Osama bin Laden, leader of al Qaeda and the world’s best-known terrorist, was born in Saudi Arabia in 1957 into a large family of wealth and privilege. His father, Muhammad bin Laden, was a self-made billionaire of Yemeni origin whose construction business held a dominant position in the kingdom and who had established close personal relations with the Saudi royal family. Osama grew up in an atmosphere marked by a religious piety rooted in the fundamentalist Wahhabist tradition that is dominant in Saudi Arabia. At seventeen, he entered the Management and Economics School of King Abdul-Aziz University, where he was a somewhat mediocre business student. While at the university, he fell under the influence of two important Islamist religious scholars, Muhammad Qutb, the brother of Sayyid Qutb, and Abdallah Azzam, a Palestinian member of the Muslim Brotherhood who played an important theoretical and practical role in the development of the modern jihadist movement.

There is some question as to whether bin Laden received his diploma or left the university without a degree, but in any event he entered his father’s construction empire and successfully managed several businesses, amassing a considerable personal fortune. By 1980, he was drawn to the cause of Afghanistan, where mujahideen, both Afghan and foreign, were fighting the communist-led and Soviet-supported government. He went to the Pakistan border city of Peshawar where he joined his former teacher Azzam in providing facilities and assistance for foreign, mainly Arab, mujahideen—often referred to as the “Afghan Arabs”—going to fight in Afghanistan.

Although there is some disagreement over bin Laden’s exact role in the Afghan struggle, it is clear that he funded jihadist activities, personally participated in the fighting around the city of Jalalabad, and used his experience in construction to build bases and training facilities for the mujahideen, including the famous cave complex at Tora Bora. In 1988, with the Soviet defeat and withdrawal looming, bin Laden with several associates founded
al Qaeda as an international jihadist movement. The term means “the base” or “the foundation” in Arabic and was commonly used by foreign volunteers in Afghanistan.

By 1990 bin Laden was back in Saudi Arabia, several months before Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait precipitated the crisis that led to the first Gulf War. Bin Laden volunteered to lead a group of jihadist veterans of the war in Afghanistan, the so-called Afghan Arabs, against Saddam. His offer was refused by the Saudi government, which permitted American and other foreign forces to enter the kingdom. Bin Laden protested against this defilement of the holy land of Islam by the presence of infidel forces. His protests brought him house arrest, and he henceforth became an implacable foe of the Saudi government. Using his family influence to obtain travel documents, bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in 1991 and sought to mediate among the various factions struggling for control after the departure of the Soviets, fearing that this civil war would have a negative impact on the jihadist movement elsewhere.

Bin Laden’s efforts failed and he left Afghanistan for Sudan where he was offered protection by the military regime headed by a radical Islamist, Hassan al-Turabi. Bin Laden invested heavily in Sudan and involved the leadership of the country in his business ventures. He also arranged for settlement of the Afghan Arab mujahideen who followed him to Sudan and offered them employment. Among these Afghan Arabs was Ayman al Zawahiri, an Egyptian jihadist who had become a close associate of bin Laden by the late 1980s and would emerge as the second most important leader of al Qaeda. In Sudan, bin Laden was involved either directly or indirectly in jihadist activities, including plots to overthrow the Saudi monarchy, attacks on American peacekeepers in Somalia in 1993, the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, and an attempt to assassinate the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in 1994.

By 1994, the Saudi government stripped bin Laden of his citizenship, and the Sudanese government was pressured by the Saudis, the United States and Egypt to expel him and other militants. He left the country in 1996 and returned to Afghanistan, arriving there several months before the Taliban captured Kabul. Bin Laden established a close relationship with the new fundamentalist regime, which provided sanctuary and a base for him to organize his global jihadist activities. He in turn supported the Taliban with funds, as well as managerial and development expertise. It was only at this time that bin Laden achieved widespread notoriety as a leading terrorist. Both the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in 2000 were traced to al Qaeda. After the bombings of the American embassies, President Clinton launched a cruise missile attack on one of bin Laden’s bases in Afghanistan in an unsuccessful attempt to kill him.

The American invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11 and the overthrow of the Taliban government deprived bin Laden of his sanctuary. By most accounts, he was almost captured at his Tora Bora cave complex but managed