

Osama bin Laden: Al Qaeda

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The day after he survived a US cruise missile attack on his camp in Khost, southern Afghanistan, I received a satellite phone call from Osama bin Laden. On the line was his friend, political adviser and, some say, organisational brain, Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri. 'Mr bin Laden is sitting beside me,' Al-Zawahiri said. 'As he cannot speak English he asked me to convey to you that we have survived the American missile attack. Tell the Americans that the war has just begun. They should now wait for the answer.'

The answer, it now appears, came three years later when 11 September 2001 made a ghastly hole through which the US viewed, very differently, the menace of terrorism. What was a distant threat somewhere else became a horrific reality at home. The US retaliated by bombing Afghanistan, targeting the Taliban and their guest, bin Laden. The terrorist camps in Afghanistan run by the man accused of being the jihad paymaster were the prime target of its military campaign that began on 7 October 2001.

Bin Laden was not an unknown enemy for the US though. Just an extraordinarily difficult one who could not be sighted, maimed or killed even with a 25 million dollar reward on his head. As early as 1998, President Bill Clinton had described him as America's public enemy number one after US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salam, Tanzania, had been bombed. Then, the Americans had struck. They sent 80 Tomahawk cruise missiles over Pakistani airspace to hit bin Laden's training camps in Khost – to no effect. Contrary to US intelligence reports, bin Laden was not in the camp and no big meeting of his followers belonging to Al Qaeda or The Base – a secretive organisation working for global Islamist goals – was scheduled that night.

'If the instigation for jihad against the Americans and Israelis to liberate the Al-Aqsa mosque and Holy Ka'aba is considered a crime, let history be witness that I am a criminal.'



This encounter established the pattern for later ones. The US would use superior firepower against an adversary holed up in inaccessible terrain; there would be no direct engagement; and credible intelligence would be hard to come by. Result: US strikes would bloody the waters but not catch the big fish.

The adversary, on the other hand, would train guns through the media. Indeed, the Americans sighted the adversary only on the television screen, through video messages spouting anti-West rhetoric. Bin Laden became a significant presence in the American drawing room only in 1998 when the Western media sought his interviews and CNN and ABC crews travelled to Jalalabad to talk to him.

Bin Laden, a deft media manipulator, would always talk tough in such interviews. It emerged in these media sessions that his foremost priority was to force the US, British and French troops to quit Saudi Arabia both for patriotic and Islamic reasons. He saw them as occupation troops sent to protect the West's oil interests and sustain the 'corrupt, unrepresentative and pro-West' Saudi royal family in power. He insisted that 'infidels' were not allowed to set foot in or near Islam's two holiest places, Makkah and Medina. He cited the two bombings of US army barracks in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s as indicators of strong opposition to their presence in his native country. He warned that more such attacks would follow until the foreign soldiers, mostly Americans, were made to leave.

Bin Laden's appearance does not support such hard talk. The world's most wanted terrorist comes across as modest and polite, serene and soft spoken. His hands are as soft as a multimillionaire who has never known hard labour. He is charismatic and somewhat shy. The only visible sign that lends ferocity to his otherwise gentle appearance is his AK-47 (Kalashnikov), which he carries all the time. His men are keen to narrate how he snatched it from a Soviet soldier in hand-to-hand combat during the Afghan jihad.

If appearances are deceptive, then precise information about Osama ('the lion') bin Mohammad bin Awad bin Laden's early life is difficult to obtain in the absence of an authentic biography. Born in 1957 in the Saudi Arabian capital, Riyadh, bin Laden

was raised in Madina and Jeddah, where he received his school education. He studied management and economics at the King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah. He was one of 54 children of Mohammad bin Laden, a man of Yemeni origin. His mother, Aalia, was a Syrian from Jabayoun village and the last of his father's four official wives. The mother and son had a strong relationship because he was her only child. His father left Yemen where he was a porter in the port of Aden to try his luck in Saudi Arabia. Having befriended the kingdom's founder, Abdul Aziz al Saud, Mohammad bin Laden won government contracts and founded a construction company that made him one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest men. The firm, now a respected name in Saudi Arabia with assets worth \$ 5 billion, carried out construction works in Makkah and Madina and renovated Prophet Mohammad's mosque, leaving a deep impact on the young bin Laden. His father died in a helicopter crash in 1968.

Bin Laden inherited a small fortune while still in his teens. At 19, he married his Syrian cousin, Naji, who was only 13. She was the first of his four wives and the mother of his favourite son, Abdullah. The number of his children is said to be two dozen.

Most accounts agree that bin Laden had a religious bent of mind from his youth and was regular in his prayers as compared to other teenagers. His contacts with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic movement that originated in Egypt, also influenced his thinking. One of his teachers at the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah was Dr Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian-Jordanian who moved to Peshawar after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and started inviting and organising Arab nationals to take part in the Afghan war. Bin Laden later teamed up with Azzam to set up an office, Maktab Al-Khidmat, in Peshawar to serve Arab volunteers entering and coming out of Afghanistan. He also helped establish a camp in Satta, in Pakistan's tribal area, Kurram Agency, to impart military training to Arabs and set up the Ma'sad Al-Ansar base in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Red Army and Afghan communists. Bin Laden is said to have fought in the battles for Khost, Jaji and Jalalabad along with his Arab colleagues.

The Soviet military intervention had the most profound

influence on bin Laden, prompting the 22-year-old to reputedly place his considerable wealth at the disposal of the Afghan mujahideen, widows and orphans. In his interviews, bin Laden told of how he transferred heavy construction equipment including bulldozers, loaders, and dump trucks from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan for building roads, boring tunnels to store arms and ammunition, digging trenches and setting up hospitals. He spoke about the immense spiritual benefit he obtained from his participation in the Afghan jihad and explained how it enabled the Muslims to destroy the myth of the invincibility of one superpower (the former Soviet Union) and prepared them to confront the might of the remaining one (US). 'Today, the entire Muslim world, by the grace of God, has imbibed the faithful spirit of strength and started to interact in a good manner to end occupation and the Western and American influence on our countries,' he once said.

Religion occupies a large part of his discourse. But bin Laden is also an intelligent man who can be witty at times. During an interview I asked him how many children he had. There was a burst of laughter when he replied: 'I have lost count! Was he still a multimillionaire and how much was his worth? Before I had finished my question, bin Laden had put his hand on his heart and said: 'I am Ghani (rich) here.' And when I asked him how he could challenge the world's only superpower operating out of a poor, war-ravaged country like Afghanistan, bin Laden looked up to the skies, raised his index finger, and replied that there was only one real superpower and that was God Almighty.

Fed up with mujahideen infighting in Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, bin Laden returned home to Saudi Arabia where he was received as a national hero. For some time everything went well. There were reports that bin Laden was organising men to fight the Marxist regime in South Yemen. Then Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and the Saudi government thought of inviting US troops to repel the invaders. Bin Laden offered to raise a force of 100,000 volunteers to defend Saudi Arabia and evict Iraq from Kuwait. His proposal was rejected and he felt humiliated. Further, Operation Desert Storm saw the US despatch troops and planes to Saudi Arabia to the utter disgust

of bin Laden who detested the idea of armed non-Muslims treading holy ground. This stand put bin Laden in the camp of the Saudi dissidents. Things came to a head when bin Laden publicly opposed the Saudi government's decision to invite US forces. His passport was taken away to stop him from travelling outside Saudi Arabia but he was allowed to go abroad when he offered to fly to Afghanistan to mediate between the warring Afghan factions. However, he travelled to Pakistan and a group of Saudi dissidents formed around him. Together, they launched their anti-Saudi campaign.

At around this time, Sudan was ruled by an Islamic coalition, the National Islamic Front (NIF), led by President General Omar Al-Bashir and Dr Hassan Al-Turabi, a Sorbonne-educated cleric.

Al-Turabi believed the US could be taken on and defeated by the Islamists. He invited bin Laden and Al Qaeda to Sudan and bin Laden decided to shift operations there. His authority in Pakistan had already been eroded after Benazir Bhutto's government had survived a no-confidence motion he had funded. Besides, the Al Qaeda were getting restless.

Bin Laden found Sudan to his liking. The government was friendly and many Islamists and revolutionaries like him had taken refuge in the country. He dressed like the Sudanese, won government contracts to build roads, started an import and export business and bought land for farming. He set up nearly 30 firms in Sudan while Al Qaeda worked with Sudan intelligence. In exchange, the NIF gave the Al Qaeda land for training camps. Bin Laden cultivated the government ministers and department bosses. He also bred horses, a passion that he tried to continue even in Afghanistan.

From Sudan, bin Laden networked with several groups and set up links with offices in London, New York and Turkey. Al Qaeda drew on a floating group of veteran Arab mujahideen who were evading arrest from their own regimes. Bin Laden's organisation, with its financial and infrastructural resources in Sudan, proved an ideal refuge, retraining the mujahideen and re-fanning the fires of jihad.

By this time, the US and Egypt had begun pestering the Sudanese government to expel him. Bin Laden was gaining a

reputation as a jihad paymaster and was being blamed for terrorist attacks in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the US. The Saudi government stripped him of citizenship in 1994 and forced his family to disown him. This was the beginning of an open confrontation between bin Laden and the Saudi royal family. He retaliated by forming an opposition group called the Advice and Reform Committee. In late 1995, bin Laden's house in a Khartoum suburb was fired at by a group of gunmen, two of whom died along with four bin Laden men. The next year, bin Laden was finally asked to leave Sudan following an assassination attempt on President Mubarak by an Egyptian group linked to him and in the wake of truck bombings at US bases in Saudi Arabia. The Sudanese government could no longer host bin Laden as there was growing pressure from the US and Egypt. And he could think of no other place than Afghanistan to give him refuge.

The mujahideen-ruled Afghanistan welcomed him with open arms when he flew to Jalalabad, eastern Afghanistan, on 18 May 1996 on a chartered plane with his family and supporters. First the mujahideen and subsequently the Taliban treated him as a guest, upholding the tradition of Afghan hospitality. Mujahideen commander Engineer Mahmood and Hezb-i-Islami leader Maulvi Yunis Khalis, whom he knew from the days of the Afghan jihad, helped him resume life in Afghanistan. He put up his men in the Tora Bora camp while his family took up residence in a new residential area near Jalalabad. Khalis was one of his neighbours and firm supporters.

Bin Laden was in Jalalabad when the city fell to the Taliban on 12 September 1996. Subsequently on 27 September, the Taliban captured Kabul after driving out the then President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his Defence Minister Ahmad Shah Masood. Initially, the Taliban distrusted bin Laden because they thought the Saudi-born militant and multimillionaire had until then backed Rabbani and Masood. It took a few meetings between bin Laden and Taliban emissary Mulla Mohammad Sadiq to remove these misgivings. Later, the Taliban asked bin Laden to shift to Kandahar, the spiritual capital of the Taliban Islamic Movement and the headquarters of their supreme leader, Mulla Mohammad Omar. Bin Laden's four wives and several children

lived in Kandahar until the US attacks forced them to shift to the countryside. As for bin Laden, he kept shifting places all these years and lived at one of his over half a dozen hideouts, including Khost. Other hideouts prior to 11 September were near Kandahar and in Urozgan, Nimruz, Logar, Kabul and Nangarhar provinces.

Soon Mulla Omar could be heard complaining that bin Laden's criticism of the US, Saudi Arabia and other countries had cost his isolated regime its few remaining friends. This was partly due to bin Laden's penchant for publicity. So keen was he to send across his message to the world, despite his natural shyness, that he appeared willing to grant media interviews on a daily basis.

His first interview on returning to Afghanistan, after five and a half years in the Sudan and making significant investments there, was with Robert Fisk of *The Independent* in 1996. In the interview, he demanded the pullout of the US, British and French troops from Saudi Arabia. Two years later, he was far more strident. He held a press conference for Pakistani journalists in Khost on 25 May 1998 to announce the launching of the International Islamic Front for Jihad against the Christians and Jews (or against the US and Israel, as he explained).

But the news conference had been held without the permission of Mulla Omar, who was furious. The Mulla warned that Afghanistan could have only one ruler – either him or his Saudi guest, Mulla Omar, who controlled access to bin Laden, did not want him to create problems for the Taliban through his frequent outbursts. Bin Laden was later summoned to Kandahar and plainly told by Omar not to test the limits of Taliban hospitality. Subsequently, bin Laden had to issue a statement declaring his acceptance of Omar as Afghanistan's Amirul Momineen (Commander of the Faithful) and pledging unconditional support to the Taliban's policies. Around this time, the Taliban also claimed to have restricted bin Laden's access to the world, monitoring and curtailing his movements and taking away his satellite phone and fax machine.

When this writer met bin Laden for the second time, on 23 December 1998, at his makeshift tented camp in a desert near Kandahar, he complained that the Taliban had turned down repeated requests to invite me to interview him. His lieutenants –

speaking through the English-speaking Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri, leader of the radical Egyptian Al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad) group - argued that the Taliban should allow bin Laden more access to the press. Now that he is being accused of committing every act of terrorism taking place, they said, he could clarify his position and explain his mission.

Much has also been written about the growing influence of bin Laden on the Taliban. At first, bin Laden and his Arab supporters, who numbered less than 1,000 before the US started its aerial strikes in Afghanistan, depended on the Taliban for almost everything, including security and housing. They could not afford to offend the Taliban, especially Mulla Omar. No country was willing to give them refuge and none of them could return to their respective Arab countries because all of them were wanted.

Secondly, the Taliban policies on the Buddha statues in Bamiyan and Western NGOs, were shaped by headline elements in the Taliban movement led by Mulla Omar; not by bin Laden and his Arabs. The fact is that the Taliban fighters had tried to destroy the giant Buddhas in 1997 immediately after conquering Bamiyan but could not as they lacked the required explosives. At that stage, bin Laden had not been declared America's public enemy number one and was not attracting media attention. So there were no suggestions then that he had hijacked the Taliban regime and was responsible for the hardening of Taliban policies. It was, in fact, the UN Security Council sanctions against Afghanistan, delivered as a punishment for refusing to deliver bin Laden to face trial on terrorism charges and the non-recognition of the Taliban regime by the UN and the West, that made the Taliban angry and inflexible.

In retaliation, the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas despite pleas by the international community, including friends such as Pakistan and foes like the US. It also boycotted the UN peace mission for Afghanistan and acted tough with regard to the arrest and trial of eight aid workers from Germany, the US and Australia who had been accused of preaching Christianity.

Of course, there is no denying that the Arab volunteers who came to fight in Afghanistan during the Afghan jihad were fanatically anti-West. There were numerous incidents when Arab

fighters threatened Western journalists covering the Afghan war. They also killed some Afghan soldiers taken prisoner for fighting for Kabul's communist regime. The Arab fighters also used to force some of their Afghan mujahideen colleagues during the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan to pray regularly and to grow beards.

When it came to bin Laden, the Taliban earned both praise and criticism for their handling of the issue. Many were impressed with their conduct, which they saw as following the best traditions of the Afghan people, when they hosted a man who had sought protection in Afghanistan after falling on bad times. Critics, on the other hand, argued that the Taliban stand on bin Laden inflicted suffering on their people and brought their war-ravaged country to the brink of another war.

What actually worked for bin Laden was the nearly mythical role attributed to him. How successful has this been! Famous people have tried to score political points by exploiting the notoriety associated with bin Laden. Russia's Mikhail Gorbachev claimed bin Laden tried to have him killed; Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto alleged bin Laden gave money to politicians to oust her from power as prime minister during an Opposition no-trust move in the Pakistani parliament and Indian politician Jayalalitha accused him of destabilising her Tamil Nadu state in south India by sponsoring bomb explosions and militant groups. The fact is he is often misrepresented. For one, the authenticity of some of the videotapes attributed to him has not been established. Sometimes, old footage is put together to sell to television firms eager to lay their hands on anything concerning bin Laden. Besides, those claiming to speak on his behalf need to be checked for credibility. In the past, a person who claimed bin Laden had declared jihad against India and appointed him as his military commander in Indian Kashmir turned out to be a liar. Also, intelligence agencies all over the world have found it convenient to blame him as a scapegoat to hide their own shortcomings.

The effect? Bin Laden has gained something of a cult status in the Islamic world: the more he is targetted by the US, the more he becomes a hero in the eyes of most practicing Muslims. Parents in growing numbers in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan have

named their sons Osama, a rare name in this part of the world. His admirers say they are impressed by his courage in challenging the world's only superpower at a time when even nuclear countries such as Pakistan cannot stand up to the US. His posters and T-shirts, marketed by enterprising business persons, sell well.

It is not that he has no opponents in Pakistan or in neighbouring Afghanistan. Many Pakistanis and Afghans, more so those who are liberal, secular and leftist, blame him for bringing suffering on the Afghans and using violence to achieve his objectives. The truth would lie between the two extremes.

The real bin Laden is frail and ill. His right-hand man, Al-Zawahiri, was willing to share some, but not all, information about bin Laden's health. Bin Laden's permanent backache is no longer a secret, forcing him to walk with the help of a cane. During an interview, his aides politely erased footage of bin Laden walking with a stick in hand from my digital camera and forbade me from filming until he sat down. They were obviously concerned that bin Laden's image as a fearless man would suffer if he was shown in a state of physical vulnerability. He also suffers from a kidney ailment and low blood pressure. There were reports of an Iraqi doctor having gone to Afghanistan to treat his kidney. He was once seen being taken to a hospital in Kabul for kidney dialysis. As Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf disclosed, bin Laden arranged for two dialysis machines to be delivered to him in Afghanistan for his treatment. However, reports of his marriage to a young girl from Yemen, which were again never confirmed, prompted his admirers to say that he was not ill.

One has to take these reports with a pinch of salt. Bin Laden loves to talk big and is always ready to make use of the media to create an impact. As part of his self-promotion, he reportedly hired an Egyptian journalist during the early years of his life in Afghanistan to record his and his group's exploits. An incident during this writer's visit to his camp in Khost province in May 1998 – when he gave his well-known press conference – also bears this out. Smuggled across Pakistan's mountainous border with Afghanistan by the pro-bin Laden militant Islamic group, Harkat-ul-Ansar, our group of 14 Pakistani journalists was kept waiting for three days after being promised a meeting with the

man himself. Before our patience could run out, we were packed into sturdy Toyota pick-up trucks and driven across harsh terrain on a non-existent road. Five hours later, we found ourselves in a camp largely made of mud houses. I instantly recognised it from my earlier visits. It emerged that this camp was only half-an-hour's drive from where we spent three days and nights waiting for the interview. The long wait and the backbreaking journey were evidently meant to show us that bin Laden's camp was remote and inaccessible.

There was more to come once we arrived at the camp, barricaded by a barbed wire and teeming with armed men. Bin Laden, his pick-up truck leading a convoy of vehicles, made a grand entry. As he disembarked, surrounded by about 20 hooded bodyguards, the sleepy valley suddenly came alive with gunfire. Gunmen deployed on mountain peaks fired their Russian-made Zikoyak and Dachaka heavy machineguns and rocket-launchers into the air to light up the dark sky. The celebratory firing continued for the next 15 minutes or so as bin Laden, visible from afar due to his six feet-plus height, walked slowly towards us and into the large room where he was scheduled to hold the press meet. It was an impressive show of firepower and some of us were overawed.

However, my language skills soon enabled me to find out from the Pashto-speaking gunmen that they were not bin Laden's men and had been invited to put up the show for the visiting journalists. Among them were Afghans and Pakistanis receiving military training at the complex of six camps in the area and all were asked to bring their own guns for the purpose. As a result, for the uninitiated in our group, bin Laden emerged as a powerful military commander after stage-managing this fierce public display of firepower.

Bin Laden's skills are seen best in his video messages in which he comes across as a shrewd man who is able to keep the US government guessing about his intentions and whereabouts. Just when speculation was rife that he could have been killed in the two-week long US bombings in the Tora Bora area in Spinghar mountains, bin Laden stunned the world by producing yet another tape with the same anti-West message that has become his life's

mission. His calmness and defiance in the tape were surprising for a man being tracked down by the world's only superpower with all the might and resources at its command. The video showed that bin Laden had not lost his nerves despite the fall of the Taliban regime that gave him protection.

If bin Laden were to be believed, the tape was recorded three months after the September 11 attacks in the US and two months following the start of American aerial strikes in Afghanistan. That means it was recorded between the first and second week of December 2001. It seems the recording was done when bin Laden's Tora Bora cave hideouts near Jalalabad came under intense bombing by US warplanes and a ground offensive by Afghan fighters loyal to three Eastern Shura military commanders. What happened to bin Laden after the tape was produced would most likely give many more sleepless nights to American intelligence.

This was the third bin Laden video in three months. All were cleverly timed for release. The first was made available to Qatar's Al-Jazeera television on 7 October 2001, the day the US started aerial strikes in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and telecast the same night. It got prime-time television coverage all over the world and contributed towards the monopoly enjoyed by the US media networks. The second tape, again supplied to the Arabic language Al-Jazeera, was telecast on 3 November 2001. The third tape came at a time when the US military campaign in Afghanistan was said to be in its final stages. The message sent by bin Laden suggested otherwise because the campaign would not be over until the US achieves its primary aim which, in the words of US President George W. Bush, is to get bin Laden 'dead or alive'.

A comparison of the three tapes shows that bin Laden's beard has greyed considerably since 7 October. It seems his tough life in harsh surroundings and his constant struggle to avoid arrest has taken its toll. But it has not broken his spirit as evidenced in his defiance of the US and the West. Unlike the last two videos that were recorded with rocks in the background, bin Laden has chosen a different setting for the third tape. He was obviously aware that American geologists would figure out his location in Afghanistan by studying the rocks seen in the background. So, this time a blanket seems to have been placed in the background to disguise

the shooting location of the 33-minute tape. Bin Laden used to have some cameras and recording equipment and a few trained men who could produce homemade videos. The apparatus and those who operate it are obviously still able to function despite the US military campaign in Afghanistan. That bin Laden was able to supply these tapes to Al-Jazeera's offices first in Kabul and now in Pakistan shows that his loyal messengers are still operational and so more such tapes can be expected to surface in the months ahead. As for the contents of bin Laden's message in his latest tape, it was a shrewd effort to mobilise Muslim public opinion against the US and the West.

Bin Laden would not have landed in trouble if he didn't have the habit of talking big. By declaring jihad on the United States and Israel, he ensured that he would be the prime suspect in any act of terrorism targeting the Americans. This has happened in the past and was the case again on 11 September. Even before the collapse of the World Trade Center towers following the attack, accusing fingers were being pointed at bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

A scrutiny of Al Qaeda also gives the lie to bin Laden's larger-than-life image. Al Qaeda is small and loosely knit. It is a member of the International Islamic Front for Jihad against the US and Israel that was supposed to serve as an umbrella organisation for Islamic groups worldwide. Only a few groups, mostly led by Arabs based in Afghanistan, have joined it. Among them are Dr Al-Zawahiri's Al-Jihad from Egypt and Sheikh Omar Rahman's Al Jamaah Al Islamiah (Islamic Group), another Egyptian organisation. The Sheikh is the blind Egyptian preacher who is now in a US jail following his conviction in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. His two young sons are in Afghanistan and are lieutenants of bin Laden. Some Algerians, Moroccans and Libyans are also members of the Front.

Though they broadly agree on the need to jointly fight against US and Western hegemony and to strive for Islam's glory, all the groups and individuals have their own political and military agendas. They all aim to bring Islamic revolutions in their respective countries. Thus, the Egyptians are fighting to oust President Hosni Mubarak from power and replace him with the Islamists. The Algerians want an Islamic government in their country. Islamic

groups from Pakistan, the Philippines and certain other countries may be in agreement with the objectives of bin Laden's Front but they do not say publicly that they are its members or are working for its aims. Some of the groups and individuals had also signed the fatwa (religious decree) taken out by bin Laden to justify jihad against the US and Israel.

Bin Laden's strength was due a great deal to the men who work with him. They were seldom mentioned because all attention was focused on him. Important in their own right, they were fugitives from the law in their native Arab countries or wanted by the United States on terrorism charges. Together they ran Al Qaeda.

The most prominent Al Qaeda leaders after bin Laden were Al-Zawahiri and Sheikh Taseer Abdullah. The doctor was often referred to as the brain of the organisation while the Sheikh was its military commander. Both were from Egypt and were veterans of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation troops during 1979-89. Another prominent bin Laden associate was Shawkī Al-Islambouli, a brother of Khalid Al-Islambouli who shot dead Egyptian President Anwar Sadat during a military parade in Cairo 20 years ago.

It is surprising that almost all top-ranked Al Qaeda leaders, except bin Laden, were Egyptians. It may be interpreted as proof of the success achieved by Egypt's President Mubarak in ruthlessly driving out most of his Islamist opponents from the country. Or is it that the exiled Egyptian Islamists are more organised in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and are, therefore, able to monopolise the Al Qaeda hierarchy?

Al-Zawahiri is a 50-year-old physician and probably the most learned among bin Laden's associates. He is a short, stocky man. His grandfather was well-known as the mufti of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, one of the most respected centres of Islamic learning in the world. His father was his country's ambassador in Pakistan in the 1950s. The bespectacled and bearded Al-Zawahiri is a feared man in Egypt and the country's security agencies consider his followers more radical than other Islamists. He was the leader of the Al-Jihad group, which took credit for the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Fluent in English, he often serves as an interpreter for bin Laden.

Al-Zawahiri, comfortably dressed in the Afghan *shalwar-kameez* and turban, came across as a knowledgeable man who kept himself abreast of the world. He said his wife and children, now believed to be dead in the US bombing, willingly shared hardships with him in Afghanistan for almost two decades because they considered the shift from Egypt to Afghanistan a *hijrat* (migration) in Allah's cause. He was hoping to forge an alliance with other Islamic forces in Egypt, in particular with Al Jamaah Al Islamiah led by Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman. Together, he wanted his Al-Jihad, or Islamic Jihad, and other Islamic groups to oust the dictatorial, pro-West Mubarak government and Islamise Egypt. He had no doubt that Egypt's Islamic groups would triumph eventually though he could not say when and how it would happen.

It was through Al-Zawahiri that one was able to piece together a picture of the life of bin Laden and his friends. Bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri and Sheikh Taseer Abdullah almost always stayed together, consulted each other and maintained family ties. Bin Laden's eldest son, Mohammad, married Abdullah's daughter in February 2001. Videotapes of the wedding were sent out to a select group of Afghan, Pakistani and Arab Islamist politicians, journalists and academics. They showed the garlanded bridegroom sitting between his father and father-in-law while bin Laden made a stirring pro-Intifada speech in support of the Palestinians and against the Israelis.

Along with bin Laden and others, Al-Zawahiri was indicted by a US court in the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 240 people, including 12 Americans. The Interpol issued an international warrant of arrest against Al-Zawahiri. But the US government has yet to announce a reward for his capture. This makes him less dangerous, in theory, than Abdullah, for whose capture Washington had promised to pay \$ 5 million. Described as Mohammad Atef in US government records, Abdullah's nom de guerre is Abu Hafis Al-Misri. It is taken from the name of his first-born son, a practice followed by most Arabs. The US government believes he is the military commander of Al Qaeda. In his own words, Abdullah said he was bin Laden's security chief, responsible for screening visitors and ensuring that his master was safe and secure.

Abdullah, a former police officer, came to Peshawar in 1983 after being drawn to the Afghan jihad. He was among the first Arab volunteers who responded to the call for jihad when the Soviet Red Army invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 to save the crumbling Afghan communist regime. In fact, he reportedly joined the jihad before bin Laden. Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman and the late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian-Jordanian who gave up his job as a lecturer in Islamabad's Islamic University and was responsible for luring a large number of Arab nationals to receive military training and fight in Afghanistan. Abdullah was constantly at bin Laden's side, moving first to the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar and then to Afghanistan. His death in a recent US bombing raid near Kabul was a big loss for bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

Despite his blindness, Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman had also come to Peshawar on his way to Afghanistan to take part in the Afghan jihad. His two young sons, Mohammad and Abu Asem, found themselves stranded in Afghanistan after the retreat of the Soviet troops because they risked arrest on return to Egypt. They vowed revenge against the US while talking to me in Khost if their old, ailing father was not released. Abu Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad Taha, a leader of Sheikh Abdul Rahman's Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah, was another prominent Egyptian staying in Afghanistan. So were Arab nationals from almost every West Asian and African country, who said they all came to fight the invading Red Army and seek the blessings of Allah by embracing martyrdom. Most of their comrades were able to return home, some picking up the gun in places like Algeria and Egypt to bring about an Islamic revolution. Many of those who could not go, about a thousand, were part of Al Qaeda. In fact, some of them wanted to focus on the struggles in their respective countries rather than becoming involved in violence elsewhere in the Arab world or against the US and its Western allies.

Islamists such as Al-Zawahiri and Abdullah were high on the US list of wanted men as well as bin Laden. During Operation Enduring Freedom, Washington was led to believe that the Saudi-born Islamist was holed up in one of his Tora Bora cave hideouts in the Spinghar (White Mountain) range. A US government official

also said bin Laden had been heard giving orders to his fighters on a short-circuit radio. The relentless US bombing of Tora Bora, probably the heaviest in this century of a specific target in a battlefield, was thus hardly surprising.

The US was ready to pay any amount of money to its Afghan proxies and use tonnes of bombs to get bin Laden. It hired the services of the Northern and Eastern alliances and anti-Taliban Pashtun groups. What it achieved, however, was only the partial decimation of Al Qaeda. The battle began in the Tora Bora and Mailawa mountains before shifting to the Agam and Wazir valleys in the Spinghar. Throughout the campaign, anti-Taliban commanders kept saying that they would be able to secure the unconditional surrender of the Al Qaeda fighters. Yet, it was obvious that the three commanders were working at cross-purposes. All were anxious to impress the Americans and win their favour. But they were seldom able to provide sufficient number of fighters to organise swift ground offensives. Special US forces moved in larger numbers to Tora Bora to direct bombing missions and carry out operations once it became clear that the anti-Taliban commanders were not effective. However, there was no evidence that the American soldiers actively engaged the enemy. Instead, they kept their Afghan proxy fighters ahead of them to avoid casualties and intervened only to conduct search and mopping up operations.

In the end, a commander claimed 200 Al Qaeda fighters were captured and 80 killed in the Tora Bora campaign. Though the figures appeared impressive, it ought to be remembered that the Al Qaeda men were no match for US firepower and anti-Taliban manpower. That the Al Qaeda fighters were able to resist the onslaught for several days and at times escape despite claims that they were surrounded showed their fierce determination. Their defiance was further on evidence when about a dozen wounded Al Qaeda fighters admitted in a government hospital in Kandahar died fighting rather than becoming US prisoners of war.

The anti-Taliban commanders in Tora Bora also failed on another front: they could not win over the local people. The locals were clearly unhappy that the Afghans at the behest of the US were attacking the stateless Arabs and bin Laden's followers.

In comparison, the Al Qaeda fighters holed up in Tora Bora proved smart. They bought precious time by offering to surrender and seeking extensions in deadlines. It is possible they made use of this time to shift bin Laden and some of his top lieutenants to safer places. So, it was anti-climactic when anti-Taliban commander Hazrat Ali announced that bin Laden was untraceable even after having cleared Tora Bora of all Al Qaeda fighters.

Though the 31 Arabs who made it to Pakistan from Tora Bora were not lucky because they were caught in the tribal Kurram Agency, others may have found refuge in Afghan villages, fled to adjoining provinces in Afghanistan or sneaked through the long and porous Pakistan-Afghan border. Pakistan's tribal areas quickly became the focus of attention as one of bin Laden's likely destinations. It is certain though that he would never venture to enter Pakistan and risk being caught. The fate of some Taliban leaders who were captured by Pakistani authorities and handed over to the Americans would likely prompt him not to enter Pakistan. If still alive, he is most likely to be somewhere in Afghanistan even though the former Taliban interior minister Mulla Abdul Razzaq has said that bin Laden had left the country. There are many Afghans, among them his loyal cook, Tooti, who would be willing to offer any sacrifice to protect him. Having publicly expressed his wish to die as a martyr fighting the Americans, bin Laden will probably not run away from Afghanistan and abandon his loyal band.

Note that bin Laden has not toned down his rhetoric. By accusing the West of showing hatred towards Islam and by charging the US with supporting Israel to punish the Palestinians, bin Laden is attempting to reach out to the Muslim masses who feel let down by their pro-West rulers. He has referred to the West's crusades against Islam and the US bombing of Afghanistan to add punch to his argument. By referring to terrorism against the US as 'benign' or 'blessed' and as retaliation against those who kill Muslims, bin Laden has tried to justify his jihad against America and Israel. It is an intelligent argument aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Muslims worldwide.

His position has not changed since May 1998 when he first made public the fatwa issued by scores of Ulema declaring jihad

against the US and Israel. He called his newly launched organisation the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the US and Israel to emphasise the same point. He reiterated his call for jihad in accordance with the fatwa when I met him in December 1998 near Kandahar, south-western Afghanistan, for an interview. The fiat called upon the Muslims to carry on jihad to liberate Islamic holy sites, including the Ka'aba in Makkah and the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Most probably, he reasoned, the anti-US bombings took place because of the calls and warnings given by his Front. 'If the instigation for jihad against the Americans and Israelis to liberate the Al-Aqsa mosque and Holy Ka'aba is considered a crime,' he declared in that interview, 'let history be witness that I am a criminal.'