

# Reading the Culture: Explaining Osama bin Laden

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Since May 1, we have learned much about the last days of Osama bin Laden. This week, I have learned much about the years which led to his life of terrorism. What caused a shy teenager to become the world's most wanted man?

Steve Coll is the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of [The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century](#) (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), the most comprehensive history of Osama bin Laden's family to date. It begins with the earliest days of Mohamed bin Laden, father of Osama and 53 other children, and takes the family through 9/11 and beyond. I have been giving talks on radical Islam for many years but discovered much I had not seen in print before.

These unusual facts help explain the life and legacy of Osama bin Laden:

- Early in his construction career, his father devised a ramp that enabled Abdulaziz al-Saud, the new king of Saudi Arabia, to drive his car directly into his palace and to his throne. This invention began a relationship with the royal family that made bin Laden's construction company a multibillion dollar enterprise. His family's financial base enabled Osama to create the jihadist funding mechanism that birthed al Qaeda.
- Mohamed bin Laden expanded Mecca and Medina, and refurbished the Dome of the Rock. He also constructed the highways that took American forces onto Saudi soil during Operation Desert Storm, an advance that outraged his son Osama and contributed to 9/11.
- His father purchased a home in East Jerusalem around 1963 or 1964.

When Israel seized this territory during the 1967 war, the house was transferred to the Israeli government. As a result, Osama claimed his family was victimized personally by Israel (and by America, due to our financial support of the Jewish state).

- Mohamed bin Laden died in September 1967 in an airplane crash, due to the error of his American pilot. Osama's beloved older brother Salem died in an airplane crash in September 1988, near an American Air Force base in San Antonio. Osama arranged for four planes to crash into American buildings in the same month, 13 years later.
- Osama bin Laden was known as a student for his quiet and reserved demeanor. His life ambition was to join his family's company and follow in his father's footsteps. But he was recruited for the Muslim Brotherhood by a physical education teacher at his high school and further radicalized by a professor at the university he attended.

C.S. Lewis reminded us that we have never met a mortal. Every moment you live and person you meet has the capacity to change history. Paul's instruction is God's invitation to us: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people" (Galatians 6:9-10).

We cannot measure the future significance of present faithfulness.

*James C. Denison is president of the Center for Informed Faith ([www.informedfaith.com](http://www.informedfaith.com)) and theologian-in-residence with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.*