

ISSUE BRIEF: Special Edition

THE ROAD TO 9/11 AND THE DANGERS AHEAD

BY ALI SOUFAN
SEPTEMBER 2021

THE SOUFAN CENTER

thesoufancenter.org

KEY FINDINGS

- Al-Qaeda could not have developed its plans for the September 11 attacks—nor selected its operatives, nor trained them, nor coordinated their deployment to the United States—without a haven in Afghanistan from which to operate.
- Most trainees in the camps never joined al-Qaeda; of the 10,000 to 20,000 who passed through the camps between 1996 and 2001, only a few hundred became members. The others were supposed to gain combat experience in Afghanistan, Chechnya, or another theater, and the heightened terrorist risk in the region in the early 2000s has been largely attributed to veterans or returnees from the camps.
- When it came to its big attacks, al-Qaeda planned centrally, using its base in Afghanistan to bring the main plotters together under the guidance of Osama bin Laden. But when it came time for the operatives to head to their target, al-Qaeda for security reasons invariably gave cell leaders significant autonomy.
- Long before the U.S. withdrawal, al-Qaeda had already returned to Afghanistan, with hundreds of members and training camps in Helmand province and elsewhere. Training at these camps is provided to Taliban fighters and foreigners, and the UN has reported that the Taliban and al-Qaeda “show no indication of breaking ties.”
- **Recommendations** include: address the vacuums created by conflict and instability, and deploying all levers of government, including development assistance, diplomatic tools, and cultural and educational support, to address the conditions which enable terrorism; not to diminish attention to counterterrorism and Afghanistan to pursue “great power competition”; strengthen capacities of frontline officials, including those who work at borders, financial institutions, and in communities, to identify potential risks; declassify relevant documents to allow survivors and analysts to better understand the relationships between key players leading up to the attacks.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, in the fall of 2001, having already spent years chasing Osama bin Laden, I found myself near Kabul, standing in one of the al-Qaeda leader's safehouses—or what remained of it. Intense coalition bombardment had reduced the building to rubble. Together with my fellow investigators, I sifted through the remains, looking for evidence that might lead us to the al-Qaeda leader or his lieutenants. Toward the end of our search, I picked up one of the many bricks lying around and turned it over in my hands. If this brick could talk, I wondered, what could it tell us about how an atrocity on the scale of 9/11 was conceived, planned, and carried out?

Nearly twenty years later, we know more about that story—though not all, partly thanks to continued secrecy around its more diplomatically sensitive aspects. One element stands out as crucial: al-Qaeda could not have developed its plans—nor selected its

operatives, nor trained them, nor coordinated their deployment to the United States—without a haven in Afghanistan from which to operate. Today, thanks to the withdrawal of Western combat troops and the resurgence of Taliban power, al-Qaeda and its ilk may be poised to retake that advantage—and, possibly, to grow even stronger than before.

DEPARTURE AND RETURN

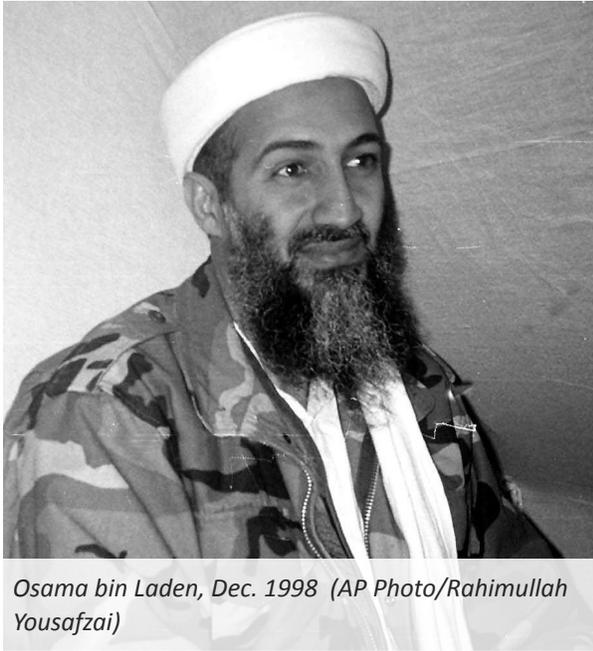
As late as the spring of 1996, it must have seemed that al-Qaeda was well on the road to defeat. Under international pressure, the Islamist government of Sudan, bin Laden's home away from home for the past four-and-a-bit years, had finally expelled him, in the process confiscating practically all of his assets in the country. Together with around 50 followers, bin Laden limped back to the



September 11, 2001 Attack on New York's World Trade Center (AP Photo/ William Kratzke)

one place in the world that would still have him, the country where he had first made his name as an insurgent commander and financier in the war against Soviet occupation in the 1980s: Afghanistan.

Bin Laden's fortunes had fallen far since then. As if to underline al-Qaeda's precarious state, within days of bin Laden's flight from Sudan, one of his most trusted lieutenants, Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, was killed in the M/V Bukoba ferry disaster on Lake Victoria in Tanzania.



Osama bin Laden, Dec. 1998 (AP Photo/Rahimullah Yousafzai)

The USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 had sounded the starting gun on a bloody civil war between fragments of the mujahideen guerillas who had fought the Soviet occupiers. One group, called the Taliban (literally, "pupils"), emerged under the leadership of an illiterate village mystic named Mullah Mohammed Omar who claimed to have had a divine vision calling him to bring peace to Afghanistan. Mullah Omar's version of "peace," it turned out, was to kill anyone who stood in his way.

The movement took Kandahar in April 1996 and overran the capital, Kabul, in September of the same year. Mullah Omar had himself proclaimed Emir al-Muminin—Commander of the Faithful—a title held by the Islamic caliphs of old. He took the alleged cloak of Prophet Mohammed from its reliquary in Kandahar and donned it, anointing himself as the Prophet's successor. But the Taliban would never control the whole country. In particular, the Northern Alliance—a coalition of ethnic minority militias under a charismatic commander, Ahmad Shah Masoud—would continue to defy them until the end. Only three other countries ever recognized the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan: its southern neighbor, Pakistan, which provided the Taliban with weapons and cash; Saudi Arabia; and a close Saudi ally, the United Arab Emirates.

The Taliban welcomed like-minded militants from across the Muslim world. Between 1996 and 2001, Saudis, Yemenis, North Africans, Palestinians, Kurds, Pakistanis, Uzbeks, Uighurs, and others all made their way to Afghanistan, seeking to rebuild their fortunes. By 2001, around 14 foreign jihadi groups were concentrated on Afghan soil, comprising at least 1,800 fighters. The main objective of all of these militants was the same: to train for war in Afghanistan and go on to fight in theaters around the world—including at various times the Balkans, Chechnya, Algeria, and Afghanistan itself (although in the last case some felt queasy about killing their fellow Muslims in the Northern Alliance). A jihadi entering Afghanistan in the 1990s would find potential affiliations laid out like a sample platter.

Al-Qaeda's new problem, therefore, was not so much identifying new members as directing the flood of recruits toward itself and away from fiercely competitive rival organizations. But bin Laden, characteristically,

had an audacious plan. One way of distinguishing al-Qaeda from a crowded field, he soon realized, would be to provoke the United States into singling him out as public enemy number one. Thus, within months of his arrival in Afghanistan, around the time the Taliban were consolidating control over Kabul, bin Laden issued a fatwa declaring all-out war on America.

At least initially, this did not please the Taliban leadership, who felt it would hinder their quest for wider international recognition. After bin Laden gave a particularly bellicose interview to CNN in March 1997, Mullah Omar insisted that al-Qaeda move closer to the Taliban power base of Kandahar, the better to keep an eye on them. Bin Laden complied, moving from the fortified cave complex at Tora Bora to the leafier surroundings of Tarnak Farms—much to the relief of his wives and children.

The following year, after the East Africa U.S. Embassy bombings and America's retaliatory missile strikes on Afghan soil, bin Laden was obliged to placate his hosts further by swearing bayat—allegiance—to Mullah Omar as Commander of the Faithful. Initially, he did so in secret, and apparently with good reason. When word got out, it soured al-Qaeda in the eyes of some, including bin Laden's own bodyguard, Abu Jandal, who eventually left the organization in part because he didn't want to take orders from the Taliban, even if the arrangement was mostly symbolic.

Bin Laden's oath, however cynically motivated, bound al-Qaeda still further to the Taliban and to Afghanistan. After Mullah Omar's death, bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has renewed al-Qaeda's bayat to each succeeding Taliban leader. Al-Qaeda has held dogmatically to the Taliban's claim to be the only legitimate "Islamic State" on earth—

so much so that this became one of the ideological factors behind the eventual rift between al-Qaeda and a rival claimant to that title, ISIS.

When it came to relations with the Taliban, the al-Qaeda leader had a few aces in the hole. First, his personal charisma and history as a revered mujahideen commander against the Soviets meant he had to be treated with the utmost respect, at least publicly. His status as an Arab, and especially one from Saudi Arabia—the Land of the Two Holy Mosques—garnered him particular reverence among non-Arab Muslims. Second, al-Qaeda members, unlike some foreign fighters, had no compunction about fighting the Northern Alliance—something that became even more urgent shortly after the group's return to Afghanistan, when the Taliban came close to losing Kabul twice in the span of a few months. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, bin Laden was, as always, a money magnet. His "Golden Chain" of wealthy backers—most of them Saudis like bin Laden himself—had evidently survived the flight from Sudan, and bin Laden was willing to share some of the largesse with his hosts.

This support convinced Mullah Omar to indulge al-Qaeda. The group's members were allowed to travel to Afghanistan; move freely once there; import and export materiel without restriction; put Afghan government license plates on their vehicles; and, perhaps most importantly of all, establish a number of training camps. Eventually, bin Laden was able to convince the Taliban to shut down other Arab-run camps in Afghanistan and put him in overall charge of those that remained.

One longtime bin Laden associate, Mustafa Hamid, described al-Qaeda in this period as "behaving in Afghanistan as if they had an individual state inside Afghanistan: a state

inside the state.” In early 2000, the staff of the U.S. National Security Council put it more bluntly: “Under the Taliban, Afghanistan is not so much a state sponsor of terrorism as it is a state sponsored by terrorists.”

REBUILDING THE BASE

An early turning point for al-Qaeda came at the end of 1996, when a group of experienced jihadis known as the “Northern Battalion” (not to be confused with the Northern Alliance) arrived at the organization’s training camp of Jihad Wal near the border with Pakistan. Originally bound for combat in Tajikistan, the group’s 40 members had been dismayed to find that the war there appeared to be winding down. In a series of sermons over several days, bin Laden pitched al-Qaeda membership as an alternative. Only 17 of the 40 accepted; but they included some of the most consequential members in the organization’s history, among them Walid bin Attash (aka Khallad), a Saudi of Yemeni origin, who would train in al-Qaeda’s camps, lose a brother and a leg in battle against the Northern Alliance, and go on to serve as one of the principal planners behind the 9/11 attacks.

Planted in Afghan soil, al-Qaeda grew with alarming speed. It established routes for smuggling operatives through Pakistan and Iran, including safe houses in both of those countries. It developed a complex governing structure, with ministerial portfolios including training, military, security, administration, and more. It supported the creation of a chemical weapons lab near Jalalabad and a biological warfare facility near Kandahar.

As befitted his mission of making al-Qaeda the pre-eminent foreign faction in

Afghanistan, bin Laden spent a great portion of his resources on building the group’s network of training camps. A pipeline soon developed. Recruits, ferried across the border from Pakistan by the Taliban, would arrive at a guesthouse, where they would be sized up, quizzed about their backgrounds, specialist skills, and prior entanglements with law enforcement or intelligence, and treated to sermons on discipline and “morals.”

Assuming they passed the sniff test—al-Qaeda was always wary of infiltration by foreign intelligence, and with good reason—the recruits would move on to a 15-day boot camp, followed by another 45 days of basic training in military discipline and formations, small arms, first aid, navigation, and so on. This portion would culminate in maneuvers involving a staged attack on a target—often a fake U.S. military base al-Qaeda had built out in the desert, complete with a flagpole displaying the stars and stripes.

From the cohorts passing through these basic classes, a select few would be singled out for advanced training in skills such as reconnaissance, hijacking, espionage, and assassination. Different camps had different specialties; for example, Bانشiri Camp (named for Abu Ubaidah al-Bانشiri, the bin Laden lieutenant killed in the ferry disaster in Tanzania) specialized in two mainstays of terrorism: improvised explosive devices and urban warfare. Occasionally, bin Laden himself would participate as an instructor, giving inspirational speeches and training people on night exercises.

Most trainees never joined al-Qaeda; of the 10,000 to 20,000 who passed through the camps between 1996 and 2001, only a few hundred became pledged members. The others were supposed to gain combat experience in Afghanistan, Chechnya, or another theater of war, then return to their



Damaged Hull of the USS Cole at the Yemeni port of Aden, Oct. 2000 (AP Photo/Dimitri Messinis)

home countries in the core of the Muslim world—notably North Africa, South-East Asia, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

A handful of trainees were marked out for special “external operations” on behalf of al-Qaeda itself. During the two months of basic training, the instructors had the opportunity to assess recruits for the desired combination of fervor and patience—the latter being necessary given the long planning cycles needed for plotting large-scale attacks against the West. The head of al-Farouq camp, Abu Mohammed al-Masri (who would remain a leader in al-Qaeda until his eventual assassination in Tehran in 2020) was said to be especially adept at spotting would-be suicide bombers. Those singled out for these so-called “martyrdom operations” would be quietly removed from the mainstream and placed in a special program.

Previously, al-Qaeda had played a supporting role in attacks on America, such as the infamous “Black Hawk Down” incident that precipitated U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1993. With its facilities and structures

established in Afghanistan, however, the group could now begin plotting its own spectacular attacks in-house. Its campaign began in earnest with the August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in which more than 200 people were murdered.

In response, the United States launched 66 cruise missiles at al-Qaeda facilities in Khost. The Clinton administration made little effort to determine whether bin Laden was home at the time, which of course he was not, having ordered al-Qaeda facilities evacuated as a precaution. Very few al-Qaeda members were killed or wounded, and all of its leaders survived unscathed. The missiles destroyed a kitchen, a mosque, and a bathroom block. Some even landed intact, without detonating; bin Laden allegedly sold them.

In the aftermath of this show of force, the U.S. may have hoped al-Qaeda would cease and desist. The result was the opposite. Being the target of an American attack made bin Laden even more of a hero than before, and recruitment increased concomitantly.

Some other jihadi groups in Afghanistan, previously critical of al-Qaeda, instead turned their ire on America. Mullah Omar, who prior to the attacks had been in talks to hand bin Laden over to the Saudis, now reneged; the Taliban, he realized, could not be seen as kowtowing to American “aggression.” Above all, al-Qaeda increased its prestige in the eyes of jihadis in Afghanistan and around the world. Evidently, the strategy of pulling the tiger’s tail was a good one.

In October 2000, al-Qaeda suicide bombers attacked the USS Cole as it refueled in Yemen, killing seventeen American sailors. At bin Laden’s direction, al-Qaeda made a glossy propaganda video, juxtaposing a reenactment of the attack with footage of the training camps in Afghanistan. Again the flow of recruits and money increased. But overall, bin Laden was disappointed with the results; partly because, this time, the U.S. response was practically nonexistent. Most gallingly of all, bin Laden still had not managed to unite the foreign terrorist groups under his banner.

The lesson bin Laden drew, typically, was that he needed to carry out even bigger attacks. As Salim Hamdan, bin Laden’s driver and confidant, later told me, “You brought 9/11 on yourselves; you didn’t respond to the Cole, so bin Laden had to hit harder.”

THE “PLANES OPERATION”

In early 1996, a few months before al-Qaeda was expelled from Sudan, a freelance terrorist named Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had left Qatar with U.S. intelligence hot on his heels. Like many jihadis at that time, KSM made his way to Afghanistan. His nephew Ramzi Yousef had been the mastermind

behind the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and the two had since plotted together to blow up airliners in Southeast Asia in a plot codenamed “Bojinka.”

Now, KSM had something else in mind. He wanted to train operatives as pilots and crash single-engine Cessna planes into the World Trade Center in an attempt to finish what Ramzi Yousef had started. KSM brought the idea to a fellow Afghanistan-based freelancer, Abu Zubaydah.

Zubaydah was unimpressed. “Flying Cessna planes into the World Trade Center will only break windows,” he said. “At least fill the planes with explosives.”

“That’s a good improvement,” KSM said. “Will you help me?”

Zubaydah demurred, referring KSM instead to bin Laden; and since al-Qaeda was also based in Afghanistan, KSM had little difficulty securing an audience. In the fall of 1996, KSM met bin Laden for the first time and pitched his explosive-laden-Cessnas idea. At first, bin Laden told KSM bluntly that his proposed operation was not feasible. Nevertheless, he invited KSM to join al-Qaeda. KSM refused to pledge allegiance formally—he always liked to keep his options open—but he stuck around anyway, helping with administrative tasks while continuing to pitch his masterplan. (Eventually, after the East Africa embassy bombings, KSM decided that bin Laden was the real deal and did pledge allegiance to him.)

Despite his early skepticism, bin Laden found that he could not stop thinking about the “Planes Operation,” as KSM called it. And as he thought about the potential attacks, the picture in his mind grew more and more violent—feasibility be damned.

“Why go to war with an ax when you can use a bulldozer?” bin Laden asked KSM. And the al-Qaeda leader proceeded to outline a nightmare vision: al-Qaeda operatives would travel to the United States, hijack passenger jets on coast-to-coast routes—which would therefore be fully laden with fuel—and crash them into the World Trade Center and other targets. If they were lucky, bin Laden said, they might even bring down a few upper floors of the twin towers.

From a more practical point of view, the argument that finally won bin Laden around to the *Planes Operation* was the one that aligned most perfectly with his number one priority: a bloody and spectacular attack against the United States would burnish al-Qaeda’s brand around the world, bringing muscle and money to Afghanistan. Assuming it provoked a big enough backlash, it might even force unity among the foreign groups in the country, with bin Laden as their natural overlord.

Others—among them practically all al-Qaeda’s top leadership—warned that a sufficiently large American military response might bring down the Taliban and with them al-Qaeda’s safe haven. Bin Laden scoffed at this. The Americans would not send in ground forces; their withdrawal from Somalia and their weak responses to the embassy and Cole bombings proved it. And if they did invade, so much the better: Afghanistan was called the grave of empires for a reason: it had seen off everyone from Alexander the Great to the Soviet Union. If the Americans came, al-Qaeda would defeat them, and Osama bin Laden would reach his apotheosis.

Once bin Laden made up his mind, that was that. By the spring of 1999, the *Planes Operation* had been approved and its planners were at work. At Tarnak Farms, KSM, bin Laden, and al-Qaeda’s military chief,

Mohammed Atef, pored over the list of potential targets, boiling it down from an initial nine (which was deemed too ambitious) to just four: the White House, the U.S. Capitol Building, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center.

As requested, trainers in the specialist camps sent a number of promising recruits to bin Laden. Two in particular caught the leader’s eye: Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Midhar, both Saudis from well-to-do Meccan families not dissimilar to bin Laden’s own Jeddah-based clan (albeit much less wealthy than the bin Ladens with their construction empire). He sent Hazmi and Midhar for elite training at Mes Ayak, a facility built inside an abandoned copper mine near Kabul. Their course was physical and kinetic, involving hand-to-hand combat, general fitness, and a spec-ops course taught by a long-time al-Qaeda leader and former Egyptian commando, Saif al-Adel.

From the beginning, the *Planes Operation* was a global one. Most of the training and planning took place in Afghanistan, of course. But the main hub for finance, travel, and other logistics was the home of Ammar al-Baluchi, another nephew of KSM, in the United Arab Emirates. Some of the coordination meetings would take place in Malaysia. KSM himself operated largely out of a safehouse in Karachi, a port megalopolis in his ancestral home country of Pakistan. There, he carried out research, reading aviation magazines, watching movies that showed hijackings, and playing a flight simulator video game.

In December 1999, Hazmi and Midhar joined KSM in Karachi for training in aviation, airline security, Western culture, and basic English (KSM having himself studied in the United States). In these more cerebral matters, the two proved to be poor students—a trait that

would eventually see them both demoted to the status of mere “muscle” for the 9/11 plot—and they left KSM exasperated by their inability to pick up even the most rudimentary English phrases.

THE HAMBURG CONTINGENT & THE MUSCLE

No doubt worried by reports of Hazmi and Midhar’s dismal performance, bin Laden was on the lookout for operatives who might do better. At the end of 1999, he suddenly received not one but four.

Mohammed Atta, Ramzi Binalshibh, Marwan al-Shehhi, and Ziad Jarrah had all lived as students in Hamburg, Germany, where they bonded over their shared extreme views, under the influence of a local preacher who had allegedly fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In long discussions at the apartment shared by Atta, Binalshibh, and Shehhi, the four talked each other up to ever-increasing heights of anti-Americanism, culminating in a collective decision to travel to Afghanistan seeking jihadi training. Having presented themselves at the Taliban office in Quetta, Pakistan, in the fall of 1999, they were escorted over the border and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in Kandahar.

Bin Laden knew a windfall when he saw it. These men seemed just as fervent as Hazmi and Midhar; but unlike the two Saudis, they also had lived in the West; spoke at least passable English; possessed useful technical skills; and had potential as pilots. Atta, in particular, was quickly identified as a natural operational leader. Almost at once, bin Laden had them separated from the other trainees and placed in a special fast-track program run by two of his top brass, Saif al-Adel and Abu

Hafs al-Masri, with backgrounds in special forces and policing respectively.

After recording “martyrdom videos,” the four were sent back to Hamburg to obtain visas to attend flight schools in the United States. In Germany, they laid low, avoided extreme mosques, and even shaved off their beards. By mid-2000, three of the Hamburg Contingent had obtained the requisite visas. Only Ramzi Binalshibh’s application had been rejected; as a Yemeni, he was automatically suspected of intending to overstay and become an undocumented worker. Binalshibh instead became an important manager in the plot, coordinating the hijackers’ training and facilitating their movements between Afghan training camps and Western cities.

As a result of Binalshibh’s visa failure, bin Laden was down a pilot; but soon he enjoyed another stroke of good luck when, out of nowhere, a recruit somehow even more perfect than the Hamburg Four just happened to show up at the al-Farouq basic training camp. Hani Hanjour’s application form showed that he had not only studied English in the United States; while there he had obtained a pilot’s license from the Federal Aviation Administration. Almost immediately, Hanjour was sent to KSM. Between the Hamburg Contingent, the two Meccans, and Hanjour, the Planes Operation now had six operatives, all of them potential pilots.

The plot still required “muscle”—hijackers to overpower the crews of the targeted planes and keep the passengers at bay. Between summer 2000 and spring 2001, Bin Laden and Atef scoured al-Qaeda’s training camps for likely candidates. Of the thirteen they selected, twelve were Saudis and one was from the United Arab Emirates. This tracked demographics in the camps, in which 70% of

recruits were from Saudi Arabia (another 20% were Yemeni and thus, like Binalshibh, unlikely to get U.S. visas). Some of the “muscle” hijackers had apparently hoped to fight in Chechnya, only to find themselves turned back by Russian border guards. According to Mustafa Hamid, some were poached from Abu Zubaydah’s contingent at Khaldan, one of the non-al-Qaeda camps which the Taliban had ordered closed.

The muscle were first sent home to obtain U.S. visas, which each of them did with little to no trouble. Travel documents in hand, they returned to Afghanistan for specialist training. Alongside hijacking, al-Qaeda’s instructors taught them other types of attack, so that they would not surmise the exact nature of the operation for which they had been selected. In a particularly grisly detail, the knife skills portion involved slaughtering and butchering animals, in preparation to do the same to human beings if necessary.

Their foundational training in Afghanistan complete, the “muscle” traveled to KSM’s Karachi safehouse, where the mastermind put them through a basic version of his Western culture and English course. KSM gave each \$10,000 and sent them to Dubai, where his nephew Ammar al-Baluchi received them, helped them get acclimatized to a Western-style city, and arranged for their onward travel to the United States.

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

Hazmi and Midhar arrived in Los Angeles in January 2000, both traveling on valid U.S. visas. They spent two weeks in the city before moving on to San Diego. With their shaky grasp of English and unfamiliarity with Western ways, they needed a great deal of

assistance. They got it: local contacts helped them with, among other things, opening bank accounts and rent apartments.

It has long been suspected that some of those who assisted Hazmi and Midhar were, or acted at the behest of, Saudi officials. In its final report, the 9/11 Commission found:

While in the United States, some of the September 11 hijackers were in contact with, and received support or assistance from, individuals who may be connected to the Saudi Government. There is information, primarily from FBI sources, that at least two of those individuals were alleged by some to be Saudi intelligence officers.

Even that lukewarm conclusion, however— together with more than two dozen pages summarizing the mostly circumstantial evidence backing it up—was classified Top Secret for thirteen years. Parts remain redacted to this day. Successive administrations have kept potentially illuminating documents classified on the basis that to reveal them would risk “significant harm to the national security”—a defense that, after two decades, is wearing distinctly thin.

In a class action lawsuit currently pending against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, survivors of 9/11 and the families of many of those who were murdered that day allege that some of those who helped Hazmi and Midhar were, in fact, active agents of the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, acting under orders from Riyadh. An investigation by ProPublica and the *New York Times* found indirect evidence of such a connection. We must take these allegations seriously, not least because they are backed by sworn affidavits from former FBI agents who have investigated the matter. The best way to deal

with the matter, of course, would be for the U.S. government to declassify documents relating to these contacts and allow the public to see for themselves.

Following their move to San Diego, Hazmi and Midhar soon enrolled in flight school, but their continued infacility with English held them back, just as KSM had predicted. The two also displayed a stunning lack of regard for operational security. At one flying school, they told an instructor who happened to speak Arabic that they were not interested in single-engine planes and wanted to fly big passenger jets right away. Other instructors recalled their obvious lack of interest in perfecting their takeoff and landing skills.

Around five months after his and Hazmi's arrival, Midhar left the United States and returned to his wife's home in Yemen, where his first child had just been born. Hazmi stayed in San Diego alone; he was even listed, under his real name, in the city's phone book. In December 2000, he was joined by Hanjour, the qualified pilot bin Laden had plucked out of basic training at al-Farouq. Together, they moved to Arizona, intending for Hazmi to enroll at Hanjour's old flight school. But Hazmi remained a terrible student; at least two instructors told him he would be better off giving up, which he eventually did; by the day of the attacks, Hazmi would find himself relieved of piloting duties and relegated to the status of muscle.

Meanwhile, in early summer 2000, the three visa-approved members of the Hamburg Contingent had arrived in the United States, but on the opposite coast. They enrolled in flight school in Venice, Florida, on the Gulf Coast south of Sarasota. They may have been better learners than Hazmi and Midhar, but they could be just as problematic when it came to secrecy: one instructor remembered Atta and Shehhi being aggressive and

physically fighting him for the airplane's controls during lessons. Nevertheless, by the end of 2000 all three had obtained their commercial pilot licenses and begun simulator training for flying big jets.

Aside from a few trips to the Washington, DC area, the Hamburg Three stayed in Florida, while Hazmi and Hanjour moved to the suburbs of New York City. At these two East Coast bases, they welcomed and assisted the muscle hijackers, who arrived from Afghanistan via Ammar al-Baluchi's Dubai logistics hub, singly or in pairs, during the first half of 2001. Khalid al-Midhar arrived on July 4. As a result of his having gone AWOL the previous year, Midhar had failed to complete his flight training and had wound up, like Hazmi, as muscle instead.

Exactly one month later, on August 4, another al-Qaeda member—another Saudi—arrived at the airport in Orlando. Mohammed al-Qahtani had no return ticket, no credible reason for being in the United States, and nearly \$3,000 in cash. Qahtani was allegedly the missing "twentieth hijacker"; if so, he was the only one to be denied entry to the United States.

Later, when I interrogated Qahtani at Guantanamo Bay, he told me that while he was sojourning with Ammar al-Baluchi in Dubai, he would often go down to the waterfront and pray for a sign.

"God, if You approve of what I am about to do, please facilitate it," he would say as he stared out over the lapping waters of the Persian Gulf. "But if you disapprove, please stop it."

It might be difficult to imagine a clearer sign of God's disfavor than Qahtani's failure to enter the United States; but Qahtani evidently chose to ignore it, for he said

nothing—indeed, he promptly returned to bin Laden in Afghanistan, as we will see—and the plot went ahead.

FINAL DESTINATIONS

When it came to its big attacks, al-Qaeda planned centrally, using its base in Afghanistan to bring the main plotters together under the auspices of the ultimate decision-maker, Osama bin Laden. But when it came time for the operatives to leave Afghanistan and head to their target, al-Qaeda for security reasons invariably gave cell leaders in the field a wide margin to decide when and how to proceed. Thus, once all the 9/11 operatives were in the United States, it fell to Mohammed Atta, the operational leader selected from among the Hamburg Contingent, to figure out the details.

Atta remained in contact with Binalshibh, who was helping to manage the plot from Europe. At one occasion, they met in Spain. Binalshibh passed instructions to Atta from Bin Laden and the leadership in Afghanistan. The two also devised a code for referring to targets, disguising their telephone conversation as a discussion of potential fields of study (the principal hijackers were ostensibly still students). Thus, “architecture” meant the World Trade Center; “law” was the Capitol Building; “arts” the Pentagon; and “politics” the White House, which the two were still considering as a possible target as late as August 3.

Atta assigned teams to himself and the other three remaining pilots, taking care to distribute English language skills evenly, so that each team would be able to control the passengers on its respective flight. He gave the pilots their targets and instructed them

that, if for any reason they could not reach the mark, they were to crash the plane into the ground, killing everyone on board.

In the weeks and months leading up to the attacks, several hijackers took test flights domestically on board similar aircraft, carrying box cutters in their carry-on baggage. On no occasion did they have trouble getting through security; and on every one of the flights, they observed that the cockpit doors would be opened ten to fifteen minutes after takeoff. So regular was this practice that Atta didn’t even bother figuring out a backup plan in case the doors didn’t open.

With just six or so weeks left, Atta’s Hamburg colleague Ziad Jarrah came close to abandoning the plot. On July 25, he flew back to Germany to see his girlfriend—one of five international trips Jarrah made between arriving in the U.S. and carrying out the attacks. Ramzi Binalshibh, the Yemeni member of the Hamburg Contingent who had become one of the plot’s principal managers after being turned down for a visa, intercepted Jarrah at the airport in Düsseldorf and convinced him to see the plot through. Jarrah returned to the United States with his resolve renewed. In August, Atta oversaw coordination meetings in Florida, New Jersey, and Las Vegas. He figured out the optimal date by cross-referencing four flights that would be in the air simultaneously, with airplane models the pilots knew how to fly, at the start of long routes (so that the planes would be laden with fuel), matching everything up using searches on the website Travelocity.

On August 29, Atta called Binalshibh at 3 a.m. Hamburg time.

“One of my friends related a riddle to me,” Atta said. “I cannot solve it... Two sticks, a dash, and a cake with a stick down.”

11-9. The European standard for September 11. It took Binalshibh a moment to get it, but then he said, “Tell your friend he has nothing to worry about. It’s such a sweet riddle.”

In the United States, al-Qaeda’s so-called “martyrs” set about enjoying the days left to them. Atta pounded shots of vodka. Others went to strip clubs. Within days, Binalshibh had packed his bags in Hamburg and set off for Afghanistan to tell bin Laden the good news.

For the al-Qaeda leader, the attacks could not come soon enough. Earlier that year, Mullah Omar had attempted to settle the squabbling between the foreign militant groups by putting someone in overall charge of all of them: not bin Laden but an Uzbek commander, Juma Bai. This naturally dismayed al-Qaeda, as well as the other Arab groups, whose members always considered themselves a cut above mere Central Asians; but bin Laden himself remained confident. Soon, he would pull off the ultimate provocation against the United States; the one that would make him the undisputed leader among foreign fighters in Afghanistan. Only he and a few trusted lieutenants knew what was about to happen.

In the spring, al-Qaeda had announced its long-planned merger with Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a group led by the former doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri. This announcement, naturally, was accompanied by renewed bloodthirsty threats against the United States. As Mustafa Hamid was to recall years later, bin Laden “practically appointed himself as ruler of Afghanistan. It was some kind of coup; declaring war on behalf of the Afghan people and their emir.”

But bin Laden also had a plan to keep the Taliban on-side. He was going to murder their most bitter rival, the Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masoud. On September 9, assassins posing as journalists detonated a bomb hidden in their camera, killing Masoud and themselves. The next day, bin Laden took to the mountains, telling his entourage something was afoot that would bring fighters flocking to his banner.

On the morning of September 11, Atta, Shehhi, Hanjour, and Jarrah boarded flights out of Boston, Newark, and Dulles with their respective teams. In each case, the modus operandi was similar: the hijackers used box cutters to kill the pilots and pepper spray to keep the passengers back while the designated pilot took the controls. Atta’s plane hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center; Shehhi’s the South Tower; Hanjour’s the Pentagon. Jarrah’s team, down a man because of Qahtani’s denial of entry to the United States—and further disadvantaged by the plane’s delayed departure, which gave its passengers the chance to become aware of the earlier attacks—was overpowered. Following Atta’s orders, Jarrah crashed the plane into a field in Pennsylvania. The plane was about 20 minutes out from the U.S. Capitol Building.

In Afghanistan, traveling around with a small entourage almost at random so as to avoid detection, bin Laden briefly camped by the side of the road to watch the news unfold. Unable to get a signal on his satellite television, he instead listened on BBC Arabic radio, silently counting off the attacks on his fingers. With each crash, his followers chanted and fired their AK-47s into the air in celebration.

Bin Laden shushed them. “There is more!” he said. “Listen!”

In his own quiet way, bin Laden was just as elated as his bodyguards. One thing irked him, however. While Salim Hamdan drove his boss to yet another secret location, bin Laden pointed to a picture of the Capitol Building and told his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, how disappointed he was that the fourth plane (which at the time he assumed the American military had shot down) had failed to “hit that big dome.”

For a brief moment in the aftermath of the attacks, bin Laden finally got everything he wanted. From a base strength of about 400 al-Qaeda members on September 11, the attacks drew around 2,000 foreign fighters to Afghanistan. And at last, the Taliban placed all the foreign militant groups under al-Qaeda’s leadership—for the purposes of mounting a defense against the Americans.

The U.S. ground invasion came as a shock to many in al-Qaeda, among them some high-ranking members like Salim Hamdan, indoctrinated to believe that America was a cowardly nation. While Saif al-Adel coordinated a last-ditch defense of Kandahar, bin Laden retreated to his cave complex at Tora Bora, the place he had lived for a time on first returning to Afghanistan in 1996. But he soon realized he could not defend it. Bin Laden disappeared into the mountains with a handful of retainers, leaving a force in the caves to hold off the Americans as long as possible. One of those apprehended in the area after the fall of Tora Bora was the would-be twentieth hijacker, Mohammed al-Qahtani, who claimed he had only been visiting Afghanistan to perfect his falconry skills—despite having been apprehended along with bin Laden’s bodyguards.

Al-Qaeda quickly morphed from a hierarchical militia into a decentralized network of local organizations, most of them primarily concerned with fighting in civil wars

in places like Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and latterly Syria. Attacks by operatives trained in the Afghan camps continued for a few years after their dispersal; one example was the London “7/7” bombings in 2005, whose operational leader, Mohammed Sidique Khan, had trained with al-Qaeda. Some of al-Qaeda’s component factions sought to inspire “lone-wolf” attacks like the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, in which the attackers learned bomb-making techniques from a magazine published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. But without its powerbase in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda could not continue mounting spectacular, large-scale attacks against the West.

Bin Laden’s death in 2011 was a grievous blow to al-Qaeda. Not only was bin Laden a magnet for donations and recruits; documents found in his Abbotabad compound show that he was in overall control of the organization until the day he died. But the founder’s death would by no means prove fatal to al-Qaeda.

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

Less than two weeks after 9/11, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar gave an interview to Voice of America. Asked why he did not just turn over bin Laden in order to forestall an American invasion, he replied:

I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God. The other is that of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God’s path, you can reside anywhere on this earth and will be protected... The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which one of these two promises is fulfilled.

In the eyes of jihadis the world over, God has now delivered for the Taliban in spectacular style (albeit with assists from Pakistan, which harbored the Taliban leadership; and from the Trump administration, which forced the Afghan government of former president Ashraf Ghani to release some 5,000 Taliban prisoners). As the Taliban rolled into Kabul practically unopposed, congratulations poured in from militants around the world. Even Hamas “congratulate[d] the Muslim Afghan people for the defeat of the American occupation.”

As of this writing, the Taliban control all of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, including all the territory held by the Northern Alliance prior to 9/11. They are the de facto government of the country, and unlike last time, they are unlikely to face many obstacles to de jure recognition. They are already in talks with a potential benefactor, China, which among other aspects of its diplomatic clout can veto any sanctions regime proposed through the UN Security Council.

Long before the American withdrawal, al-Qaeda had already returned to Afghanistan, with hundreds of members across the country, training camps and safe houses in Helmand province, and a lesser presence elsewhere. The camps are large, and the training on offer apparently covers, among other things, explosives, mine-laying, and the use of night vision equipment. One such camp, at Shorabak near the Pakistani border, took 63 airstrikes and 200 U.S. ground troops to dismantle—a bad omen for any U.S. policy that seeks to control the al-Qaeda threat using drones and cruise missiles.

Training at these camps is reportedly being provided not just to foreigners but to Taliban fighters, too, and a UN monitoring team has reported that the Taliban and al-Qaeda “show no indication of breaking ties.” In fact,

embedded al-Qaeda militants have grown so essential to Taliban military operations that “it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate [al-Qaeda] from its Taliban allies.”

This continued alignment should surprise nobody. Ever since bin Laden’s oath to Mullah Omar in 1997—renewed to every subsequent Taliban leader—al-Qaeda has been in effect a component of the Taliban’s “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” The Taliban refused to give up bin Laden in 2001, when they were on the back foot. They fought a war with a superpower for 20 years rather than betray al-Qaeda. Today, having won that war, there is no incentive to break ties.

As in the 1990s, al-Qaeda is not alone. Other foreign militant organizations present in the country include groups of Pakistanis, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Uighurs, and others. According to the UN team, there are around 8,000 to 10,000 foreign fighters in Afghanistan, and “although the majority are affiliated foremost with the Taliban, many also support Al-Qaida.” (An ISIS offshoot is also present, although it frequently finds itself at loggerheads with the Taliban.) The Taliban, with its new geopolitical sophistication, will likely seek to use sympathetic terrorist groups the way Iran does, to further its agenda throughout the region and beyond. America’s defeat in Afghanistan plays perfectly into al-Qaeda’s narrative about Western weakness: that the United States is a cowardly nation with no stomach for the long war. The West will have a hard time countering the resultant propaganda and recruitment bonanza. Meanwhile, Afghanistan looks like a propitious place from which to (re)start a global jihad, especially with the demise of the Islamic State’s short-lived empire in the Middle East and the stalemate in Syria. In some ways, in fact, it is an even more attractive destination than it was in 1996. Twenty-five additional years of

conflict have flooded the country with yet more weaponry, while the United States has spent \$36 billion upgrading its infrastructure—perfect for moving around recruits, money, and weapons.

In June 2021, a UN report warned, not for the first time, of al-Qaeda’s habit of “strategic patience”—waiting until the time is right to renew operations against the West. Today, there would appear to be little to prevent al-Qaeda from re-establishing its external-operations capability. Indeed, as the competition for recruits in Afghanistan heats up once more, the organization may again come to view spectacular attacks on the West as an existential necessity.

Long before 9/11, we knew al-Qaeda's long-term plan. In the mid-1990s, it was neatly summarized in a tract called *The Management of Savagery*, based by analogy on a simplistic conception of how Germanic tribes (“savages”) weakened and eventually overran the Roman Empire.

Phase One was to create power vacuums by expelling the United States from the Muslim world. That work is now all but complete. America enjoys little influence in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and now Afghanistan. In fact, 20 years after the so-called “War on Terror,” and five trillion dollars later, the United States does not even have embassies in any of these countries. It demonstrably cannot control its nominal allies in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan. In Iraq, it is forced to tolerate elected political leaders who flaunt their membership in Iranian-controlled militias, some of which Washington has dubbed terrorist groups.

With the United States in retreat across the region, al-Qaeda will now move to Phase Two: eventually filling those power vacuums with entities based on the Taliban model.

(The final phase is to unite the governments into a worldwide caliphate, a goal which still seems far off.)

At this point, the West faces a lose-lose situation. To the extent that Phase Two goes well, we will face an arc of instability from North Africa to South Asia. To the extent that it goes poorly, al-Qaeda has a renewed, reinforced base from which to launch more attacks.

Starting in 1996, it took al-Qaeda just five years to build from near-extinction to the 9/11 attacks. The crucible for its astonishing resurrection was a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan; and a crucial ingredient was American inattention. The United States was a sleeping giant, viewing al-Qaeda as little more than a nuisance and devoting so little attention to the problem that the eventual hijackers were allowed to pass unhindered through U.S. border control multiple times, even as they prepared to murder thousands of American civilians. In the months and years to come, the West will be tempted to repeat its mistake, ignoring Afghanistan as a lost cause. It must resist this temptation. Especially with its military forces pulled back, its diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and law enforcement apparatus must remain hypervigilant against yet another global terrorist reboot.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Al-Qaeda’s strategy has been to exploit conflict and chaos, and fill the vacuum left by national and international attention; it is therefore essential to deploy all levers of government – including development assistance, cultural and educational opportunities, diplomatic and policy tools – to address the conditions in which terrorism thrives and terrorists find their recruits.
2. The United States should not diminish attention to counterterrorism and Afghanistan to pursue “great power competition”; the two are not mutually exclusive and state and non-state adversaries are likely to benefit from American inattention.
3. Frontline officials proved key to identifying and mitigating threats. States and international organizations should redouble efforts to strengthen capacities of frontline officials including those who work at borders, travel and financial institutions, for example.
4. Declassifying relevant documents to allow survivors and analysts to better understand the relationships between key players leading up to the attacks, such as those alleged between the hijackers and the government of Saudi Arabia, and hold states accountable for their actions.



*Militiamen Loyal to Ahmad Massoud in a Training Exercise in Panjshir Province, Aug. 2021
(AP Photo/Jalaluddin Sekandar)*



THE SOUFAN CENTER

ABOUT TSC:

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.