NO PREP

Who Planned 9/11?

Unveiling the Attackers' Motives

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

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The Network Behind the Attack

The September 11 attacks were not the work of a lone madman acting on impulse. They were the product of years of planning by al-Qaeda, an international extremist network whose name means "the base" in Arabic. Al-Qaeda was founded around 1988 by Osama bin Laden, the son of a Saudi construction billionaire, in the final years of the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. Bin Laden had used his wealth to

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The Network Behind the Attack

The September 11 attacks were not the work of a lone madman acting on impulse. They were the product of years of planning by al-Qaeda, an international extremist network whose name means "the base" in Arabic. Al-Qaeda was founded around 1988 by Osama bin Laden, the son of a Saudi construction billionaire, in the final years of the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. Bin Laden had used his wealth to support Arab fighters who joined Afghan forces resisting the Soviet occupation, and when the Soviets withdrew in 1989, he came away convinced that committed fighters could defeat a superpower. After the Soviet war ended, bin Laden turned his attention to a new enemy: the United States. The turning point came in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and Saudi Arabia allowed hundreds of thousands of American troops onto Saudi soil to defend the kingdom and drive Iraq back. Bin Laden, who had offered his own fighters for the job, was outraged that non-Muslim soldiers were stationed in the country that contains Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. When the American troops stayed after the war, his resentment hardened into a campaign of violence. Al-Qaeda was organized less like an army than like a corporation with franchises. Bin Laden sat at the top as its leader and financier, with an Egyptian physician named Ayman al-Zawahiri as his deputy and chief strategist, and a network of committees below them handling military operations, finances, and propaganda. Training camps in Afghanistan put thousands of recruits from dozens of countries through weapons and explosives instruction, and only a small, trusted fraction were ever selected for major operations abroad.

A Declaration of War Few Noticed

In 1996, from a base in Afghanistan, bin Laden issued a public declaration of war against the United States, and in 1998 he broadened it, stating that killing Americans was the duty of his followers. His list of grievances centered on three complaints: the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, American support for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians, and the suffering caused by international sanctions on Iraq after the Gulf War. Most Americans never heard these declarations, but al-Qaeda soon demonstrated it was serious. In 1998, its operatives bombed two American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 people, most of them African civilians. In 2000, suicide bombers in a small boat attacked the USS Cole, a Navy destroyer refueling in Yemen, killing seventeen American sailors. It is important to understand that al-Qaeda's ideology represented a fringe, violent distortion rejected by the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims. Mainstream Islamic scholars across the world condemned bin Laden's declarations and the attacks that followed. Al-Qaeda's victims over the years included thousands of Muslims, and Muslim countries themselves became frequent targets of the network's violence. The plan that became September 11 did not originate with bin Laden himself. A Kuwaiti-born engineer named Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, whose nephew had bombed the World Trade Center garage in 1993, brought him the idea of hijacking commercial airliners and flying them into buildings. Bin Laden gave the operation his approval in 1999 and supplied the money, the recruits, and the training, while Mohammed handled the planning.

The Architect and the Plot

The idea of using hijacked airliners as weapons came from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani militant educated in the United States, who proposed the plan to bin Laden in 1996. Bin Laden approved a scaled-down version around 1999 and personally selected some of the participants. The plot, which al-Qaeda called the "planes operation," required money, patience, and secrecy. Three of the four intended pilots, including Mohamed Atta, had met not in the Middle East but in

Hamburg, Germany, where they were radicalized as university students before traveling to Afghanistan and volunteering for a mission they did not yet know. The full operation cost an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 dollars, funded through al-Qaeda's network of donors and front organizations. Nineteen men ultimately carried out the attacks. Four of them, the intended pilots, moved to the United States and enrolled in civilian flight schools in Florida and Arizona, earned their licenses, and then bought time on commercial jet simulators. They paid in cash, trained with unusual intensity, and kept their purpose entirely to themselves. The remaining fifteen, often called the "muscle hijackers," arrived in 2001 to control passengers and crew. The hijackers deliberately lived quietly, renting apartments, joining gyms, and avoiding attention. They chose cross-country morning flights loaded with jet fuel and boarded them with knives and box cutters, which airport rules at the time allowed.

Why They Believed Violence Would Work

Al-Qaeda's leaders believed the United States was a paper tiger, powerful in appearance but unwilling to absorb losses. Bin Laden pointed to American withdrawals from Lebanon in 1983 after a barracks bombing and from Somalia in 1993 after the Black Hawk Down battle as proof that spectacular violence could drive America out of the Middle East. The 9/11 targets were chosen as symbols: the World Trade Center represented American economic power, the Pentagon represented military power, and the fourth plane was likely aimed at the Capitol or White House, symbols of political power. Bin Laden also boasted about the asymmetry of the exchange, noting that a plot costing less than half a million dollars had provoked responses costing the United States trillions. Al-Qaeda expected the attacks to trigger an American retreat from the region and inspire uprisings across the Muslim world. Those predictions failed. Instead of retreating, the United States invaded Afghanistan within a month, destroyed al-Qaeda's training camps, and drove its surviving leaders into hiding. No wave of uprisings followed. Osama bin Laden spent nearly a decade running from the most intensive

manhunt in history before American forces killed him in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured in Pakistan in 2003 and has been held in American custody ever since, still awaiting trial decades later.

The Warnings That Went Unheard

One of the most painful discoveries after September 11 was how many warnings had existed before it. In July 2001, an FBI agent in Phoenix wrote a memo noting that suspicious numbers of Middle Eastern men were enrolling in American flight schools and recommending a nationwide check; the memo was never acted on. In August, flight school instructors in Minnesota grew alarmed by a student named Zacarias Moussaoui, who wanted to fly a Boeing 747 despite minimal experience, and the FBI arrested him, but agents could not get approval to search his laptop before the attacks. That same month, the president's daily intelligence briefing carried a now-famous title: "Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US." None of these fragments reached the people holding the other pieces. The CIA knew two future hijackers had entered the United States but was slow to tell the FBI; the FBI's field offices could not connect their own reports to each other. The 9/11 Commission, which investigated the attacks, concluded that the failure was not a lack of information but a failure to share it, a wall between agencies that let a plot visible in fragments remain invisible as a whole. Its recommendations reshaped American intelligence, creating a Director of National Intelligence to force the agencies to work as one. In all, the commission counted ten separate operational opportunities to disrupt the plot before September 11, any one of which, taken, might have changed history. Historians study the motives behind September 11 for the same reason doctors study a disease: understanding causes is the first step toward prevention. Examining al-Qaeda's grievances, recruitment methods, and strategic thinking helps governments recognize warning signs, address conditions that extremists exploit, and avoid responses that create new recruits. None of that analysis excuses the attacks. The 2,977 people killed on September 11 were civilians, workers, travelers, and rescuers, not soldiers on a battlefield. Explaining

why the attackers acted is not the same as justifying what they did, and history students must learn to hold both ideas at once: murder can have understandable causes and still be inexcusable.

Key Information: The Planning of 9/11

Fact	Details
Al-Qaeda	Extremist network founded by Osama bin Laden around 1988; the name means "the base"
Osama bin Laden	Saudi-born founder and financier of al-Qaeda; killed in Pakistan in 2011
Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	Architect of the "planes operation"; proposed the plot in 1996, captured in 2003
Key grievances	U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, support for Israel, sanctions on Iraq
Earlier al-Qaeda attacks	1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania; 2000 attack on the USS Cole
The hijackers	19 men: 4 trained pilots plus 15 "muscle hijackers"
Cost of the plot	An estimated $400,000-$500,000 over several years
Strategic goal	Force a U.S. retreat from the Middle East; the goal failed

Case Study: The Flight School Report

In August 2001, flight instructor Dana Whitfield sat in the office of her small Minnesota flight school, staring at an enrollment file. A new student had paid thousands of dollars in cash for time on a Boeing 747 simulator despite barely fifty hours in small propeller planes and no pilot's license. When she asked about his goals, he was vague, saying with a shrug, "I only want the flying, not the career." Her business partner laughed it off. "He's probably some rich guy who wants to impress his friends. His money is real, Dana." She drafted an email to the FBI's local field office, deleted it, then wrote it again and sent it. Weeks passed with no reply beyond an automated acknowledgment. She told herself she had done her part, but the student's file kept circling in her mind like a plane in a holding pattern. That September, watching the news, Dana felt the floor drop out from under her.

1. Dana's business partner dismissed the strange request, while Dana reported it. Using the reading, explain why a student with almost no experience demanding time on a jumbo-jet simulator should have raised alarm, and what her partner's reaction shows about why warnings get missed.

_____

_____

2. The reading says investigators later identified warning signs that had been overlooked. What does Dana's experience suggest about the difference between individual vigilance and a system that acts on warnings?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. What event first turned Osama bin Laden's anger directly against the United States?
    a) The United States' military invasion and occupation of Afghanistan
    b) American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia after Iraq invaded Kuwait
    c) The creation of the state of Israel
    d) The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan

2. Which statement best describes how the world's Muslims viewed al-Qaeda's ideology?
    a) Most Muslims quietly supported bin Laden's stated political goals
    b) Muslim scholars were forbidden from commenting on it
    c) The vast majority rejected it, and mainstream scholars condemned it
    d) Only Muslims in the United States opposed it

3. Why did al-Qaeda's leaders believe a spectacular attack would force the United States out of the Middle East?
    a) They expected European countries to pressure America to withdraw
    b) They believed American defenses were too strong to attack directly
    c) They thought the United Nations would order a withdrawal
    d) They cited U.S. withdrawals from Lebanon and Somalia

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	A) Islam's two holiest cities, located in Saudi Arabia
2. ___ USS Cole	B) Militant who proposed the "planes operation" to bin Laden in 1996
3. ___ Mecca and Medina	C) Navy destroyer attacked by suicide bombers in Yemen in 2000
4. ___ Muscle hijackers	D) Pakistani city where American forces killed bin Laden in 2011
5. ___ Abbottabad	E) The fifteen men whose role was to control passengers and crew

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Al-Qaeda's name means "_____" in Arabic.

2. In 1998, al-Qaeda bombed embassies in Kenya and _____.

3. The hijacker-pilots trained at civilian flight schools in Florida and _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. What did al-Qaeda expect to happen after September 11, and what actually happened?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why does the reading compare studying the attackers' motives to doctors studying a disease?

_____

_____

_____

3. How did bin Laden's belief that fighters could defeat a superpower shape al-Qaeda's strategy?

_____

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