoted, dogmatic, and zealous characteristics.” They also are prone to “ascetic and austere lifestyles” (Millon, 1996, p. 520). In addition, paranoids tend to “desensitize their tender and affectionate feelings. They become hard, unyielding, immune, and insensitive to the suffering of others” (Millon, 1996, p. 704). This was bin Laden. And because such people see themselves as righteous, they feel justified in doling out punishment:

Not only must they prove others to be wrong and immoral, but they judge them as deserving punishment. Because others are seen as sinners and perpetrators of immoral acts, they can justly be condemned without guilt. Justice requires a punitive attitude; morality sanctions it (Millon, 1996, p. 521).

The paranoid personality is noted for pervasive suspiciousness in which “innocuous events are construed as signifying hidden or conspiratorial intent” (Millon, 1996, p. 702). This conspiracy-minded view of the world was at the heart of bin Laden’s ideology.

Bin Laden also displayed characteristics of a sadistic personality, including “a broad-ranging social intolerance and prejudice, especially toward envied or derogated social groups, ethnic, racial, or otherwise” (Millon, 1996, p. 485). This was apparent in his attitudes toward Jews, Christians, and Americans. Besides intense bigotry, sadists “behave as if the softer emotions were tinged with poison” (Millon, 1996, p. 483).

In addition, sadistic personalities seek to dominate the people in their lives: “their spouses and children are perceived as objects devoid of human feeling and sensibility” (Millon, 1996, p. 485). Besides making them suffer, bin Laden desired to control his children completely. His son, Omar, reported these comments from his father:

My sons must be the fingers of my right hand. My thoughts must control your actions in the same manner my brain controls the movement of my limbs. My sons, your limbs should react to my thinking as though my brain was in your head (Sasson, 2012, p. 268).

Omar noted, “We were to be robots, in other words, without opinions or actions of our own” (Sasson, 2012, p. 268).

One subtype of the sadistic personality is what Millon called the “enforcing sadist.” This combines compulsive and sadistic traits, mixing the rigid moralism of the compulsive with the callousness of the sadist. Such people “feel they have the right to control and punish others, who know when rules have been broken, and how these violators should be dealt with, even violently and destructively” (Millon, 1996, p. 490).

At the personal level, the concept of the enforcing sadist illuminates bin Laden’s behavior within his family. Enforcing sadists view themselves as upholders of what is right. They use their socially sanctioned roles to “search out rule-breakers and perpetrators of incidental infractions,” “exercising whatever powers they possess to the most severe degree” (Millon, 1996, p. 490). Thus, bin Laden felt justified in beating his children for violating any of his rules or expectations, no matter how minor. As husband and father, he was socially authorized to enforce whatever standards of behavior he deemed appropriate. He took this power to the extreme, making his family suffer and justifying it as being for their own good. In addition, for enforcing sadists:

The more they discharge their hostility and exercise their wills, the more they display their dominance and feed their sadistic urges, the more they feel justified in venting their anger. Power has gone to their heads. Many begin to dehumanize their victims, further enlarging the sphere and intensity of their aggressive destructiveness (1996, p. 490).

Another subtype of the sadistic personality is the “tyrannical sadist.” Such people “derive deep satisfaction in creating suffering and in seeing its effect on others” (Millon,



1996, p. 489). Omar said that when his father heard about the many victims in the two U.S. embassy bombings in Africa, “I had never seen him so excited and happy” (Sasson, 2012, p. 296). Tyrannical sadists “employ violence as an intentionally utilized instrument to inspire terror... The subjugation or elimination of others has become the primary goal” (Millon, 1996, pp. 489–490).

Bin Laden also possessed antisocial personality traits. In fact, Millon’s description of the antisocial is a remarkable conceptualization of bin Laden’s personality and behavior:

The antisocial is the victim, an indignant bystander subjected to unjust persecution and hostility... They not only disown their malicious impulses and attribute the evil to others. As persecuted victims, they feel free to counterattack and gain restitution and vindication (Millon, 1996, p. 448).

This passage is worth a closer look. First, an antisocial personality is preoccupied with being a victim; bin Laden was obsessed with victimization, even though it was largely imagined. Second, he projected his own hatred onto others. Though he was the one who wanted to destroy America/Israel/Jews/Christians, he claimed that they wanted to destroy Islam. He projected his own hatred and desire for world domination onto them and then accused them of hating Muslims, wanting to destroy Islam, and dominate the world. Finally, he believed that he and his people were persecuted victims, thereby justifying what he considered to be a counterattack.

Projection also occurs in the “malignant paranoid,” which combines paranoid and sadistic traits. These individuals “attribute their own venom to others” to the point that “the belief takes hold that others are intentional persecutors” and their suspicions of persecution become delusions (Millon, 1996, p. 707). Millon also noted the self-fulfilling prophecy that such people create: “by their own hand, they stir up further hostility and disfavor” (1996, p. 707). In other words, because they act on their suspicions and hostility toward others, they end up provoking a hostile reaction in return. This further confirms their paranoia. Because bin Laden not only believed America was his enemy but acted on this belief, he succeeded in making America his enemy.

Finally, bin Laden had narcissistic traits. The core of narcissism is an inflated sense of self that may involve “self-glorifying fantasies” (Millon, 1996, p. 405). In fact, “narcissists are minimally constrained by reality. They also take liberties with facts, embellishing them, even lying, to redeem their illusions about their self-worth” (Millon, 1996, p. 406).

This appears in bin Laden’s presentation of his involvement in the war in Afghanistan. At Jaji, bin Laden had approximately fifty men; they were attacked by an estimated two hundred Russians. Bin Laden lost about a quarter of his men and retreated (Coll, 2004, pp. 162–163).

According to Coll, “The Jaji battles of 1987 were intense, with significant casualties on both sides, but they did nothing to alter the course of the larger war” (2008, p. 302).

Bin Laden transformed this defeat into a victory over Russia: “He actually believed the fable... that his Arab legion had brought down the mighty superpower” (Wright, 2006, p. 145). Post noted, “bin Laden became solely responsible for the victory over the Soviet superpower... in his own increasingly grandiose psychology” (2007, p. 196). In 1990, when he offered to fight Iraq, bin Laden commented, “We pushed the Soviets out of Afghanistan” (Wright, 2006, p. 158).

As noted, bin Laden and his men did nothing to effect the outcome of the war. In fact, Mikhail Gorbachev, who inherited the Russian occupation of Afghanistan when he came to power, had decided months before the battle of Jaji to get Russia out of Afghanistan (Coll, 2004, pp. 158–160). Bin Laden had nothing to do with this decision.

Bin Laden’s narcissism was also evident in his family. He presented an image of always being the best: “He was accustomed to being number one in everything he did. He was the most skilled horseman, the best driver, the greatest boatman, the fastest runner, and the top marksman” (Sasson, 2012, p. 150). Of course, he was not all these things, and his son, Omar, told about a time that his father lost control of a speedboat and another man had to take a boat out to rescue him. Bin Laden was so mortified that instead of riding back in his boat, he jumped out and floated behind the boat so that he would not be seen returning to the dock: “He simply couldn’t bear the thought of looking foolish. From that day, his sons and employees were forbidden to mention that speedboat” (Sasson, 2012, p. 150). Millon noted that some narcissists “are prone to feel shamed and humiliated” when faced with negative judgments by others (1996, p. 412). This suggests that bin Laden’s narcissism was built on a fragile foundation that could easily crumble.

In response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Omar said bin Laden believed that he could “have saved Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, further establishing his reputation as the greatest Arab hero of all time” (Sasson, 2012, p. 195). In addition, Omar said his father would “pose new ideas that he believed would alter the course of the world” (Sasson, 2012, p. 205). This grandiose thinking was noted by Wright, who wrote, “The scale of his ambition was beginning to reveal itself. In his fantasy he would enter history as the savior of Islam” (2006, p. 161).

Similarly, Post discussed bin Laden’s inflated sense of himself and “his own messianic role” (Post, 2007, p. 197). In 1998, when bin Laden issued his fatwa for all Muslims to kill Americans, he wrote, “In compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims.” As Post noted, “It should be observed that it is not bin Laden but God who has ordered religious Muslims to kill all the Americans; it is God for whom bin Laden speaks with authority” (2007, p. 198). Keeping in mind that everything bin Laden did as a terrorist was in violation of Islam, it was supremely arrogant to claim to be acting on God’s authority.

In considering bin Laden’s career as a terrorist, his narcissism was remarkable. Even though he had no political experience or government position, he viewed himself as a figure of international importance who gave himself the right to decide the course of nations. Similarly, though not a cleric and with no standing in the religious community,

he deemed himself an Islamic expert capable of dictating how Islam should be practiced throughout the world. Finally, he deemed himself a god-like figure worthy of deciding who lives and who dies.

Bin Laden fits the description of what Sprinzak (2009) called “the megalomaniacal hyperterrorist”. He said that such people are “self-anointed individuals with larger-than-life callings” who have an “insatiable urge to use catastrophic attacks in order to write a new chapter in history.” In addition, “They think big, seeking to go beyond ‘conventional’ terrorism and, unlike most terrorists, could be willing to use weapons of mass destruction. They perceive themselves in historical terms and dream of individually devastating the hated system.” Finally, “They believe history alone will judge them, and they are certain of absolution.”

This presents us with the puzzle of how a shy, insecure young man became a megalomaniacal terrorist. Other violent perpetrators used violence to enhance their status or transform themselves from insecure youths with a sense of damaged masculinity into fearsome males (Langman, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Bin Laden had multiple sources of humiliation, was described as girlish in his youth, and apparently endured significant blows to his sense of masculinity. How might we understand bin Laden’s transformation?

Millon’s research offers several possible explanations. First, he articulated the dynamics of the “compensatory narcissist.” In his view, “the origins that undergird their overtly narcissistic behaviors derive from an underlying sense of insecurity and weakness” (1996, p. 411). To compensate for their insecurity, they “seek to fill their emptiness by creating an illusion of superiority and by building up an image of high self-worth” (1996, p. 411).

Millon also described a variant of the sadistic personality called the “spineless sadist.” Like compensatory narcissists, these sadists engage in various behaviors to compensate for their inadequacy: “There are types that are deeply insecure... For them, their sadistic actions are responses to felt dangers and fears. Their aggression signifies an effort to show others that they are not anxious” (1996, p. 491). In addition, such people “join groups that search for a shared scapegoat, a people or ethnic population that has been ‘sanctioned to hate’” (1996, p. 491).

Finally, Millon noted the same dynamic in the paranoid personality: “the confidence and pride of paranoids cloak but a hollow shell. Their arrogant sense of autonomy rests on insecure internal footings” (1996, p. 703). A paranoid subtype—the “fanatic paranoid”—combines paranoid and narcissistic traits. Such a person “asserts a new identity [as] a noble and inspired leader... grandiose missions are proposed for ‘saving the world’” (Millon, 1996, p. 707).

Many perpetrators of mass violence have sought to create ultramasculine identities for themselves through military aspirations (Langman, 2015, 2017). They cultivate an attitude of being hard, tough, and pitiless. We see this dynamic with bin Laden. The jihadist mindset is “designed to remove tenderness and kindness from the human heart” (El Fadl, 2005, p. 159). This is essentially the same theme found in sadistic

personalities who “behave as if the softer emotions were tinged with poison” (Millon, 1996, p. 483). In addition, bin Laden’s oppression of the females in his life—contrary to his own upbringing, the national culture, and Islam—was another expression of his need to be ultramasculine and dominant.

Beyond transforming himself into a merciless warrior, bin Laden sought to transform Islam into a martial endeavor: “Fighting is part of our religion and Shariah [Islamic law]. .. getting military training is the duty of every Muslim” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 37). He claimed, “the peak of this religion is jihad” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 49). In contrast, El Fadl identified the core aspects of Islam as “mercy, compassion, and peace. After all, these are the values that each practicing Muslim affirms in prayer at least five times a day” (El Fadl, 2005, p. 11). As noted above,

“The notion of a militant Islam cannot be supported by any educated reading of the source materials” (Dakake, 2009, p. 28).

Bergen (2018), noting the transformative dynamics of violence, described violent extremists in the U.S. as “zeros trying to be heroes... losers who attached themselves to extremist right-wing ideologies that gave meaning to their otherwise dead-end lives”. Regarding jihadists, Bergen (2017, p. 16) wrote, “There is, after all, something exciting, even heroic, about casting yourself as a holy warrior fighting in a glorious, Allah-sanctioned war against the enemies of Islam—especially when you might otherwise be just another suburban office worker”.

This raises the question of who bin Laden would have been without violence. As noted earlier, he appears to have been incompetent and disliked as an employee in the family business. If he stayed in the business, he may have ended up in a low-level position. If he left the business and ventured out on his own, he may have failed miserably. According to Coll, “His grandiose schemes did not pan out.” Coll said of bin Laden’s financial decline, “It was an extraordinarily fast downturn.

Osama had blown through his lump sum inheritance, his dividends, and his charitable funds in just four to five years, a total of perhaps \$15 million or more” (2008, p. 413).

Others described similar problems: “His business career was a terrible failure... He cared little about running his companies or overseeing his investments... He had sunk much of his money into enterprises he knew little about... He drifted into projects without much thought.”

According to his primary business adviser, “There were five different companies, and nothing worked... All these companies lost. You cannot run a business on remote control (Wright, 2006, p. 196). A former colleague said, “Osama as an organizer—completely a catastrophe” (Bergen, 2006, p. 105).

Without jihad, bin Laden likely would have been unknown—a misfit son in an illustrious family. Violence gave him a path from obscurity to international status. A summary of Norwegian terrorist, Anders Breivik, captures this trajectory:

Incited by the power of his fantasies, especially by what they enabled him to become—a knight, a commander, a hero—he decided to bring them to life. He had been a nobody... by virtue of undertaking the inconceivable... he would become somebody (Knausgaard, 2015).

## 6. Limitations

The politics and history of the Middle East are notoriously complicated, as is the history of America's involvement in the Middle East. Because the focus of this article was on Osama bin Laden, the political complexities could not be addressed in any depth.

As a non-Muslim westerner, I approach this topic from a personal and cultural perspective outside of the milieu in which bin Laden was immersed. I sought to minimize any inherent bias by drawing largely on sources from within bin Laden's world, including family members, business colleagues, and fellow jihadists. Because bin Laden often evoked strong emotions in people, the statements by those who knew him emerged from their personal experiences and perspectives and should be viewed as subjective rather than objective.

I also sought to minimize bias by the extensive use of bin Laden's own statements, though as noted in the Introduction, he may have made statements and allegations that he knew to be false in order to promote his political agenda. Because there is no way to know what he actually believed, the analysis took his statements at face value. Therefore, the conclusions expressed in this article remain tentative.

Also, psychological evaluations usually involve clinical interviews with the subject and a battery of psychological assessments. Obviously, such an evaluation was not possible. Therefore, the analysis relied upon statements bin Laden made, actions he engaged in, and the comments of people who knew him.

Finally, no effort has been made to present a complete picture of bin Laden. The focus has been on his psychopathology. The fact that he sometimes smiled, enjoyed himself, or had positive interactions with his children does not further our understanding of him as a terrorist. Nonetheless, in the interest of accuracy, it should be noted that such moments did occur.

## 7. Summary

Though bin Laden claimed to attack the U.S. due to its troops in Saudi Arabia and its support for Israel, these were his rationales for violence, not the reasons. He envisioned destroying America and Israel, as well as Christians and Jews all over the world. He even viewed many Muslims as his enemies and committed terrorist attacks against them, too. We cannot understand bin Laden's attacks on the U.S. without considering the broader scope of his hatred and rage. He believed his version of Islam was endangered by multiple religious, political, and cultural influences and was willing to commit violence on a massive scale wherever he saw fit.

Bin Laden's justifications for violence were not grounded in reality.

He took a fact such as the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and conjured up conspiracies of the West seeking to destroy the Muslim world. He claimed to be motivated by his love of Islam, yet everything he did as a terrorist was a violation of the religion. He had no interest in harmony among peoples, but envisioned a world where Islam—specifically his distorted version of Islam—had eliminated all other religions and ruled the world. He was, in essence, a bigot who dehumanized all those who were not like him, looking down on them with contempt and hatred. Yet, because he was soft-spoken and ascetic, he was often seen as humble and pious.

From a psychological perspective, bin Laden was consumed by humiliation from multiple sources: cultural, familial, and personal. He sought to overcome his damaged identity through elevating himself into a grand personage: the greatest warrior in the history of Islam, the savior of his religion. He transformed himself from an insecure, effeminate boy into a formidable figure of power. He displayed traits of many personality disorders, including avoidant, compulsive, masochistic, paranoid, sadistic, antisocial, and narcissistic.

Leaving behind the complexity of these personality disorders, bin Laden's most relevant features can be distilled to three traits that he shared with other ideological killers (Timothy McVeigh, Anders Breivik, and Dylann Roof) discussed in a previous work (Langman, 2019a). First, they all were paranoid, believing in conspiracies that had no basis in reality. Second, they all were grandiose, envisioning themselves as heroes or saviors who would go down in history. Finally, they were all shockingly callous—without empathy and without conscience.

Dr. Raphael Ezekiel, who studied white supremacists in the U.S., noted that an extremist “believes the ideology literally, word for word—there is an Enemy, the Enemy is evil. He believes the ideology because he wants it: He wants the grounds for radical action” (1995, p. xxxi; *italics in original*). Without an enemy, what meaning would his

life have? Without an enemy, how could he justify unleashing his rage on the world? Wright, speaking of jihad, said, “It was more than faith—it was an identity” (2006, p. 305).

As noted, “The cause is not the cause.” Rather, “*political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces*” (Post, 1990, p. 25; italics in original). Bin Laden saw enemies all around him and conjured up conspiracies to rationalize his rage and hatred. The fact that Muslims in the Middle East may have valid grievances against the U.S., Israel, European nations, as well as their own governments, does not explain bin Laden’s actions. Any Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist can point to somewhere in the world where their coreligionists have suffered, but killing innocent people because of this is murder. To quote Post a final time, “Individuals become terrorists in order to join terrorist groups and commit acts of terrorism” (1990, p. 35). There are other options.



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