



# Osama's Prodigal Son

His father tested chemical weapons on his dogs, tried to turn him into a suicide bomber and groomed him to lead Al Qaeda. The dark, twisted journey of Omar bin Laden

By Guy Lawson

**THE DEFECTOR**  
Omar bin Laden in a cafe in Beirut. "I could face reprisals for talking," he says. "But my father would never harm me."

**I**T IS AFTER midnight when Osama bin Laden's fourth-born son, Omar, leads me into a nightclub called Les Caves de Boys in the center of Damascus. Marked only by a small neon sign on a side street in an upscale quarter of the city, the basement bar is dark and secluded, enveloped by an air of exclusivity. Omar brushes past the two heavyset Syrian thugs at the door and picks a booth in the back. A dozen or so wealthy Arab men are drinking whiskey and watching Russian strippers put on a show. By Western standards, the performances are tame, a succession of scantily clad women in burlesque costumes – Little Bo Peep, pigtailed schoolgirl, pole-climbing gymnast. But as Omar sips a 7 Up, he follows their every move with boyish wonder. Russian women, he tells me, are the

Omar smiles. It's a knowing and ironic look, the age of terrorism turned into a cosmic joke: *Can you believe how fucked up things are?*

Past two in the morning, a statuesque dancer emerges for the grand finale. Dressed in a red rhinestone bra and panties, with a black shimmy belt and an ostrich-feather crown, she gyrates her hips as Omar watches, mesmerized.

"Thank God my father doesn't run the world," Omar says, grinning.

THERE IS NO MORE REVEALING VIEW of a man than through the eyes of a son he has wronged. To Omar, Osama bin Laden is neither a freedom-fighting jihadist nor a terrifying mass murderer – he is a lost man, a flawed and fanatical father who withheld his love, beat and betrayed his own children, and destroyed his family chasing his fantasy of becoming a latter-day prophet. "My father is a strong personality," says Omar. "Nobody can stop him from getting his dream. Either he gets what he wants, or he dies."

Now 28, Omar is one of 11 sons of Osama bin Laden. But from an early age, Omar stood out from his brothers for his independence. Though Omar does not believe that any of his siblings are still by his fa-

neatly trimmed. He is dressed in black – leather jacket, Versace T-shirt, designer jeans – and, in perhaps the final insult to the aesthetics of jihad, shiny silver sneakers. With the finishing touch of dark sunglasses, the *Matrix*-like outfit gives Omar the appearance of a celebrity trying to deflect notice – at the same time as he attracts attention with a flamboyant disguise.

"People recognize me a lot of times in Saudi Arabia," he says. "They say I should be proud of my father. There are millions who agree with my father. By many people, he is respected, idolized. I could face reprisals because you can't speak against your father in the Muslim world. Many people say I should not talk. But my father would never harm me."

Sitting next to Omar drinking a virgin piña colada is his wife, Zaina, a British grandmother nearly twice his age. Short, light-skinned, with striking blue eyes, she wears an ankle-length black coat that looks like a costume from *The Lord of the Rings*. Zaina acts as Omar's conduit to the Western world, serving as his publicist, dresser and interpreter, hovering over his every word and rushing to deflect anything she considers damaging or inflammatory. Since they met four years ago, the unlikely couple have become tabloid

## Omar doubts his father will stage more attacks. "He doesn't need to. As soon as America went to Afghanistan, his plan worked. He's already won."

most beautiful in the world. "It is as if their bodies are shaped with plastic, like dolls," he says.

As a teenager in the mountains of Tora Bora, Omar had been his father's chosen successor, the favored son meant to lead Al Qaeda and carry on global jihad. Then, in 2001, a few months before Osama bin Laden was to become the world's most wanted man, Omar abandoned his father's compound in Afghanistan. He left behind almost certain death for this: the world, Les Caves de Boys, life.

Now, as a dancer joins a drunken man in the booth next to us, Omar reflects on his own connection to the strippers onstage. "I have talked to these women before," he says. "I tell them my name. Sometimes they don't believe I am a bin Laden. Sometimes they get mad. They have to dance like this because their country is poor. It was my father who made Russia poor, in the war in Afghanistan. He ruined their economy. He is doing the same thing to America right now."

Contributing editor GUY LAWSON wrote about the Mexican drug war in *RS 1074*.

ther's side, he is the only bin Laden son to publicly disavow his father's violence. In *Growing Up bin Laden*, co-authored last year with his mother and an American writer named Jean Sasson, Omar not only captures the insanity and cruelty inside his father's world, but also provides an intimate portrait of what it is like to be the son of a sociopath. "In many ways, Omar's story represents how the modern Arab world is thinking through its views of the West," observes Steve Coll, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Bin Ladens* and president of the New America Foundation. "They accept the critique provided by Al Qaeda but not its idea of never-ending war. Like Omar, they won't follow Osama onto the battlefield."

Omar bears a striking resemblance to his father: He has the long, broad nose, the pronounced brow, the dark, brooding eyes. Sitting in the hotel bistro at the Four Seasons in Damascus the morning after our visit to Les Caves, Omar attracts sly glances from the bellhops and waitresses. Shorter and more muscular than his father, he wears his jet-black hair rock-star long and pulled back in a ponytail, his goatee

fodder in England. "We are bigger than Prince Charles and Lady Diana," Omar says, shaking his head. He made headlines for a few days in 2008 when he went on television and declared that his father should "find another way" – an appearance designed to promote a horse race he had proposed from Cairo to Morocco, an event Omar said would help promote world peace. He had lofty goals for himself: He hoped to become a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations, like Audrey Hepburn or Angelina Jolie.

It didn't help that Zaina struck many in the British press as an attention-hungry harpy, a scheming wanna-be who was using Omar and his infamous father as a chance to become rich and famous. "To anyone who wants to give me £10 million, I will give my full life story," she told the London *Daily Mail*. "My story is worth it because I am married to the son of Osama bin Laden." No one took up the offer, but the details of her colorful past soon made the papers: her five previous marriages, including one to a Hells Angel, her adoption of the title "Lady," the spider-web tattoo across her back.



1

### The Chosen One

Omar bin Laden at age six, the year he started school in Saudi Arabia (1) and with his siblings (third from left) in the family's sitting room in Jeddah (2). For much of his early childhood his father was fighting the Russians in Afghanistan (3), where he took Omar at age 15. "I was my father's favorite," Omar recalls. "He had a lot of hope that I'd do something for the world. But I wanted to be a normal boy."



2



3

"They made me sound crazy," Zaina complains. "They said that Omar had run away with a grandmother with thousands of pounds worth of plastic surgery. I have no scars from plastic surgery. They made it up. They lied about us."

Like his father, Omar is a man in search of a country. A citizen of Saudi Arabia, where he has primarily lived since he left his father, he has been denied a visa by England and turned down for political asylum by Egypt and Spain. After months of back-and-forth negotiations, he finally agreed to meet me in Syria, where he was going to visit his mother, Najwa, Osama bin Laden's first wife. We would spend four days together, first in Damascus and then on a drive through the Bekaa Valley into Beirut, a city that Omar wanted to see but had never visited.

The night before, in the strip club, Omar had been relaxed. But when I turn on my tape recorder in the Four Seasons bistro, he lapses into awkward silence. When I ask about his father, he is defensive and evasive. "I love him because he is my father," he says. "I don't want him to be caught and put on trial. It would break my heart. I wish he could die before someone gets him. I don't want to see my father under the rule of somebody else. My father is my father, to this day, and until I die. I came from his body. I am part of him."

"How do you feel when you see him on television?" I ask.

"I get worried," Omar says. "For me, for my father, for the world."

After a long silence, Omar turns on his smartphone and shows me the logo for a company he and Zaina are starting called B41. The company's first project, he says, will be a line of high-fashion clothes. "It will be like Armani but with a different style," Zaina explains. "It will be a mixture between East and West, silk and quality fabrics, a semiconservative mix and match." The notion of the bin Laden name being re-branded as the pinnacle of luxury may seem risible, but Zaina has grandiose plans for B41. She says she is going to design horseback-riding equipment – show bridles and shawls – followed by another book, centered on her and Omar's experiences after 9/11. This interview, it becomes clear, is part of an overall business strategy: Omar and Zaina hope that an investor will read about their venture

and put large sums of money into B41.

Since returning to Saudi Arabia shortly before the attacks of 2001, Omar has struggled to make a living, an injustice that cuts him to the quick. He had assumed that he would slide effortlessly into the life of private jets and luxurious homes enjoyed by his wealthy Saudi relatives, but instead, he was forced to work for the family as a real estate agent, on commission. "Saudi fami-

lies are afraid to be around me," he says. "That was why I couldn't marry one of my cousins or a Saudi girl from my class. I got refused seven times, from people at the same level as my family." He managed to amass several hundred thousand dollars by starting a scrap-metal business, but for a bin Laden accustomed to vast wealth, such a sum was a pittance. Haunted by his father's misdeeds and unable to make a name for himself, he plunged into a deep depression.

Then, on a horseback-riding tour near the Pyramids in 2006, he met Zaina. "I see her blue eyes and the black hair, and in my heart I wanted to marry her," he says. "She was in the same group of horse riders as me. It was a sign I could make my dream. The second day, we were walking down from the Pyramids, and I told her who I am. A lot of time people run away. She told me she knew who I was. She didn't go away

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPH BY REPORTAGE BY GETTY IMAGES FOR "ROLLING STONE"

COURTESY OF OMAR BIN LADEN FAMILY PHOTO COLLECTION, 3

from the trouble. Why she would want to be with me and marry into a mess situation if her heart is not clean and right?"

"Before Omar, I had a very quiet life," Zaina says. "I preferred to ride horses. I liked to be left alone. Then the awful things came out in the newspapers, and I was mortified. Everybody believed these horrific things about Omar and about me. They think he is just like his father."

"I am judged by my father all the time," Omar says. "It is not right. I am trying to fight all the world to think differently than they do about me. It is very, very, very hard work."

**A**S A COMING-OF-AGE STORY, Omar's childhood surely ranks as one of the strangest on record. When Omar was a child growing up in Saudi Arabia, his father was off in Afghanistan fighting the Soviets. "In those days, my father was a great hero to the West, too," Omar observes. But the years of war, and the deprivations he suffered in Afghanistan, had turned Osama's views bleak and Spartan. "Life has to be a burden," Osama advised his sons. "Life has to be hard. You will be made stronger if you are treated toughly. You will become capable adults, able to endure many hardships."

While his cousins enjoyed the luxury and comfort afforded to one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Saudi Arabia, Omar and his brothers were forced to live as though it were the seventh century: no movies, no television, no indecent music. His father's hatred for the "evils of modern life" meant no fizzy drinks, no toys, no inhaler for Omar's asthma. If Omar needed relief, his father told his desperate son, he could breathe through a honeycomb.

"We were told that we must not become excited at any situation," Omar recalls in his memoir. "We were not allowed to tell jokes. We were ordered not to express joy over anything. He did say that he would allow us to smile so long as we did not laugh. If we were to lose control of our emotions and bark a laugh, we must be careful not to expose our eyeteeth. I have been in situations where my father actually counted the exposed teeth, reprimanding his sons on the number their merriment had revealed."

Today, Omar prides himself on his ability to show his teeth when he laughs. His sense of humor, such as it is, tends to run to the dark side: At one point, he offers up a "funny story" about a slutty female dog that ends with her jealous mate tearing apart his rivals. With any luck, Omar

hopes to write comedy one day. "Why not?" he asks. "I love Jim Carrey. He is brilliant man. Comedy for me is about adult with children mentality, and children with adult mentality. Jim Carrey is adult, but he doesn't take it seriously. He doesn't have to be respectable man."

Although Omar comes from a society that has no truck with modern psychology, he is able to see that his development was profoundly impacted by the way he was denied nurture as a child. "While it is difficult for any human being to accurately describe their own personality," he says in his memoir, "I know enough of myself to be convinced that the life my father decreed for his sons also shaped me negatively." But the harsh upbringing didn't destroy Omar's need for his father's affection. "Of all my children," his mother says in the book, "Omar felt the keenest long-

"The owner asked if I would like to meet him. I said sure, just to say hello. But he wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't answer when I tried to introduce myself. The owner of the hotel was embarrassed. Later, in a British newspaper, he said that I was son of Hitler."

"He said he was disgusted to be in the same room with bin Laden," Zaina says. "It was unbelievable."

Events in Omar's childhood weren't marked by birthdays or family vacations – they were punctuated by embassy bombings and missile attacks and nights sleeping in the desert to prepare for Armageddon. Omar befriended the teenage sons of the men then plotting the first World Trade Center bombing, as well as the bombings of the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Even so, he recalls the time with fondness, relatively speaking. He and his brothers were sent to the best school in the country, until a bullet whistled through a window one day and the compound was besieged by gunmen attempting to assassinate his father. The attack only deepened bin Laden's commitment to jihad, as well as his paranoia and anger. When Omar's pet monkey was deliberately run over by one of Osama's men, Omar discovered his father had convinced the man that the animal was a Jewish human turned into a monkey "by the hand of God."

"In the eyes of this stupid man, he had killed a Jew!" Omar says in amazement. In what Omar calls his father's "mad world," there was no way to know where peril lay. One day, one of Omar's closest friends was raped by a group of men. "The rapists added insult to the attack and injury by snapping photographs of the young man during and after the rape," Omar recounts in his memoir. When the photographs fell into the possession of Ayman Muhammad al-Zawahri, his father's top deputy, it was the equivalent of a death sentence. Zawahri – who in Omar's eyes was little more than a psychopath – concluded that the boy was homosexual. Despite pleadings from the boy's father, Omar's friend was dragged into a room with Zawahri, who shot him in the head.

Omar says that the form of Islam he practices today is "moderate," but his childhood experience clearly helped shape his religious beliefs. Walking with Zaina through the crowded market in Damascus, Omar comes to the stern facade of the Umayyad Mosque, one of the holiest places in Islam. He points to an ornate minaret. This, he says, was the place where the Prophet declared that Christ would return to Earth. "When Christ comes down,



MRS. BIN LADEN Omar and Zaina in Beirut. "Why would she want to be with me if her heart is not clean and right?" he says.

ing for a father's love."

In 1992, when Omar was 10, Osama moved his family to a jihadist compound in Sudan. Isolated and impoverished, Omar grew desperate to connect with the outside world. Forbidden to watch movies or television, he improvised. When Omar caught the bus to school in Khartoum, he had one of his friends recite entire scenes from *Rambo* line by line while he imagined what the onscreen action might look like.

"Tell him the story about meeting Sylvester Stallone," Zaina says.

"I met Rambo in Rome," Omar says with a smile. He had traveled to the city with Zaina in 2008, to appear on an Italian television show.

"He lied about us," Zaina says.

"Until I met him, he was one of my heroes. I thought he would be a friendly man. But he doesn't care about anyone around."

"We were staying at one of the best hotels in Rome," Zaina says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY REPORTAGE BY GETTY IMAGES FOR "ROLLING STONE"

God will say to the Christians there is no more Christianity," Omar says. "Christians will become Muslims."

Zaina quickly cuts him off. "He doesn't mean that literally," she interjects, trying to moderate Omar's vision of how history will unfold. "It's a question of interpretation of the Koran."

But Omar will not have his views softened. "I believe this 100 percent," he insists. "It is fact. To be a Muslim, you have to believe, because it is what the Prophet said."

**A**S A TEENAGER, OMAR began to bridle against the severe way of life imposed by his father. He was a headstrong kid, with an independent streak that Osama proudly said gave him the qualities of a judge – a high compliment in Islam. Omar was given the nickname *Alfarook*, Arabic for "sword."

In 1996, under increasing pressure from the United States, the Sudanese government ordered bin Laden to leave Khartoum. Omar was the only son Osama took

Osama was ecstatic in Tora Bora. The "sheik," as his men called him, began to act as if he were the Prophet himself. "My father was always a source of awed conversation," Omar recalls. "His men were so overcome by his presence that they believed every little thing was a sign from God." But while his followers treated bin Laden as the modern incarnation of Muhammad, Omar saw a father disappearing into a world of extremist make-believe. Like the son of a Civil War re-enactor who has taken his hobby to absurd lengths, Omar was miserable, a seriously pissed-off teenager made to endure his dad's lunacy on a never-ending camping trip to relive the bloody battles of the past.

At Tora Bora, he became his father's personal tea boy, bathing Osama's feet before prayers each day. His father often listened to the BBC on a transistor radio, shouting into a Dictaphone about the evils of America. "After a week or so of hearing his tirades, I shut my ears to his unpleasant rants, but now I regret my inattention," Omar recalls. "Many times I wish I had

– the ones who fought the Russians," he says. "The old people were calm and friendly. They had finished fighting. They couldn't go home because their old country wouldn't take them. They were stuck." But that same respect didn't extend to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the Al Qaeda recruits who were flocking to the mountains of Afghanistan, eager to wage war on America. To Omar, the newcomers were buffoons and bores. He dismisses their Afghan pilgrimages as "jihad vacation," his father's grand scheme as nothing but a suicide camp for wayward Muslims.

"Most of the new ones who came to my father were just silly soldiers," he says. "Some were running away from problems in their lives. Some could not live a normal life. I didn't do the training like the others. I have no use for this. All the running and jumping were silly." In Omar's telling, grenade pins were pulled accidentally, explosives were mishandled and jihadists regularly killed each other in friendly-fire incidents.

One of the most highly publicized items

## To Omar, his father's followers were buffoons and bores. "These men are all Mini Me's," he says. "They want to be just like my father."

with him when he returned to Afghanistan. "No one could control me," Omar recalls. "That is why my father was always taking me with him. I was his chosen son. I was my father's favorite. He said that to me. He said he had a lot of hope that I would do something for the world. I didn't want this. I wanted to be a normal boy. I wish it didn't happen. God puts responsibility on the leaders of the world. He doesn't put responsibility on me."

In May 1996, after taking a private jet to Jalalabad, father and son arrived in a nation immersed in civil war and still reeling from the decade-long campaign against the Soviets. They were immediately welcomed by tribal leaders, who gave bin Laden a mountain called Tora Bora as a gift. Taken to the remote redoubt, little more than a collection of abandoned shacks, 15-year-old Omar's heart sank. He had hoped for a house, electricity, maybe a few creature comforts. His cousins in Jeddah had Jet Skis and weekend trips to London and Beirut; they had whiskey, women, freedom. "I really could not believe that our lives had come to this," Omar recalls in his memoir. "Here I was, the son of a wealthy bin Laden, living in a lawless land, wheezing for air in a small Toyota truck, surrounded by Afghan warriors carrying powerful weapons, on my way to help my father claim a mountain hut for our family home."

those tapes in hand so that I could better understand what it was that drove my father to hate so many governments and so many innocent people."

Alone with his son, Osama also shared stories of his own childhood. The elder bin Laden said he had been abandoned by his father and spoke of the pain he suffered when his father beat him – just as he beat Omar and his brothers. "I was puzzled," Omar says in his memoir. "If after so many years he could recall how pained he was when his father struck him or ignored him, I could not understand how he could so easily, even eagerly, beat or ignore his own sons. I never got the courage to ask my father that question, although I am sorry now that my nerve failed me."

Living in a remote mountain hide-out with a father bent on world domination, Omar's existence was like some twisted, real-life version of Dr. Evil's son from the *Austin Powers* films. Omar laughs at the comparison. There is a good resemblance, he admits. But to Omar, what *Austin Powers* really got right was the relationship between his father and his father's followers. "These men are all Mini Me's," he says. "They want to be just like my father – to look like him, to act like him, to be him."

Living in the camp at Tora Bora, Omar grew to admire the veterans of the war against the Soviets. "I loved the old guys

seized from bin Laden's hide-out after the U.S. invasion in 2001 was a cache of videotapes that showed puppies being put into pens and slowly, painfully killed to test chemical weapons. To the world, the tapes proved the diabolical ambitions of bin Laden and his followers. To Omar, it was just another example of a cruel and inconsiderate father. The puppies had been born to Omar's favorite dog, and he had hoped to raise the entire brood. But Osama's men kept taking the puppies for their experiments.

In his memoir, Omar says he wept when he learned that his puppies had been killed. But when I ask him about the incident, he stops short of blaming his father. The Arab stricture against speaking ill of one's parents is too hard to defy. "To this day, we don't know who gave the order," Omar insists. "Better they have my dogs than someone else's."

In Afghanistan, Omar was taught to fire a Kalashnikov and learned to drive a Russian tank. But for the most part, he found life in the mountains unbearably tedious. For days on end, he would be stuck in the camp's mosque listening to speech after speech. "Once they start, you can't leave when a man is talking," he says. "You can't make him angry or embarrassed by leaving. They talk about Islam, about what the Prophet said, basic re- [Cont. on 99]

## OMAR BIN LADEN

[Cont. from 57] ligious things. I heard this 100 times. I was fed up." Like a bored teenage version of Martin Luther, Omar decided to stage a protest by tacking a note to the front of the mosque – being careful to disguise his identity by altering his handwriting. "Believers should not be put in a position of total boredom," he wrote, "as such will discourage believers from attending many worthwhile events at the mosque." But the note failed to spark a revolt. "After the people look at it, some smile," he recalls now. "But most say nothing. One guy said that nobody could do this but me. He came to me and said I did it. I said I didn't know."

**A**T NIGHT, LISTENING TO THE airplanes that flew overhead, Omar began to dream of escape. All but three of his 10 brothers had joined his father in Afghanistan, but their companionship did little to relieve the tedium. "We were bored so much," he says. "We had nothing to do. Me and my brothers went out hunting on our horses. We traveled from village to village. We all planned to leave and see the world together."

But the day of reckoning with his father's violent vision was inevitable. To become the leader of Al Qaeda, Omar would have to prove himself as a warrior. Sometime around 1999, after Omar turned 17, Osama arranged for him to go to the front lines for 40 days and 40 nights. "He was giving me a test," Omar says. "There is a *hadith* – these are the sayings of the Prophet – that says if you live with the people for 40 days, you will be one of them. All my life I was fighting this battle inside me. It was a struggle. I wanted to see the real war. This was my chance."

Under the protection of his father's fighters, Omar was taken to the mountains north of Kabul, where Ahmad Shah Massoud was waging a civil war against the Taliban. A brilliant general known as the "Lion of Panjshir," Massoud had been instrumental in defeating the Soviets in the 1980s. At one point, playing with a walkie-talkie, Omar suddenly found himself talking to Massoud's men. The soldiers were friendly, but pointed. "You are Arab, and you should go away," they told him. "This is a war between tribes – nothing to do with religion." When Omar asked what they thought about Osama bin Laden, the Afghans said they respected him but felt he was being used by the Taliban.

What Omar saw at the front lines turned him against the war his father supported. "Muslims fighting Muslims? It was crazy," he recalls. "The fight with the Russians was over. I felt sorry for the victims. Innocent civilian farmers were attacked by soldiers. Women and children die for no reason. In the hospital I found a very bad situation. People broken, in-

jured. There was bad medical service. That was the start of wanting to leave all this. It changed me. I believe we could sort out our problems without fighting."

After 35 days, Omar left the front lines and returned to his father's base. "I finish what I needed to see," he says. "I couldn't stay more. I couldn't stand it. I hated it."

The rift between Omar and his father widened soon after, when Osama tried to recruit him to become a suicide bomber. Not directly – Osama was too devious for that. Bin Laden's hold over his followers came in large part from the way he never gave orders. He asked questions, made suggestions. "He never pushes anyone to do something," Omar says. "Never, ever. He asks you to do something. But if you don't want to, you don't have to. He only gives order in the very immediate war situation. Even then he is kind. He says, 'Please.'"

One day, around the time that bin Laden was plotting the attacks of 9/11, he tacked a piece of paper to the wall of the mosque to recruit men willing to be suicide bombers. A stir of excitement traveled through the camp as men signed up – likely some of the very men who perpetrated the attacks of September 2001. That same day, bin

"You never said anything to your father?"

"A lot of times I said things like that to my father. But not at this moment. He walked away from us. He was smiling, like it was just between him and his God." In Omar's world, it appears, it is possible to be misquoted in your own autobiography.

**T**HE DRIVE FROM DAMASCUS TO Beirut winds through the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. The car I have booked is a BMW 7 Series sedan, with tinted windows for Omar's security. Unimpressed, Omar sniffs at the fake-leather interior. Saudis, he says, drive only the finest Mercedes. He asks the driver to put on country & western music or Madonna – music he first heard as a boy in the mountains of Afghanistan, scanning the transistor radio for sounds of the outside world.

During the drive, as Omar reflects on his childhood and discusses his views on world issues, Zaina repeatedly interrupts to answer on his behalf. When I finally ask if she would mind if Omar spoke for himself, she retreats into glum silence.

I ask Omar what he thinks of Barack Obama. He says the president seems like

---

**"I would tell Obama that you can't solve Afghanistan with more soldiers," Omar says. "It's like adding water to sand – it only makes the sand heavier and messier."**

---

Laden called his sons together and said they should consider joining the other volunteers. "If any of you, my children, want to go, he should write his name down," their father told them. It was a sly rhetorical turn of phrase, tantamount to inciting his sons to self-annihilation.

I remind Omar that the way he tells the story in his memoir, this was the moment when he finally confronted his father. "How can you ask this?" he recounts himself demanding. It is presented as a heroic gesture: Omar protecting his brothers and speaking out forcefully against his father's death cult.

Omar appears confused. "It says that in the book?"

Yes, I say – it's right there on page 263. Zaina reaches for my copy to search for the passage. When she reads the lines aloud, however, Omar shakes his head. "It was not like that," he insists. "It is true my father put the paper up in the mosque and everyone wanted to put their name on it. He didn't say I should go. He said if anyone wants to go they can put their name on the paper in the mosque. I wasn't going to put my name. But one of my little brothers wanted to put his name. I shouted at him not to do it. My older brother and I are the leaders, so no one dared to do it."

a very refined man – intelligent, widely read, capable. But he is certain Obama is on the verge of committing a massive error by sending more troops into Afghanistan. "Obama should ask for my advice about Afghanistan," he says. "I could help. But I have to see him personally. I would tell him you can't solve Afghanistan's problems with more soldiers. It is like adding water to sand, as we say in the Arab world – it only makes the sand heavier and messier. If I was in his position, the first thing I would do is make a truce. Then for six months or one year, no fighting, no soldiers. Afghanistan can never be won. It has nothing to do with my father. It is the Afghan people."

It is dark by the time we take the switchback roads down into Beirut. This is the fabled Arab city that Omar has heard about all his life, the pearl of the Mediterranean, the Paris of the Levant, Sin City for Arab men seeking to escape the stifling hypocrisy of their own nations. In Omar's imagination, Beirut is the epitome of class and sophistication. His uncle, he says, owns the Hard Rock Cafe on the Corniche, near our hotel.

As a good Muslim, Omar is a teetotaler, but that doesn't mean he isn't interested in seeing what the city has to offer. That

## OMAR BIN LADEN

night, after dinner, we catch a cab to the Music Hall, a cabaret-style club in a converted movie theater in the center of Beirut. In the packed main room, a singer dressed as a Saudi sheik is belting an Arabic tune. The air ripples with what has long made Beirut legendary: astonishingly beautiful people, cultural diversity, the wild abandon of a perpetual war zone. It is Omar's first time in a real club, not the dreary sex trade of a Syrian strip bar. He stands with his back to the wall, looking on in amazement as a crowd of people his own age drink and dance and flirt with each other. On this night, in the noise and sweat and joy, the Music Hall may well be the best club on the planet.

"You like?" I ask Omar.

"Yes," he says, straight-faced. "But I want rock & roll. Rock & roll is the best."

As if on cue, a Twisted Sister tribute band appears onstage. The players are dressed in full heavy-metal glam regalia: big wigs, flashy makeup, tight-fitting spandex, platform heels. The crowd goes berserk as the band lights into a bone-crushingly loud cover of "We're Not Gonna Take It."

"This is the best!" Omar says with a huge grin, all his teeth on display.

By the next morning, however, Omar has had a change of heart. When we meet for a late breakfast, he says he didn't enjoy the Music Hall at all. "That was an Iraqi dressed as a high sheik, like a prince or a bin Laden," Omar says. "It was not respectful. A Saudi doesn't dance in front of silly young people in Lebanon. It is the other way around. I would ban this place if I was the ruler of Lebanon."

"I don't like modern people," he continues, his words growing emphatic. "I like original people. If you go back 1,000 years, you will find the same people. I am like that - the way I look. But there are some people who are very strange-looking. Not black or white or Chinese or Arab. I hate this. I get a mess in my head. I don't like the modern life. It is a mistake. I like pure-looking faces. I talked about this with my father. He is the same as me. He doesn't like the mix."

Omar looks directly at me. "Like you," he says. "You are not original. You are a mix." The offense in his words seems to elude him, as if he doesn't realize his ideas about racial superiority might have an effect on the person he is talking to.

For all his insights into his father's pathology, Omar can also come across as something of an apologist for the elder bin Laden. Though Westerners might think he is repudiating his father, he is careful to signal to Arabs that he is still a conventionally respectful son. He refers to his father as "kind" - by which he means that Osama, unlike other jihadists, follows a religious and moral code, however

perverse. He even downplays his father's attempt to recruit him as a suicide bomber. "He thinks he is doing it for justice, for the Muslim people," he says.

Such ambivalence has prompted some counterterrorism experts to question whether Omar is actually operating as a double agent, dispatched by his father to deploy peacenik rhetoric as a deceptive and sophisticated weapon. Michael Scheuer, the former head of the bin Laden desk at the CIA, has even written an article about Omar titled "Osama's Flower-Child Son or Al Qaeda Disinformation Agent?" When I contact Scheuer, he says he has just finished reading Omar's memoir, which he considers an important piece of intelligence. The book confirms much of what the CIA has long believed about bin Laden. But it seems to Scheuer that Omar is also pursuing an unspoken agenda, one that serves his father.

"When it is published in Arabic, it will

**"When Bush was elected, my father was so happy," Omar says. "This is the kind of president he needs - one who will attack and spend money and break the country."**

make his father look like a hero in the Muslim world," Scheuer observes. "People say Osama didn't really fight or give up the luxurious lifestyle. But Omar lays out the story in detail about what a tough hombre his father is and how he gave up everything for God. The book shows bin Laden to be eloquent, devout, pious, with extraordinary leadership qualities in the Muslim context. He's Robin Hood eating lousy food in the mountains with his men. That is a much more powerful enemy than a madman."

**O**MAR MADE HIS FINAL BREAK with his father in April 2001, when one of the older fighters took him aside and warned him that "a big plan" was in the works. "You need to be far, far away," the fighter told him. "It is my belief that many of us will die." The elder bin Laden reluctantly agreed to let Omar go. "I don't agree with you leaving me," he told his son. "But I can't stop you."

"My father is a wealthy man," Omar recalls. "He gave me \$10,000 in cash. He told me to get a car and go." Omar's eyes well with tears. "If he wanted to keep me, he had to follow my way. If I wanted to keep him, I have to follow his way. I had a broken heart as I drove away. We don't show our feelings. I kissed his hand and said goodbye. This is the last time I saw him."

He remembers his last glimpse of his father: As Osama bin Laden walked away, he wore the same small, mysterious smile

he had when he suggested his sons become suicide bombers.

Alone for the first time in his life, Omar took a car to the Pakistan border. A few months later, his father destroyed the World Trade Center, killing thousands. "I never thought the attack would be civilian buildings," Omar says. "I thought it would be a ship, like the *USS Cole*. My father's dream was to bring the Americans to Afghanistan. He would do the same thing he did to the Russians. I was surprised the Americans took the bait. I so much respected the mentality of President Clinton. He was the one who was smart. When my father attacked his places, he sent a few cruise missiles to my father's training camp. He didn't get my father, but after all the war in Afghanistan, they still don't have my father. They have spent hundreds of billions. Better for America to keep the money for its economy. In Clinton's time, America was very, very smart. Not like a

bull that runs after the red scarf.

"I was still in Afghanistan when Bush was elected," he continues. "My father was so happy. This is the kind of president he needs - one who will attack and spend money and break the country. Even Bush's own mother says he is the biggest idiot boy of his family. I am sure my father wanted McCain more than Obama. McCain has the same mentality as Bush. My father would be disappointed because Obama get the position."

"Do you think Obama can win in Afghanistan?"

"Out of what you see," Omar asks, "what do you think?"

According to Omar, Americans are actually lucky that his father has not been captured or killed. "It is going to be worse when my father dies," he says. "The world is going to be very, very nasty then. It will be a disaster."

"Omar always says that without the head, the arms and legs will run wherever," Zaina says.

"I know this for a fact," Omar says. "People were always asking my father to attack more. They would say, 'Sheik, we must do more.' Crazy fucking things. My father has a religious goal. He is controlled by the rules of jihad. He only kills if he thinks there is a need."

"Will there be more attacks?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Omar says. "He doesn't need to. As soon as America went to Afghanistan, his plan worked. He has already won."

**O**N OUR LAST DAY IN Beirut, Omar appears agitated. He seems to be regretting the interview, the book, the whole idea of opening himself up to the scrutiny of people like me. But he is also impelled forward, trying to find a way to make his own fame and fortune. He asks me what I think his future might be. Could he be a successful businessman? Could he be an important person? Could he help make peace in the world? Would the United Nations want his help? Would Obama, or Hillary Clinton, want to meet with him?

Omar may have rejected his father's violence, but he shares the elder bin Laden's sense of being destined for greatness. Rather than citing the Koran to make sense of his circumstances, he relies on a somewhat different canon. "I am like the character of William Wallace in the movie *Braveheart*," he says. "Sometimes people say I look a lot like Mel Gibson. It is a strange accident. William Wallace wanted to live his normal life, but they push him and push him to become a warrior. The same for me. I have been pushed to be political. I have been given no good life, no good business. It is impossible for me to live a normal life. I tried hard for years. In Islam, what is happening to me is not allowed - the sins of the father going to the son. I am like Tom Cruise in the movie *The Last Samurai*. He turned around to fight his own people. This is like me."

Omar orders a *shisha* and a Turkish coffee. As he smokes the hookah-like pipe, he wonders aloud at what the future holds for him. His older brother Sa'ad is believed to have been killed by a drone missile in Pakistan last year, and six other siblings are reportedly being held against their will in Tehran by the

Iranian government. Returning to Jeddah and the life of a scrap-metal merchant holds no interest for him. "I need to make a hundred million dollars," he says. "I need to make a billion. Do you know how I can make money like this?" I allow that I do not.

Omar turns to the deepest question defining his existence: how to deal with his father's legacy. His father, he says, rejected money and power to go to the mountains of Afghanistan and fight for what he believed. In the same way, Omar adds, he himself has rejected jihad to return to the "real" world and live according to his beliefs.

As Omar sees things, his father had destroyed the Soviet empire. Now, nearly a decade after 9/11, his father's vision for an America of economic ruin and a soul-sapping war in Afghanistan has come to pass. As far as Omar is concerned, his father has brought ruin to two empires. What does the son of such a man do to compete with that?

"If I had stayed with my father, I would have the ambition to be a modern-day Alexander the Great," Omar says. "I have a larger ambition than my father. I find this life I have to be very small. I expected my life to be bigger than this. I feel this world to be small. It could be under one man. If I am in my father's way, I would want to be that man. If I was in that position, I would want to rule the world. I want to be the highest."

Omar puffs on his *shisha*.

"Always the son tries to be better than his father," he says. "I try my best to be better - in a good way. I think a lot of people should thank God I chose the peaceful way. If I chose war, I would be unbelievable at it. A lot of people should pray to their god to thank him that I did not do that." ☐

ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791X) is published biweekly except for the first issue in July and at year's end, when two issues are combined and published as double issues, by Wenner Media LLC, 1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104-0298. The entire contents of ROLLING STONE are copyright © 2010 by ROLLING STONE LLC, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without written permission. All rights are reserved. Canadian Goods and Service Tax Registration No. R125041855. International Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553. The subscription price is \$39.96 for one year. The Canadian subscription price is \$52.00 for one year, including GST, payable in advance. Canadian Postmaster: Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga, Ontario L4T 3B5. The foreign subscription price is \$80.00 for one year, payable in advance. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post publication agreement #40683192. Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service, P.O. Box 8243, Red Oak, IA 51591-1243.

# ALL ACCESS

## RAY-BAN

**Ray-Ban® Rare Prints Subway Wayfarer®**

Reinforcing its iconic status, Ray-Ban® introduces the new Rare Prints collection featuring the strikingly graphic NYC subway map. Available in black, white, blue, purple and red, each Wayfarer® comes complete with a certification tag and collection number engraved on the temples.



Available at [www.ray-ban.com](http://www.ray-ban.com)

## CHARITY:WATER



1 billion people on the planet don't have access to clean drinking water. That's one in eight of us. charity: water is a non-profit organization that provides clean and safe drinking water to people in developing nations. 100% of all public donations go directly toward projects on the ground.

Learn more at [charitywater.org](http://charitywater.org)

## ROCK THE DECK ON VH1 BEST CRUISE EVER!

VH1 is bringing you the ultimate music lover's getaway! Enjoy non-stop concerts from hosts 3 Doors Down - plus Lifehouse, Shinedown, and more on board a full-service cruise ship! Set sail April 15-19 from Tampa to Grand Cayman.

See full line-up and book your cabin today!  
[www.vh1bestcruiseever.com](http://www.vh1bestcruiseever.com)



## THOSE WHO ROCK, ROLL WITH ZIPPO



Paul DiPrima of Lake Worth FL just won a 2010 Harley-Davidson Iron 883™ motorcycle at ZippoEncore.com. You too can win big and hear the hottest and rockiest new music at Zippo Encore.

**zippo** ZippoEncore.com