



# The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader

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## **The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader** Peter L. Bergen

"The Osama bin Laden I Know" is an unprecedented oral history of Osama bin Laden's rise to revered leader of al Qaeda. Peter Bergen takes the reader onto the battlefields of Afghanistan as bin Laden goes from a shy, quiet teen to a leader; he brings you into Osama's intimate family life as he lives under the radar in Sudan, then Afghanistan; he puts you right in the room for al Qaeda's very first meeting; and he uses eyewitness accounts to relate what bin Laden said, and thought on 9/11 as he watched the twin towers fall.

Derived from Bergen's interviews with more than 50 people who know bin Laden personally, from his highschool teacher to an early al Qaeda member who later became a US informant, "The Osama bin Laden I Know" recounts individual experiences with the man who has declared the US, and its allies, his greatest enemies.

## **The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader Details**

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## From Reader Review The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader for online ebook

### Flacco says

Peter Bergen's account of Osama Bin Laden's life is the typification of true journalism. The biography of the world's most hated man is pieced together through first hand accounts of those that were in his company at the various stages of his life. Bergen assembles a collection of primary documents to narrate the controversial figure and allow a perspective rarely seen from the mainstream media or any other media outlet. He has tackled the most daunting question of them all: Why would someone commit such atrocities? Instead of relying on simplistic ideas (i.e. He hates us for our freedom), Bergen explores the geo-political, cultural, and religious reasons for the choices that bin Laden has made in relation to the transformational experiences of US involvement in the Middle East and his devout Muslim faith. Perhaps the greatest work of journalism I have read.

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### Andrew says

I learned plenty from this book that I didn't know before but the organization was atrocious. I too could compile a stack of index cards about a subject, but I don't think many publishers would let me just print them in a book as is. The author made no attempt to create a narrative from his research, he just printed a disjointed hodge-podge of thoughts and impressions and somehow got away with it. A frustrating read.

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### Zach says

Excellent. Bergen presents a very real image of Bin Laden. He is not presented as some one dimensional criminal master mind, but nor is this an apologetic description that attempts to explain away/rationalize Bin Laden. The book is neutral, journalistic account of Bin Laden's background. It begins with a description of the Misawah or Awakening in the Muslim world through Bin Laden's own youth to his experience in Afghanistan to explaining how his ideology and the Al Qaeda organization developed.

Much of the book is filled with interviews with former associates and people who knew Bin Laden and his family. Many of these interviews are insightful and provide a unique perspective, however after awhile many of them say the same things and many may find them repetitive (Bin Laden is so pious, Bin Laden is so humble, Bin Laden is so tall) etc.

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### Steve says

"I believe that he will be a much more popular man for many Muslims once he becomes a martyr because Mr. bin Laden as a dead man would be even more potent than when he is alive." One of Pakistan's leading journalists, Rahimullah Yusufzai, who interviewed Osama bin Laden twice in the late 1990s is credited with that quotation in this 2006 biography by Peter Bergen.

Ten years after that publication and nearly five years after bin Laden's death, I think it's safe to say that the

accuracy of Yusufzai's prediction is debatable. Biographer Bergen could not have known at the time of his book's release about the coming rise of ISIS. A decade ago and five years after bin Laden's bloody take down, who could've imagined that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria would dominate the front pages of newspapers around the globe? Arguably, bin Laden's al Qaeda has been pushed to the back page if it's mentioned at all in today's media. Perhaps it's also true, as Bergen states in his introduction, "Arresting the spread of bin Laden's ideas will prove more problematic than arresting or killing al Qaeda's leaders."

In that same introduction, Bergen admits that his book will not "definitively answer" all the questions about "the impact that bin Laden has had on the recent history of the world." Bergen writes, "There is surprisingly a good deal that remains mysterious about him." Bergen lists some of those mysteries including bin Laden's development as the leader of "the world's most deadly terrorist organization," how bin Laden conceived his religious-political ideology and his relationship to Egyptian Islamist militants. Perhaps the two most important unknowns left unsolved: Why was bin Laden attacking the United States and what did he really want? Was it because of USA freedoms or this nation's foreign policies? Did bin Laden want to "overthrow the Saudi regime or to restore the caliphate across the Muslim world?"

Bergen also lists the reasons why he was unable to answer a lot of those questions in this oral history of al Qaeda's leader. "Writing about bin Laden is complicated," Bergen notes, and was hampered by his subject's mysterious "interior life," bin Laden's biological roots in "one of the most closed societies on the planet," not to mention his membership in the Saudi Arabian "kingdom's most secretive families." The bottom line: bin Laden "seemingly deliberately avoided revealing much of his personal story when he (was) interviewed." That being said, Bergen attempted here to "help the reader develop a fuller picture of (bin laden) and his organization."

You have to give Bergen an "A" for trying to pull back the curtain on what made bin Laden what he was. This "oral and document-based history of al Qaeda's leader" draws almost exclusively from firsthand accounts, from persons who "actually met bin Laden. Bergen "relied on interviews (he) conducted over eight years," as well as testimonies from legal cases. In addition, Bergen gleaned from "books written by al Qaeda's leaders and former Taliban officials." Bergen's sources also included "thousands of pages of transcripts from military tribunal proceedings for prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay." The author also used "firsthand accounts of bin Laden from newspapers around the Muslim world" in addition to Saudi BinLadin Group documents as well as Bergen's collection of Qaeda-related documents and publications. All of those resources helped to launch what Bergen hoped would be "a wider discussion of bin Laden's character, the personalities of his inner circle and Al Qaeda's history and goals."

Bergen's 444-page-wide discussion is both exhaustive and exhausting. It begins with nine pages of dramatis personae, a listing of the main characters in bin Laden's life. That's followed by two pages of Osama bin Laden's timeline, from his 1957 birth to his October 29, 2004 videotape in which he publicly admitted to the September 11, 2001 attack on America for the first time. A full page map of Osama bin Laden's world comes next. That's followed by a ten-page introduction. Next comes fourteen chapters discussing the birth of al Qaeda, its global outreach, its involvement with Afghanistan, the 9/11 plot, the fall of the Taliban and bin Laden's flight to Tora Bora, his quest for weapons of mass destruction, how al Qaeda took root in Iraq, bin Laden's days on the run and his legacy. Four pages of Appendix A notes come next on where members of the dramatis personae were as of 2006. Appendix B gives the reader five pages of detailed notes on key members of bin Laden's family. An overview of the bin Ladin family business is highlighted in Appendix C. Nineteen pages of notes come next documenting all of Bergen's sources. As if that weren't enough, Bergen then includes six pages of notes thanking all "the people who collaborated with (him) to make (this book) happen." Bergen's still not done. A dozen pages of notes indexing key figures and events to bin Laden's life bring this encyclopedia of all things bin Laden to a close.

At the risk of sounding bigoted, in addition to the overwhelming data and minute detail, what primarily made this a difficult read for this reviewer was the countless unreadable, unspellable and unpronounceable names

on every page. Bergen goes to great lengths to introduce and reintroduce each character, but, I still found it all extremely confusing. My take? This is a classic example of T-M-I. Too much information.

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### **Wayne Jordaan says**

A book based on interviews with those who knew OBL, and documentary research. This book reinforces my personal perspective that one should be extremely careful of generalisations, but at the same time, while not necessarily agreeing with the methods, try and understand why those deeds are committed.

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### **Marshal Mdeza says**

They say if you want to know about a man, study his friends; this is an account of Bin Laden as told by people that in one way or the other surrounded the man of terror. It is intriguing to not that Muhammad Bin Laden, Osama's dad fathered 54 kids; 25 girls and 19 boys; and had so much money that at one time Osama and his brother used Italian expensive shirts only once; turned them into disposable dippers! Told by Peter Bergen, A man who followed Al Qaeda better than any writer I know of, this is an amazing story.

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### **Sultan muhammad Khan says**

Best book of the year

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### **Michael says**

This is a fairly important book, which I used as a teaching assistant for the course "The World After 1945." In terms of understanding American foreign affairs in the twenty first century, there is probably no one individual so important to get a grasp on as Osama bin Laden. Even after the death of the former al-Qaeda leader, he remains important (at least) as a representative of the ongoing anti-American and anti-Western sentiments which many so-called "Islamists" in the Middle East express.

A great many myths and misconception which are common in the West will be exploded by reading this book. For example, bin Laden did not hate the "freedoms" of Americans. He did not really care how Westerners lived, he was concerned about the ways in which the West influenced Muslim countries and their governance. He wanted to see a fundamentalist theocracy established throughout the Muslim world, more or less on the model of Iran, and he saw the US and its allies as the major obstacle to this. He was not (as I had previously erroneously believed) involved in the bombing attack on the World Trade Center in the early 1990s, although people associated with him were. He certainly had no great love for Saddam Hussein, and there was no active al-Qaeda movement in Iraq before the 2003 invasion (after which one cropped up to resist the Americans).

None of which is to say that bin Laden comes out looking like a hero in this book. He was a mass-murderer, and Bergen (and his sources) have no hesitation in saying so. He did declare war against the US and American civilians, and he took morally indefensible actions against innocent people. His ideology, like that of any fanatic, is hardly consistent. At one point he made the analogy, which has certainly occurred to me since the "Arab Spring" last year, between the many Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe and the many US-supported dictatorships of the Middle East. The analogy falls flat, however, when one considers his tactics - did he really believe the fall of the Soviet Union would have been hastened if East Germans and Czechs had crashed airplanes into prominent buildings in Moscow? Would that not more likely have brought increased nationalism and dedication in Russia and increased oppression and suffering in Eastern Europe? Indeed, might it not have extended the existence of the very Soviet system which it would have intended to destroy?

Still, this book is worth reading for any American or Westerner who wants to understand the roots of terrorism and its spread in recent decades.

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### **Kristin says**

A unique perspective of Osama bin Laden in that all accounts are first-hand. A good place to start if you are interested in studying Al Qaeda's history -- after reading this book, it's much easier to recognize names and dates because of the more personal story depicted.

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### **Man O'neal says**

SOMEWHAT OF A SPOILER ALERT: Possibly the most compelling passages from this book are those which paint a picture of an Osama Bin Laden uninhibited by political objectives. A Bin Laden who is really rather child-like. For example, a Bin Laden who likes to ride horses, read poetry and play soccer or volleyball with the neighborhood kids. A Bin Laden who goes to European hotels and plays with the owners children. A Bin Laden who never raises his voice and becomes elated at the opportunity to prepare special meals for his favorite guests, even if the meals are only slightly more fulfilling than his usual humble dish of rice and bread. A Bin Laden who writes in his will that he regrets not spending more time with his own children. But the book does more than that. It does give the reader an idea of Bin Laden's political motivations, which are slightly less political since they are based on his austere observation of, and unshakable faith in Islam. I hope that more people read this. It can be used as an exercise in understanding. While 9/11 was terrible, Bin Laden seems to me to be a man who wanted to serve the greater good, but a man who was terribly misguided in trying to do so. According to Bergen, and I've always imagined this, Bin Laden is not the mindless murderer that we too often label him as. He has reasons for doing what he, presumably, did. His ends seemed fair and just, but his means were just horrible and un-enlightened. I say ALL of this assuming that Peter Bergen is accurate in his reporting. The only reason that I didn't give this book five stars was because it was confusing at times. Every now and then I found myself asking why this person did this, what their relationship was to this person, who was the political opposition to who and why, and I had some trouble picturing the states of certain countries during certain periods (Mainly Afghansitan after the U.S. invasion as a response to 9/11). All in all, I am glad I read it.

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### **Bhattee says**

It takes some time to get used to the style of the author, but offers quite useful information regarding OBL.

As it is a collection of interviews of individuals who were in touch with OBL, the account can be considered as objective and closest to the truth.

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### **Mike Hill says**

Excellent book. I don't read modern history books that often because usually they look at things from a set point of view. However this book was very fruitful and neutral. It was very interesting to hear many different perspectives from people who certainly wouldn't write books for themselves.

Interesting note in the end author reveals some of his own thoughts and he well explains what would later become the ISIS phenomena. You can destroy organizations but new ones will pop up unless you solve the underlying problems.

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### **Benjamin says**

The book is mainly comprised of snippets of interviews with people who directly knew bin Laden. It's a contrived hook, but the content backs up the promise. Bergen is unrepentant in his desire to understand bin Laden as a person, but there is never a trace of empathy for the man.

my favorite quote: "At the Italian trial I asked for the case to be over quickly. I did not defend myself. No defense was possible: it was an act of war in a country that was not at war, so I had to pay the consequences."

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### **Thomas says**

Well,

I finally finished "Osama Bin Laden I Know". I had problem keeping track of the numerous characters. I finished the "book" with following impression:

In the end, Osama's "war" on America has been an utter failure, because there are more US troops in the middle East than there has ever been. In addition, he has not been able to bring down America. However, by invading Iraq, America has contributed to his cause of fueling the hatred of America; increasing the number of people willing to die for his "holy war", and not to mention the cost in lives and resources.

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### **Lara Eakins says**

It was okay, although a bit hard to get into. After it got to the 1990s it was more interesting. I think it would be better read than listened to given the large amounts of quotations from interviews, letters, etc.

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