

The New Yorker, December 20 & 27, 2010

Young Osama: How he learned radicalism, and may have seen America.

by Steve Coll

December 12, 2005

Bin Laden, Osama; Education; Al Thagher Model School; Terrorists; High Schools; Teen-agers; Jedda, Saudi Arabia

Osama bin Laden's old school---the Al Thagher Model School---sits on several dozen arid acres lined by eucalyptus trees, whose branches have been twisted by winds from the Red Sea. The campus spreads north from the Old Mecca Road, near downtown Jedda, the Saudi Arabian port city where bin Laden spent most of his childhood and teen-age years. The school's main building is a two-story rectangle constructed from concrete and fieldstone in a featureless modern style. Inside, dim hallways connect two wings of classrooms. In bin Laden's day---he graduated in 1976---there was a wing for middle-school students, and another for the high school. Between them is a spacious interior courtyard, and from the second floor students could lean over balcony railings and shout at their classmates below, or pelt them with wads of paper. Most Al Thagher students, including bin Laden, were commuters, but there were a few boarders; they lived on the second floor, as did some of the school's foreign teachers. It was in this upstairs dormitory, a schoolmate of bin Laden's told me, that a young Syrian physical-education teacher led an after-school Islamic study group for a few outstanding boys, and it was there, beginning at about age fourteen, that bin Laden received his first formal education in some of the precepts of violent jihad.

During the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, Al Thagher was the most prestigious high school in Jedda; compared with other schools in Saudi Arabia, it had a relatively secular flavor. Many wealthy Saudi parents sent their sons abroad for secondary education---to Lebanon, Egypt, England, or the United States---but for those who kept their boys in Jedda ``Al Thagher was the school of the elite," Saleha Abedin, a longtime Jedda educator, said. (Abedin is now a vice-dean of Jedda's Dar Al-Hekma College, a private women's college.) Al Thagher---the name means, roughly, ``the haven"---was founded in the early nineteen-fifties, initially in the nearby city of Taif, with support from Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, who became the King of Saudi Arabia in 1964. Faisal was a complicated man; he developed the kingdom's schools, roads, and hospitals very rapidly, yet he also tried to preserve Saudi Arabia's austere Islamic traditions, partly as a defense against international Communism. The Al Thagher Model School showcased Faisal's interest in science and Western methods of education; in the nineteen-sixties, it was the only school in Jedda with air-conditioning. Its students did not wear the national dress, a thobe and cloth headdress, but, rather, a uniform that imitated the styles of English and American prep schools: white button-down shirts with ties, gray slacks, black shoes and socks, and, in the winter months, charcoal blazers.

Each year's graduating class numbered about sixty boys. Among them were young princes from the Saudi royal family, as well as privileged commoners like bin Laden. Every morning, the students would assemble in rows for a military-style call to order; on a stool to one side sat a schoolmaster with a cane, ready to discipline boys who misbehaved, by beating them on the soles of their bare feet. The school's curriculum included English-language instruction given by teachers from Ireland and England and demanding courses in mathematics. At the same time, as with all institutions in Saudi Arabia, Al Thagher adhered to Islamic ritual. At midday, students would kneel together for the Zuhr, or noon prayer.

Assuming that bin Laden is still alive, he is now forty-eight years old. He developed his vision for his global jihad organization, Al Qaeda, over the course of more than three decades, and his formative experiences have included participation in combat during the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the nineteen-eighties; prolonged exile from Saudi Arabia; the survival of at least two assassination attempts; at least four marriages, which produced at least a dozen children; and, lately, the trials of being the world's most wanted fugitive. (Several American intelligence officers and diplomats have told me in recent months that they assume bin Laden is hiding somewhere in Pakistan, or perhaps in a remote area of Afghanistan, but there has been no visible progress in the effort to locate him. His most recent videotaped speech was a rambling diatribe broadcast four days before the last United States Presidential election. A few weeks later, the Al Jazeera television network broadcast an audiotape attributed to bin Laden, in which he praised Al Qaeda's new leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Since then, bin Laden has not been heard from, and there has been speculation---not for the first time---that he is dead. Late last month, the Senate Democratic leader, Harry Reid, told a television interviewer, ``I heard today that he may have died in the earthquake that they had in Pakistan.")

Bin Laden has never spoken publicly about his time at Al Thagher, and the record of other reliable testimony is thin. Still, from interviews with people who knew him as a teen-ager, or who knew his family or the school, a portrait of bin Laden's high-school years has begun to emerge, one that may help to explain some of the earliest sources of his beliefs.

In a 1998 interview, later broadcast on Al Jazeera, bin Laden said that he was born in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, on March 10, 1957. ``Then God was gracious to us as we went to Holy Medina six months after I was born," he continued. The rest of his youth, he said, was spent in the western Saudi Arabian province known as the Hejaz, which lies between the Red Sea and central Arabia; it is the site of the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, where the most important events in the life of the Prophet Muhammad occurred.

Bin Laden is the only child of the marriage between Alia Ghanem, who was born in Syria, and Muhammad bin Laden, who was born in Yemen but migrated as a child to Jedda, where he made his fortune as a building contractor for the Saudi

royal family during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Osama's parents divorced soon after he was born, according to Khaled M. Batarfi, a Saudi journalist who knew Osama during the nineteen-seventies. Osama's mother then married a man named Muhammad al-Attas, who worked at her former husband's company. The couple had four children, and Osama lived in the new household with three stepbrothers and one stepsister. Bin Laden's natural father, who had more than fifty children by more than a dozen wives, died on September 3, 1967, when his company airplane, a twin-engine Beechcraft, which was being flown by an American charter pilot, crashed as it attempted to land on a mountain airstrip in Saudi Arabia's southern Asir province, where bin Laden had been overseeing road-construction projects.

The next year, Osama bin Laden enrolled at Al Thagher, according to Brian Fyfield-Shayler, a Briton who taught English at the school at the time. Fyfield-Shayler has said that when bin Laden arrived at the school he was already unusually tall (today, his height is estimated at six feet four). He was not, however, a particularly forceful personality. In an intermediate-English class, "I was trying to push the spoken aspects of the language," Fyfield-Shayler recalled in an interview for a documentary film produced in Britain last year. "To succeed, the student needs to be prepared to make mistakes. They need to make a bit of an exhibition of themselves, and Osama was rather shy and reserved and perhaps a little afraid of making mistakes." Seamus O'Brien, an Irishman who taught English at Al Thagher, told me that he remembers Osama as "a nice fellow and a good student. There were no problems with him. He was a quiet lad. I suppose silent waters run deep."

A schoolmate of bin Laden's told me that during the eighth or ninth grade, around 1971 or 1972, bin Laden was invited to join the Islamic study group. In that period at Saudi high schools and universities, it was common to find Syrian and Egyptian teachers, many of whom had become involved with dissident Islamist political groups in their home countries. Some of these teachers were members of, or were influenced by, the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization founded in Egypt in 1928 by a schoolteacher, Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood was initially a religious-minded movement opposed to British colonial rule in Egypt; later, following Britain's withdrawal from the region, the Brotherhood's leaders continued their struggle against the secular, socialist Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who took power in 1952. In his approach to the Brotherhood, Nasser alternated between periods of accommodation and brutal crackdowns. Some of the Brotherhood's organizers were forced into exile, and they began to form new chapters across the Muslim world. Their aim was to replace secular and nationalist Arab leaders with Islamic governments, and they often operated clandestinely. Today, the movement typically recruits its members from elite, well-educated families; its goals include the imposition throughout Muslim societies of sharia--law as set forth in the Koran--and the empowerment of Islamic scholars as cultural arbiters and dispensers of justice. Brotherhood members have openly held seats in elected parliaments in Kuwait and Jordan; last month, the movement's members made a strong showing in parliamentary elections in Egypt, despite being formally

banned there. Over the years, the Brotherhood has operated both in the open and in secret, through peaceful political campaigning and through support for terrorism.

In Saudi Arabia during the nineteen-sixties, King Faisal welcomed exiled teachers from Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, even if they were influenced by the Brotherhood, because he believed that they had been unfairly persecuted for their religious and political beliefs. He also hoped that their emphasis on Islamic teachings might help to inoculate Saudi Arabia against ideas such as socialism and secular pan-Arab nationalism, which were then spreading through Arab societies. Moreover, as he expanded Saudi Arabia's schools, Faisal faced a shortage of qualified instructors of all kinds. The King "needed teachers," Khaled al-Maena, a prominent Jeddah newspaper editor, told me. "Where would you get them?" Egypt and Syria offered Saudi Arabia a ready source at a time when the kingdom, barely a generation removed from widespread poverty and illiteracy, was struggling to produce teachers from its own population.

Formal political activity was banned in Saudi Arabia, so the Brotherhood-influenced teachers had to be careful. "When they came here, they realized the system does not allow any association" that might smack of politics, said Muhammad Salahuddin, a magazine publisher and journalist in Jeddah who came to Saudi Arabia from Egypt. Rather than organize a political network, the teachers often introduced their students more informally to the Brotherhood's precepts of Islamic activism, political consciousness, and violent jihad against Christian occupiers or secular leaders. The principal mission at Al Thagher, as laid out by the headmaster and wealthy supporters in the Jeddah merchant community, was to prepare "elite young Saudis for roles in the kingdom's modernizing economy; it had nothing to do with the Brotherhood's goals. The after-school Islamic study group that bin Laden joined was initially offered to exceptional students with the promise of earning extra credit.

Bin Laden's experience in the group was described for me during several interviews with a schoolmate who is now a successful professional in Saudi Arabia, and who asked not to be further identified, because, he said, he did not want to risk reprisals from bin Laden's sympathizers. The schoolmate had never given interviews about Al Thagher's after-school Islamic study group, but he decided to do so, he said, because he hoped his account might warn other Saudi parents about the potential dangers of such informal tutoring, particularly of the young and impressionable. His specific account of the group's meetings is in accord with the more general recollections of several other Saudis who knew bin Laden during his Al Thagher years.

The Syrian physical-education teacher who led the group at Al Thagher was "tall, young, in his late twenties, very fit," the schoolmate recalled. "He had a beard--not a long beard like a mullah, however. He didn't look like he was religious. He walked like an athlete, upright and confident. He was very popular. He was charismatic. He used humor, but it was planned

humor, very reserved. He would plan some jokes to break the ice with us.

“Some of us were athletes, some of us were not,” the schoolmate said of the group's initial membership, which, besides bin Laden, included the sons of several prominent Jeddah families. The Syrian “promised that if we stayed we could be part of a sports club, play soccer. I very much wanted to play soccer. So we began to stay after school with him from two o'clock until five. When it began, he explained that at the beginning of the session we would spend a little bit of time indoors at first, memorizing a few verses from the Koran each day, and then we would go play football. The idea was that if we memorized a few verses each day before soccer, by the time we finished high school we would have memorized the entire Koran, a special distinction.

“Osama was an honorable student,” the schoolmate continued. “He kept to himself, but he was honest. If you brought a sandwich to school, people would often steal it as a joke or eat it if you left it on the desk. This was a common thing. We used to leave our valuables with Osama, because he never cheated. He was sober, serious. He didn't cheat or copy from others, but he didn't hide his paper, either, if others wanted to look over his shoulder.”

At first, the study group proceeded as the teacher had promised. “We'd sit down, read a few verses of the Koran, translate or discuss how it should be interpreted, and many points of view would be offered. Then he'd send us out to the field. He had the key to the goodies---the lockers where the balls and athletic equipment were kept. But it turned out that the athletic part of it was just disorganized, an add-on. There was no organized soccer. I ended up playing a lot of one-on-one soccer, which is not very much fun.”

As time passed, the group spent more and more time inside. After about a year, bin Laden's schoolmate said, he began to feel trapped and bored, but by then the group had developed a sense of camaraderie, with bin Laden emerging as one of its committed participants. Gradually, the teen-agers stopped memorizing the Koran and began to read and discuss hadiths, interpretive stories of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, of varied provenance, which are normally studied to help illuminate the ideas imparted by the Koran. The after-school study sessions took place in the Syrian gym teacher's room, on the second floor. The teacher would light a candle on a table in the middle of the room, and the boys, including bin Laden, would sit on the floor and listen. The stories that the Syrian told were ambiguous as to time and place, the schoolmate recalled, and they were not explicitly set in the time of the Prophet, as are traditional hadiths. “It was mesmerizing,” he said, and increasingly the Syrian teacher told them “stories that were really violent. I can't remember all of them now, except for one.”

It was a story “about a boy who found God---exactly like us, our age. He wanted to please God and he found that his father was standing in his way. The father was pulling the rug out from under him when he went to pray.” The Syrian “told the story slowly, but he was referring to ‘this brave boy’ or ‘this righteous boy’ as he moved toward the story's climax. He explained that

the father had a gun. He went through twenty minutes of the boy's preparation, step by step---the bullets, loading the gun, making a plan. Finally, the boy shot the father." As he recounted this climax, the Syrian declared, "Lord be praised---Islam was released in that home." As the schoolmate recounted it, "I watched the other boys, fourteen-year-old boys, their mouths open. By the grace of God, I said 'No' to myself. I had a feeling of anxiety. I began immediately to think of excuses and how I could avoid coming back."

The next day, he stopped attending the after-school sessions. Eventually, after an awkward period of pulling away from his study-group friends, he joined a different circle of boys. During the next several years, he said, he watched as bin Laden and the others in his former group, who continued to study with the Syrian, openly adopted the styles and convictions of teen-age Islamic activists. They let their young beards grow, shortened their trouser legs, and declined to iron their shirts (ostensibly to imitate the style of the Prophet's dress), and, increasingly, they lectured or debated other students at Al Thagher about the urgent need to restore pure Islamic law across the Arab world. It is unclear whether the Syrian teacher was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood or was simply influenced by some of its ideas about political activism and violent jihad against unbelievers; his whereabouts today are unknown. Bin Laden's schoolmate said the teacher left Al Thagher twenty-five years ago.

Khaled Batarfi is a soft-spoken man in his mid-forties who works as a senior editor at Al Madina, an Arabic-language newspaper in Jedda, and who also writes a weekly column for Arab News, an English-language paper in the city. He earned a doctoral degree at the University of Oregon and, since September 11, 2001, has become an occasional interlocutor for American journalists and diplomats who visit the kingdom. Batarfi is sometimes invited to participate in foreign-policy seminars sponsored by the United States government; last month, he joined a roundtable discussion in Jedda with Liz Cheney, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and a daughter of Vice-President Cheney's. In addition to his work as a Saudi political journalist and commentator, Batarfi has emerged during the past several years as a source of detailed, firsthand information about bin Laden as a teenager. He has talked about his recollections of Osama and has published an interview with bin Laden's mother, and remains in touch with other members of the family.

In 1971, Batarfi moved in a few doors down from bin Laden, and they played on the same club soccer team. (When he could, Batarfi said, he encouraged bin Laden to play forward, so that the tall youth could use his head to send balls into the opposing team's goal.) Although Batarfi did not attend Al Thagher, he saw bin Laden frequently during Osama's years there. Over the course of several interviews, Batarfi told me that he witnessed his friend's emergence during those years, at about age fifteen or sixteen, as an increasingly committed schoolyard Islamic activist. "In Al Thagher, he was part of an Islamic group," Batarfi recalled. "He was a prominent member. That group was influenced by the Brotherhood. He was influenced by this philosophy."

Batarfi's recollection is corroborated by Jamal Khashoggi, a former acquaintance of bin Laden's who is now an adviser to Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. The longtime Middle East correspondent Jonathan Randal, in his 2004 book, "Osama," quoted Khashoggi as saying that Osama "grew up as a Muslim Brother" and did not split from the movement until the mid-nineteen-eighties. The Brotherhood's influence on bin Laden was particularly striking, Batarfi told me, because the movement's emphasis on the need for political transformation in the Muslim world differed from the more introspective Islamic theology then prevalent in Saudi Arabia.

The kingdom's dominant school of Islam is often called Wahhabism by non-Saudis, in reference to Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, an eighteenth-century desert preacher who allied himself with the al Saud family when it first established political control over the Arabian Peninsula, and whose descendants are still among Saudi Arabia's most important official clergy. Many Saudis reject the term "Wahhabism" as pejorative; they regard Wahhab's ideas as Islam itself, properly interpreted, and they argue that no other label is required. Some Saudis acknowledge their country's dominant theology as a distinct school of Islamic thought, but they will typically refer to this school as Salafism, a term that refers to the beliefs and practices of the earliest followers of Islam. With some exceptions, adherents of the Salafi school steer away from purposeful political organizing; instead, they often emphasize matters of personal faith, such as the strict regulation of Islamic rituals, and of an individual's private conduct and prayer. Bin Laden's group at Al Thagher, Batarfi said, was influenced to some extent by Salafi ideas, because there was no escaping the presence of such ideas in Saudi society, but bin Laden's group adopted "a more activist or a political agenda," as Batarfi put it, which was drawn largely from the Muslim Brotherhood's advocacy for political change in Islamic countries.

In this respect, bin Laden's years at Al Thagher appear to have been an intellectual prelude to his better-known experiences as a student at King Abdul Aziz University, in Jeddah, where he studied during the late nineteen-seventies. At the university, bin Laden was influenced by several professors with strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Among them was Muhammad Qutb, an Egyptian, whose brother Sayyid Qutb had written one of the Brotherhood's most important tracts about anti-Western jihad, "Signposts on the Road." (Sayyid Qutb was hanged for treason by the Egyptian government in 1966.) Bin Laden's early exposure to the Brotherhood's ideas and recruiters may help to explain why later, in Afghanistan, he was attracted to the causes of so many Egyptian exiles, including his future deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, whose experiences also included early exposure to the Muslim Brotherhood.

High school shaped bin Laden's future in another way as well. In Afghanistan, he worked at times with a former Al Thagher biology teacher, a Saudi named Ahmed Badeeb. During the nineteen-eighties, Badeeb took up a new job, as chief of staff for Prince Turki al-Faisal, who was then the head of Saudi intelligence and whose department, in collaboration with the C.I.A., sent

hundreds of millions of dollars to support the Afghan war effort. In describing his occasional work with bin Laden on the Afghan frontier, Bateeb has said that they enjoyed a warm personal relationship, one that had its origins in their shared experiences at Al Thagher.

As a young man, bin Laden drove a white Chrysler and a gray Mercedes, often very fast, according to Batarfi. On occasion, he joined gatherings of the larger bin Laden clan. By the early nineteen-seventies, this group, on his father's side of the family, included a number of half brothers who had studied abroad, in places such as Lebanon and England. Some of Osama's older half brothers had travelled to Europe and, occasionally, the United States. The leader of this side of the family then was Muhammad bin Laden's eldest son, Salem, an ebullient, guitar-playing graduate of an English boarding school. By the mid-nineteen-seventies, Salem had acquired a private jet, and he travelled widely, to Switzerland, England, and Texas. At about that time, Osama's mother arranged for her teen-age son to marry a first cousin, who was from Syria.

The subject of Osama's youthful travels has been muddled by a number of accounts of his teen-age years, published shortly after September 11th. These have included reports, for example, that bin Laden attended boarding school in Lebanon, where he supposedly engaged in drinking and disco dancing. Some of bin Laden's half brothers did attend school in Lebanon, but no credible evidence has surfaced that Osama ever did. There have also been published reports that bin Laden joined his family on vacation in Sweden, and that he enrolled in a summer language course in England, but there is some uncertainty about these reports; several people who have met bin Laden say the reported trips amount to cases of mistaken identity.

Khaled Batarfi offered a new account of bin Laden's travels during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. He said that, as far as he knew, bin Laden had ventured outside the Middle East as a young man only three times. The first time, when he was about ten, he went to London with his mother to receive medical treatment for an eye condition. Bin Laden stayed in England for at least a month and did some sightseeing, according to Batarfi. On a second trip, as a teen-ager, bin Laden joined some friends and relatives on a big-game safari in East Africa. And, finally, according to Batarfi, Osama bin Laden made one trip to the United States, in about 1978.

According to Batarfi, the trip to America came about because bin Laden's first child, a son named Abdullah, who was born in about 1976, had a medical problem---apparently cosmetic. Bin Laden, his wife, and his toddler son travelled together to the United States for treatment, Batarfi said, although he is not certain where the procedure took place. By his account, only one aspect of the journey made a particularly strong impression on bin Laden: On the way home, Osama and his wife were sitting in an airport lounge, waiting for their connecting flight. In keeping with their strict religious observance, his wife was dressed in a black abaya, a draping gown, as well as the full head covering often referred to as hijab. Other passengers in the airport ``were staring at them," Batarfi said, ``and taking pictures." When bin Laden

returned to Jeddah, he told people that the experience was like "being in a show." By Batarfi's account, bin Laden was not particularly bitter about all the stares and the photographs; rather, "he was joking about it."

If Batarfi is correct, bin Laden's American visit took place before he travelled to Afghanistan to participate in violent jihad, and about ten years before he founded Al Qaeda; it might never have surfaced in intelligence and law-enforcement investigations of bin Laden, which began in the mid-nineteen-nineties. Spokesmen at several government agencies, including the C.I.A. and the F.B.I., said that their Al Qaeda specialists had no information about a visit by bin Laden to the United States. A State Department spokesman said that its consular section had no record of ever having issued a visa to bin Laden, but that the department no longer has complete records of visas that were issued that long ago.

Abdullah bin Laden, Osama's son, today lives in Jeddah and enjoys good health, according to several people who know him. (He did not respond to requests for an interview.) In a story published in a London-based Saudi-owned newspaper in 2001, Abdullah said that he left his father's household in the mid-nineties, when Osama was preparing to leave Sudan, where he had been living in exile, for a new and uncertain exile in Afghanistan. Not wishing to endure such hardship any longer, Abdullah sought and received his father's permission to return to Saudi Arabia, where he has since taken up a career in advertising and public relations.

Abdullah runs his own firm, called Fame Advertising, which has offices near a Starbucks in a two-story strip mall on Palestine Street, one of Jeddah's busiest commercial thoroughfares. "Fame \ldots Is Your Fame" is the company's slogan, according to its marketing brochures. Among the firm's advertised specialties is "event management," which refers to the staging of attention-grabbing corporate galas and launch parties for new products or stores. The firm makes this promise: "Fame Advertising events are novel, planned meticulously, and executed with efficiency." On the back of this brochure is printed a single word: "Different."

Many Saudis follow the search for Abdullah's father with fascination, and this is particularly true of alumni of the Al Thagher Model School. Some of Osama's former classmates are now doctors or lawyers; others have followed their fathers into business. They use the Internet to stay in touch. On January 31, 2001, Al Thagher's Class of 1976 started a message group on Yahoo, where they exchange news about old friends and occasionally discuss questions about religion and politics, a participant told me. That Yahoo group requires a moderator's permission to join, but a second Al Thagher group for all alumni has publicly posted messages that give the flavor of the group's discussions, particularly in that autumn after the September 11th attacks. Posted message titles include "Taleban," "Northern Alliance Atrocities," "Salman Rushdie article," and, suggestively, "9 Unpopular Ideas, important to read."

Al Thagher's Class of 1976 is approaching the thirtieth anniversary of its

graduation; no reunion has been scheduled. The class held its most recent reunion at a beach resort on the Red Sea. The party took place on a wintry night; in all, about fifty Al Thagher alumni turned up to mingle and share a meal. There was no word from Osama.

end