

## Chapter 2

# Al Qaeda's Means and Methods to Raise, Move, and Use Money

*There are two things a brother must always have for jihad, the self and money.  
An al Qaeda operative<sup>5</sup>*

Al Qaeda's methods of raising and moving money have bedeviled the world's intelligence agencies for good reason. Al Qaeda has developed "an elusive network...an unconventional web"<sup>6</sup> to support itself, its operations, and its people. Al Qaeda has demonstrated the ability, both before and after 9/11,<sup>7</sup> to raise money from many different sources, typically using a cadre of financial facilitators, and to move this money through its organization by a variety of conduits, including hawaladars (see the discussion of halawas, below), couriers, and financial institutions. These sources and conduits are resilient, redundant, and difficult to detect.

Contrary to popular myth, Usama Bin Ladin does not support al Qaeda through a personal fortune or a network of businesses. Rather, al Qaeda financial facilitators raise money from witting and unwitting donors, mosques and sympathetic imams, and nongovernment organizations such as charities. The money seems to be distributed as quickly as it is raised, and we have found no evidence that there is a central "bank" or "war chest" from which al Qaeda draws funds. Before 9/11 al Qaeda's money was used to support its operations, its training and military apparatus, the Taliban, and, sporadically, other terrorist organizations. Since 9/11 al Qaeda's money supports operations and operatives and their families.

Since 9/11 the disruption of al Qaeda's sources, facilitators, and conduits, primarily through deaths and arrests, has made funds less available and their movement more difficult. At the same time, al Qaeda's expenditures have decreased since 9/11 because it no longer supports the Taliban, its training camps, or an army. That said, al Qaeda still appears to have the ability to fund terrorist operations.

### ***Intelligence Issues***

There is much that the U.S. government did not know (and still does not know) about Bin Ladin's resources and how al Qaeda raises, moves, and spends its money. The combination of Bin Ladin's move to Afghanistan in 1996 and his censure by the

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<sup>5</sup> Intelligence reporting, Apr. 13, 2004. The discussion of al Qaeda financing in this chapter is derived from an extensive review of documents from State, Treasury and the intelligence community, as well as interviews of intelligence analysts, law enforcement agents, and other government officials.

<sup>6</sup> Intelligence reporting, Apr. 12, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Our pre-9/11 analysis focuses on al Qaeda after Bin Ladin arrived in Afghanistan in 1996, and especially after he firmly established himself there by 1998.

international community following the 1998 East Africa bombings contributed to the difficulty in tracking this money.<sup>8</sup>

The CIA expressed the extent of the problem in April 2001:

Usama Bin Ladin's financial assets are difficult to track because he uses a wide variety of mechanisms to move and raise money[;]...he capitalizes on a large, difficult-to-identify network with few long-lasting nodes for penetration. It is difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy what percentage of each node contributes to his overall financial position. Gaps in our understanding contribute to the difficulty we have in pursuing the Bin Ladin financial target. We presently do not have the reporting to determine how much of Bin Ladin's personal wealth he has used or continues to use in financing his organization; we are unable to estimate with confidence the value of his assets and net worth; and we do not know the level of financial support he draws from his family and other donors sympathetic to his cause.<sup>9</sup>

Even after the September 11 attacks, the intelligence community could not estimate the total income or the relative importance of any source of Bin Ladin's revenue stream. High-level policymakers were frustrated and characterized themselves as "seriously challenged...by an inability to obtain on a consistent basis solid and credible background information on targets for blocking of assets[.]"<sup>10</sup> More than a year after 9/11, the head of the government's terrorist-financing coordination effort described this gap in knowledge:

[S]ometime in the next 3 months a Congressional committee is rightfully going to haul us up to the Hill (or the President is going to call us into the Oval office) and ask us 4 questions:

1. Who finances al Qaeda?
2. How?
3. Where is it?
4. Why don't you have it (and stop it)?

Paul [O'Neill, secretary of the Treasury] could not [be able to] answer [those questions] today.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mainstream Gulf area donors and the Bin Ladin family generally turned away from Usama Bin Ladin after the East Africa bombings. Additionally, UN Security Council Resolution 1333 in December 2000 called on all member states to freeze funds in accounts associated with al Qaeda, a point discussed more fully later in this monograph.

<sup>9</sup> Intelligence reporting, Apr. 12, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> State Department Memorandum, Dec. 3, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Treasury Department email, Nov. 14, 2002. The CIA contends it has much better intelligence about al Qaeda financing than is indicated by this Department of Treasury document. In the CIA's view, Treasury was unhappy because the CIA's intelligence was often extremely sensitive, so it could not be released to support public designations.

The volume and quality of the intelligence appear to have improved since the summer of 2002, mostly because a flood of information is being derived from custodial interviews of captured al Qaeda members. Reliance on this information, of course, has its perils. Detainees may provide misinformation and may misrepresent or mischaracterize their roles or the roles of others. As a result, corroborating their information, through other custodial interviews, documentary evidence, or other intelligence collection, is critical in assessing what we know about al Qaeda financing. Even if what detained al Qaeda members tell us is accurate, the information can be stale, as it necessarily describes the state of affairs before their capture, and it is unlikely to be “actionable”—that is, sufficient to create an opportunity for disruption or to enable investigators to follow a money trail forward to operational elements or backward to the donors or facilitators.

Understanding al Qaeda’s money flows and providing actionable intelligence present ongoing challenges because of the speed, diversity, and complexity of the means and methods for raising and moving money; the commingling of terrorist money with legitimate funds; the many layers and transfers between donors and the ultimate recipients of the money; the existence of unwitting participants (including donors who give to generalized jihadist struggles rather than specifically to al Qaeda); and the U.S. government’s reliance on foreign government reporting for intelligence.

Commission staff evaluated the existing information regarding al Qaeda’s financing, before 9/11 and today, in light of these limitations. We describe what we know, acknowledge where the information is simply insufficient, and discuss what we are reasonably certain did *not* occur. The list of purported al Qaeda funding sources is legion: counterfeit trademarked goods, consumer coupon fraud, drug trafficking, insider trading, support from Gulf-area governments, and conflict diamonds are the most common. In many cases, one or two threads of information make such theories tantalizing; but after careful review of all of the evidence available to us, including some of the most sensitive information held by the U.S. government, we have judged that such theories cannot be substantiated.

## ***Al Qaeda’s Financing: Sources, Movement, Uses***

### ***Where did al Qaeda get its money?***

Al Qaeda relied on fund-raising before 9/11 to a greater extent than thought at the time. Bin Ladin did not have large sums of inherited money or extensive business resources. Rather, it appears that al Qaeda lived essentially hand to mouth. A group of financial facilitators generated the funds; they may have received money from a spectrum of donors, charities, and mosques, with only some knowing the ultimate destination of their money. The CIA estimates that it cost al Qaeda about \$30 million per year to sustain its activities before 9/11, an amount raised almost entirely through donations.

## Dispelling myths

For many years, the United States thought Bin Ladin financed al Qaeda's expenses through a vast personal inheritance or through the proceeds of the sale of his Sudanese businesses. Neither was true. Bin Ladin was alleged to have inherited approximately \$300 million when his father died, funds used while in Sudan and Afghanistan. This money was thought to have formed the basis of the financing for al Qaeda.<sup>12</sup> Only after NSC-initiated interagency trips to Saudi Arabia in 1999 and 2000, and after interviews of Bin Ladin family members in the United States, was the myth of Bin Ladin's fortune discredited. From about 1970 until 1993 or 1994, Usama Bin Ladin received about a million dollars per year—adding up to a significant sum, to be sure, but not a \$300 million fortune. In 1994 the Saudi government forced the Bin Ladin family to find a buyer for Usama's share of the family company and to place the proceeds into a frozen account. The Saudi freeze had the effect of divesting Bin Ladin of what would otherwise have been a \$300 million fortune. Notwithstanding this information, some within the government continued to cite the \$300 million figure well after 9/11, and the general public still gives credence to the notion of a "multimillionaire Bin Ladin."

Nor were Bin Ladin's assets in Sudan a source of money for al Qaeda. Bin Ladin was reputed to own 35 companies in Sudan when he lived there from 1992 to 1996, but some may never have actually been owned by him and others were small or not economically viable. Bin Ladin's investments may well have been designed to gain influence with the Sudanese government rather than be a revenue source. When Bin Ladin was pressured to leave Sudan in 1996, the Sudanese government apparently expropriated his assets and seized his accounts, so that he left Sudan with practically nothing. When Bin Ladin moved to Afghanistan in 1996, his financial situation was dire; it took months for him to get back on his feet. While relying on the good graces of the Taliban, Bin Ladin reinvigorated his fund-raising efforts and drew on the ties to wealthy Saudi nationals that he developed during his days fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

## Financial facilitators and their donors

Al Qaeda depended on fund-raising to support itself. It appears that al Qaeda relied heavily on a core of financial facilitators who raised money from a variety of donors and other fund-raisers. Those donors were primarily in the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Some individual donors knew of the ultimate destination of their donations, and others did not; they were approached by facilitators, fund-raisers, and employees of

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<sup>12</sup> Reporting from November 1998 concluded that although the \$300 million figure probably originated from rumors in the Saudi business community, it was a "reasonable estimate" as of a few years earlier, representing what would have been Bin Ladin's share of his family's business conglomerate in Saudi Arabia. The intelligence community thought it had adequately verified this number by valuing Bin Ladin's investments in Sudan as well as what he could have inherited from his father's construction empire in Saudi Arabia. Finished intelligence supported the notion that Bin Ladin's "fortune" was still intact by concluding that Bin Ladin could only have established al Qaeda so quickly in Afghanistan if he had ready access to significant funds. Intelligence reporting, Nov. 17, 1998.

corrupted charities, particularly during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The financial facilitators also appeared to rely heavily on imams at mosques, who diverted zakat donations to the facilitators and encouraged support of radical Islamic causes. Al Qaeda fund-raising was largely cyclical, with the bulk of the money coming in during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

## **Charities**

Al Qaeda's charities' strategy before 9/11 had two prongs. In some instances, al Qaeda penetrated specific foreign branch offices of large, internationally recognized charities. In many cases, lax oversight and the charities' own ineffective financial controls, particularly over transactions in remote regions of the world, made it easy for al Qaeda operatives to divert money from charitable uses. These large international Gulf charities donated money to end recipients, usually smaller in-country charities, whose employees may have siphoned off money for al Qaeda. In the second class of cases, entire charities from the top down may have known of and even participated in the funneling of money to al Qaeda. In those cases, al Qaeda operatives had control over the entire organization, including access to bank accounts.

Much has been made of the role of charities, particularly Saudi charities, in terrorist financing. A little context is necessary here. Charitable giving, known as zakat, is one of the five pillars of Islamic faith. It is broader and more pervasive than Western ideas of charity, in that it also functions as a form of income tax, educational assistance, foreign aid, and political influence. The Western notion of the separation of civic and religious duty does not exist in Islamic cultures. The Saudi government has declared that the Koran and the Sunna (tradition) of Muhammad are the country's constitution, and the clergy within Saudi Arabia wield enormous influence over the cultural and social life of the country.

Funding charitable works is ingrained into Saudi Arabia's culture, and Saudi zakat has long provided much-needed humanitarian relief in the Islamic world. In addition, a major goal of Saudi charities is to spread Wahhabi beliefs and culture throughout the world. Thus Saudi efforts have funded mosques and schools in other parts of the world, including Pakistan, Central Asia, Europe, and even the United States. In some poor areas these schools alone provide education; and even in affluent countries, Saudi-funded Wahhabi schools are often the only Islamic schools available.

## **Since 9/11**

Financial facilitators are still at the core of al Qaeda's revenue stream, although there is little question that the arrests and deaths of several important facilitators have decreased the amount of money al Qaeda has raised and have made it more expensive and difficult to raise and move that money. The May 2003 terrorist attacks in Riyadh, moreover, seem to have reduced al Qaeda's available funds even more—some say drastically—for a

number of reasons. First, it appears that enhanced scrutiny of donors by the Saudi government after the attacks may be having a deterrent effect. Second, Saudi law enforcement efforts have reduced al Qaeda's cadre of facilitators. Individuals such as Riyadh, an al Qaeda facilitator, and "Swift Sword," known for their ability to raise and deliver money for al Qaeda, have been captured or killed. Lastly, the Saudi population may feel that the fight has come to their homeland, and that they should be more cautious in their giving as a result.

Entirely corrupt charities, such as the Wafa Charitable Foundation, are now out of business, with many of their principals killed or captured. Charities that have been identified as likely avenues for terrorist financing have seen their donations diminish and their activities come under more scrutiny. The challenge is to control overseas branches of Gulf-area charities, prevent charities from reopening under different names, and keep corrupt employees of nongovernmental organizations from corrupting other NGOs as they move from job to job.

Despite the apparent reduction in its overall funding, al Qaeda continues to fund terrorist operations with relative ease. The amounts of money required for most operations are small, and al Qaeda can apparently still draw on hard-core donors who knowingly fund it and sympathizers who divert charitable donations to it.

The exact extent to which the donors know where their money is going remains unknown. Still, substantial evidence indicates that many Gulf donors did know and even wanted evidence that the fund-raisers really were connected to al Qaeda. In addition, some donations, while not completely sinister, are not completely innocent. For example, many donors gave funds to support the families of mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan. Such donors may not have intentionally funded terrorism, but they certainly knew they were supporting the families of combatants. Moreover, there is evidence that donations increased substantially after the United States attacked al Qaeda in Afghanistan, suggesting considerable anti-U.S. sentiment among the donors. At the same time, it seems very likely that facilitators diverted funds from unwitting donors. To stop such revenue from well-intentioned donors, it is necessary to capture or kill the facilitators who raise the funds or to remove the corrupt imams, NGO officials, or others who divert them to al Qaeda.

### **Allegations of other sources of revenue**

Allegations that al Qaeda used a variety of illegitimate means to finance itself, both before and after 9/11, continue to surface. The most common involve the drug trade, conflict diamonds, and state support; none can be confirmed.

After reviewing the relevant intelligence on al Qaeda's involvement in drug trafficking and interviewing the leading authorities on the subject, we have seen no substantial evidence that al Qaeda played a major role in the drug trade or relied on it as an important source of revenue either before or after 9/11. While the drug trade was an important

source of income for the Taliban before 9/11, it did not serve the same purpose for al Qaeda. Although there is some fragmentary reporting alleging that Bin Ladin may have been an investor, or even had an operational role, in drug trafficking before 9/11, this intelligence cannot be substantiated and the sourcing is probably suspect. One intelligence analyst described the reporting as “bizarre.” Bin Ladin may, however, have encouraged drug traffickers to sell to Westerners as part of his overall plan to weaken the West (though much of that intelligence is also suspect).

It is even less likely that al Qaeda is currently involved in the drug trade. Substantial post-9/11 intelligence collection efforts have failed to corroborate rumors of current narcotic trafficking. In fact, there is compelling evidence the al Qaeda leadership does not like or trust those who today control the drug trade in Southwest Asia, and has encouraged its members not to get involved. Although some individuals with some connection to al Qaeda may be involved in drug trafficking, there is no convincing evidence that al Qaeda plays a major role in it or that it is an important source of revenue.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the lack of affirmative evidence, there are substantial reasons to believe that al Qaeda has no role in drug trafficking: al Qaeda members are geographically hemmed in and are unable to travel as the narcotics business demands. Trafficking would unnecessarily expose al Qaeda operatives to risks of detection or arrest. Moreover, established traffickers have no reason to involve al Qaeda in their lucrative businesses; associating with the world’s most hunted men would attract unwanted attention to their activities and exponentially increase the resources devoted to catching them. Furthermore, Al Qaeda neither controls territory nor brings needed skills and therefore has no leverage to break into the sector.

Allegations that al Qaeda has used the trade in conflict diamonds to fund itself similarly have not been substantiated. Commission staff has evaluated the sources of information for these various public reports raising the diamond allegations. These include reports of journalists, the United Nations, and certain nongovernmental organizations investigating this issue. The FBI conducted an intensive international investigation of the conflict diamond issue, including interviews of key witnesses with direct knowledge of the relevant facts, and found no evidence of any substantial al Qaeda involvement; the CIA has come to the same judgment. Additionally, detained operatives have since reported that al Qaeda was not involved in legal or illegal trading in diamonds or precious stones during its Afghan years. We have evaluated the U.S. government investigations in light of the public reports to the contrary, the relative veracity of the sources of information, and the best available intelligence on the subject, and see no basis to dispute these conclusions. There is some evidence that specific al Qaeda operatives may have either dabbled in trading precious stones at some point, or expressed an interest in doing so, but that evidence cannot be extrapolated to conclude that al Qaeda has funded itself in that manner.

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<sup>13</sup> We are aware of the December 2003 seizure of two tons of hashish from a ship in the Persian Gulf, and of the initial press reports that three individuals on board had purported al Qaeda links. Both the CIA and the DEA discount the significance of those links, and neither agency believes that this seizure is evidence that al Qaeda is financing itself through narcotics trafficking. We have seen no evidence to the contrary.

Other than support provided by the Taliban in Afghanistan, there is no persuasive evidence of systematic government financial sponsorship of al Qaeda by any country either before or after 9/11. While there have been numerous allegations about Saudi government complicity in al Qaeda, the Commission staff has found no persuasive evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or as individual senior officials knowingly support or supported al Qaeda.<sup>14</sup>

## **Al Qaeda fund-raising in the United States**

The United States is not, and has not been, a substantial source of al Qaeda funding, but some funds raised in the United States may have made their way to al Qaeda and its affiliated groups. A murky U.S. network of jihadist supporters has plainly provided funds to foreign mujahideen with al Qaeda links. Still, there is little hard evidence of substantial funds from the United States actually going to al Qaeda. A CIA expert on al Qaeda financing believes that any money coming out of the United States for al Qaeda is “minuscule.” Domestic law enforcement officials, acknowledging the possibility of schemes that they have not identified, generally state it is impossible to know how much, if any, funding al Qaeda receives out of the United States. These officials agree that any funds al Qaeda raises in the United States amount to much less than is raised by other terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and that the United States is not a primary source of al Qaeda funding.

Finally, contrary to some public reports, we have not seen substantial evidence that al Qaeda shares a fund-raising infrastructure in the United States with Hamas, Hezbollah, or Palestinian Islamic Jihad. None of the witnesses we interviewed, including the FBI’s leading authorities on terrorist financing generally and its expert on Palestinian extremist fund-raising specifically, reported evidence of this overlap, although supporters of Palestinian extremist groups travel in the same general circles as suspected al Qaeda supporters and have some contact with them.<sup>15</sup> In fact, there is far more evidence of fund-raising collaboration between Hamas and Hezbollah than between either of these groups and al Qaeda, according to the FBI official responsible for tracking these groups’ funding.

## ***How did al Qaeda move its money?***

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<sup>14</sup> The Saudi government turned a blind eye to the financing of al Qaeda by prominent religious and business leaders and organizations, at least before 9/11, and the Saudis did not begin to crack down hard on al Qaeda financing in the Kingdom until after the May 2003 al Qaeda attacks in Riyadh. See chapter 3, “Government Efforts Before and After the September 11 Attacks,” and chapter 7 on al Haramain and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>15</sup> In addition, individuals may have made donations both to suspected Hamas front groups and to other organizations believed to be somehow affiliated with al Qaeda. Such overlap does not establish any organizational coordination or cooperation, however.



Before 9/11 al Qaeda appears to have relied primarily on hawala<sup>16</sup> and couriers to move substantial amounts of money for its activities in Afghanistan. Charities were also used as conduits to transfer funds from donors to al Qaeda leaders. At times al Qaeda operatives and supporters in the West and other banking centers freely used the international financing system.

## Hawala

Al Qaeda moved much of its money by hawala before 9/11. In some ways, al Qaeda had no choice after its move to Afghanistan in 1996; the banking system there was antiquated and undependable. Hawala became particularly important after the August 1998 East Africa bombings increased worldwide scrutiny of the formal financial system. Bin Ladin turned to an established hawala network operating in Pakistan, in Dubai, and throughout the Middle East to transfer funds efficiently. Hawalas were attractive to al Qaeda because they, unlike formal financial institutions, were not subject to potential government oversight and did not keep detailed records in standard form. Although hawaladars do keep ledgers, their records are often written in idiosyncratic shorthand and maintained only briefly. Al Qaeda used about a dozen trusted hawaladars, who almost certainly knew of the source and purpose of the money. Al Qaeda also used both unwitting hawaladars and hawaladars who probably strongly suspected that they were dealing with al Qaeda but were nevertheless willing to deal with anyone.

## Financial institutions

Al Qaeda itself probably did not use the formal financial system to store or transfer funds internally after Bin Ladin moved to Afghanistan. Bin Ladin's finances were initially in dire straits; al Qaeda was living hand to mouth and did not have any funds to store. Additionally, the Afghan banking system was rudimentary at best, and the increased scrutiny after the East Africa bombings and the UN resolutions against Bin Ladin and the Taliban made the use of such institutions problematic.

Al Qaeda's extended network of supporters and operatives did use the formal financial system before 9/11. Hawaladars associated with al Qaeda (like hawaladars generally) relied on banks as part of their hawala operations. One bank, for example, had 1,800 to 2,000 branches in Pakistan, making it relatively easy for a hawaladar to use the bank to move funds.<sup>17</sup> In addition to hawaladars, charities such as Wafa Humanitarian

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<sup>16</sup> A definition of *hawala* is contained in the case study of the al-Barakaat network. Additionally, a good discussion of hawala is found in U.S. Department of Treasury, *A Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 359 of the USA PATRIOT Act*, November 2002 (online at [www.fincen.gov/hawalarptfinal11222002.pdf](http://www.fincen.gov/hawalarptfinal11222002.pdf)).

<sup>17</sup> Hawala was frequently combined with other means of moving money. For a single transaction, the hawaladars sometimes used both hawala and the formal banking system or money remitters; the senders and receivers of the funds also often used couriers to transfer the funds to and from their respective hawaladars. Hawala also enabled operatives to access the banking system without having to open an account.

Organization had accounts at banks, which served as a means to move money for terrorists.

Fund-raisers for al Qaeda also used banks to store and move their money. Most banks probably did not know their institutions were being used to facilitate the flow of funds to al Qaeda, although some may have. Corrupt individuals on the inside of these banks may have facilitated the transactions. There is little question that the near-total lack of regulation and oversight of the financial industry in the UAE and Pakistan before 9/11 allowed these activities to flourish.

Al Qaeda operational cells outside Afghanistan made extensive use of the formal financial system. As discussed in appendix A, the September 11 hijackers and their co-conspirators had bank accounts and credit cards, made extensive use of ATM cards, and sent and received international wire and bank-to-bank transfers. Those al Qaeda operatives and supporters who were relatively anonymous could more easily risk using the formal financial system than could al Qaeda's core leadership.

## **Couriers**

Al Qaeda used couriers because they provided a secure way to move funds. Couriers were typically recruited from within al Qaeda and could maintain a low profile—perhaps because of their background, language skills, ethnicity, or documentation—and so, ideally, no outsiders were involved or had knowledge of the transaction. They usually did not know the exact purpose of the funds. A single courier or several couriers might be used, depending on the route and the amount of money involved. They picked up money from a hawaladar, financial facilitator, or donor, and took it to its destination. For example, al Qaeda reportedly used a Pakistani-based money changer to move \$1 million from the UAE to Pakistan, at which point the money was couriered across the border into Afghanistan. The 9/11 transaction provides a good example of al Qaeda's use of couriers. As discussed in appendix A, the plot leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammad delivered a large amount of cash, perhaps \$120,000, to the plot facilitator Abdul Aziz Ali in Dubai; Ali then used the cash to wire funds to the hijackers in the United States.

## **Since 9/11**

Since 9/11 the core al Qaeda operatives have relied on cash transactions involving trusted hawaladars and couriers. The hawala network that existed prior to 9/11 seems to have been largely destroyed. Several of the main hawaladars who were moving money for al Qaeda before 9/11 have been detained, and the identities of others have been revealed in seized records. Al Qaeda may have developed relationships with other hawaladars, and it most likely uses them to move some of its money. However, major cash transfers apparently are done by trusted couriers or, for added security, by the main operatives themselves. Some couriers may be carrying information (although not specific operational details) as well as cash.

Using couriers has slowed down al Qaeda's movement of money, as physically transporting money over large distances necessarily takes much longer than using electronic means such as wire transfer. In addition, there is evidence that significant delays in moving money, especially to al Qaeda operatives in far-flung parts of the world, have been caused by the limited supply of trusted couriers. Moreover, transferring funds by courier requires planning, coordination, and communication, all of which take time. Al Qaeda's use of couriers presents challenges and opportunities for the intelligence and law enforcement communities. Couriers can be vulnerable to certain forms of enforcement, however.

### ***How did al Qaeda spend its money?***

Before 9/11 al Qaeda's expenses included funding operations, maintaining its training and military apparatus, contributing to the Taliban and their high-level officials, and sporadically contributing to related terrorist organizations. The CIA estimates that prior to 9/11 it cost al Qaeda about \$30 million per year to sustain these activities.

### **Al Qaeda's expenses**

Once in Afghanistan, Bin Ladin focused on building al Qaeda into a fully operating organization. Al Qaeda spent money on military training and support, including salaries for jihadists, training camps, and related expenses. Reportedly there were also propaganda and proselytizing-related expenses and costs to support al Qaeda outside Afghanistan.

Before 9/11 al Qaeda was reportedly highly organized, with a committee structure that included the Finance Committee. Credible evidence indicates that Bin Ladin played a significant role in planning each operation and was very attentive to financial matters. Other than Bin Ladin, the person with the most important role in al Qaeda financing was reportedly Sheikh Qari Sa'id. Sa'id, a trained accountant, had worked with Bin Ladin in the late 1980s when they fought together in Afghanistan and then for one of Bin Ladin's companies in Sudan in the early to mid-1990s. Sa'id was apparently notoriously tightfisted with al Qaeda's money.<sup>18</sup> Operational leaders may have occasionally bypassed Sa'id and the Finance Committee and requested funds directly from Bin Ladin. Al Qaeda members apparently financed themselves for day-to-day expenses and relied on the central organization only for operational expenses.

Al Qaeda funded a number of terrorist operations, including the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa (which cost approximately \$10,000), the 9/11 attacks (approximately \$400,000–500,000), the October 18, 2002, Bali bombings (approximately

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<sup>18</sup> Sa'id reportedly vetoed a \$1500 expense for travel to Saudi Arabia to get visas for the 9/11 attacks until Bin Ladin overruled him (although there is no reason to believe that Sa'id knew the reason for the travel at that time).

\$20,000), and potential maritime operations against oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz (approximately \$130,000). The actual operations themselves were relatively cheap, although these figures do not include such “overhead” as training at camps, evaluation of trainees, and recruitment. Although the cyclical nature of fund-raising may have created periodic cash shortfalls, we are not aware of any evidence indicating that terrorist acts were interrupted as a result.

## **Money for the Taliban**

Once Bin Ladin revitalized his fund-raising after moving to Afghanistan, he provided funds to the Taliban in return for safe haven. Al Qaeda probably paid between \$10 to 20 million per year to the Taliban. As time passed, it appeared that the Taliban relied on al Qaeda for an ever-greater share of their needs, such as arms, goods, and vehicles, and even social projects. In return, the Taliban resisted international pressure to expel Bin Ladin or turn him over to a third country.

## **Money to other terrorist groups**

Before 9/11 Bin Ladin appears to have used money to create alliances with other Islamic terrorist organizations. Al Qaeda’s cash contributions helped establish connections with these groups and encouraged them to share members, contacts, and facilities. It appears that al Qaeda was not funding an overall jihad program but was selectively providing start-up funds to new groups or money for specific operations. Generally, however, al Qaeda was more likely to provide logistical support and cover and to assist with terrorist operations than to provide money.

## **Since 9/11**

Al Qaeda’s expenditures have decreased significantly since the 9/11 attacks and the defeat of the Taliban, although it is impossible to determine to what extent. Al Qaeda has become decentralized and it is unlikely that the Finance Committee still exists. Sa’id continues to operate, but given the difficulties of communication, it is doubtful that he exerts much control. The direction and financing of operations are now based more on personal relationships with operatives than on a management structure.

Al Qaeda no longer pays money to the Taliban (for safe haven or otherwise) and no longer operates extensive training camps in Afghanistan or elsewhere. It still provides operatives and their families with modest support. Al Qaeda occasionally provides funds to other terrorist organizations, especially those in Southeast Asia. Intelligence analysts estimate that al Qaeda’s operating budget may be only a few million dollars per year, although such estimates are only tentative.

## Terrorist Financing Staff Monograph

We have learned much since 9/11 about how al Qaeda raises, moves, and stores money, but our understanding is still somewhat speculative. The U.S. intelligence community is forced to extrapolate from current information to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Detainees have confirmed the basic sources of al Qaeda funding and methods of moving money, and have provided insights into changes in al Qaeda's financing since 9/11. Moreover, al Qaeda adapts quickly and effectively, creating new difficulties in understanding its financial picture. Intelligence challenges remain and are likely to continue, although the picture is clearer today than ever before. As al Qaeda becomes more diffuse—or becomes essentially indistinguishable from a larger global jihadist movement—the very concept of al Qaeda financing may have to be reconsidered. Rather than the al Qaeda model of a single organization raising money that is then funneled through a central source, we may find we are contending with an array of loosely affiliated groups, each raising funds on its own initiative.