

## Chapter 3

# Government Efforts Before and After the September 11 Attacks

This chapter discusses the U.S. government terrorist financing efforts before September 11, and describes and assesses our current efforts. As in other areas of counterterrorism, the government has poured vastly more resources and attention to combating terrorist financing since the attacks, and has made great strides in a difficult area.

### ***Before the September 11 Attacks***

Notwithstanding the government's efforts to choke off Bin Ladin's finances before 9/11, on the eve of the September 11 attacks the CIA judged that Bin Ladin's cash flow was "steady and secure."<sup>19</sup> Although fund-raising was somewhat cyclical, al Qaeda had enough money to operate its network of Afghan training camps, support the families of its members, pay an estimated \$10–20 million to the Taliban and its officials, and fund terrorist operations.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Domestic intelligence and law enforcement***

Before September 11, FBI street agents in a number of field offices gathered intelligence on a significant number of suspect terrorist-financing organizations. These FBI offices, despite setbacks and bureaucratic inefficiencies, had been able to gain a basic understanding of some of the largest and most problematic terrorist-financing conspiracies that have since been identified. The agents understood that there were extremist organizations operating within the United States supporting a global Islamic jihad movement. They did not know the degree to which these extremist groups were associated with al Qaeda, and it was unclear whether any of these groups were sending money to al Qaeda. The FBI operated a web of informants, conducted electronic surveillance, and engaged in other investigative activities. Numerous field offices, including New York, Chicago, Detroit, San Diego, and Minneapolis, had significant intelligence investigations into groups that appeared to be raising money for foreign jihadists or other radical Islamist groups. Many of these groups appeared to the FBI to have had some connections either to al Qaeda or to Usama Bin Ladin.

The FBI was hampered by an inability to develop an endgame; its agents continued to gather intelligence with little hope that they would be able to make a criminal case or otherwise disrupt an operation. Making a case in terrorist financing was certainly as if not

---

<sup>19</sup> Intelligence report, 29 August 2001. Commission staff has seen no evidence that would contradict the CIA's assessment.

<sup>20</sup> Commission staff, in researching this chapter, conducted a comprehensive review of government materials on terrorist financing from essentially every law enforcement, intelligence and policy agency involved in the effort. This review included interviews of current and former government personnel, from intelligence analysts and street agents, up to and including members of the cabinet.

more difficult than in other similarly complex international financial criminal investigations. The money inevitably moved overseas—and once that occurred, the agents were at a dead end. Financial investigations depend on access to financial records. This usually requires a formal legal request, typically through a previously negotiated mutual legal assistance treaty (MLAT), or an informal request to a foreign government security service through the FBI’s legal attaché (Legat) responsible for the relevant country. The United States rarely had mutual legal assistance treaties with the countries holding the most important evidence; and when agents could make an MLAT request, the process was slow and sometimes took years to get results. In addition, an MLAT request required the existence of a criminal investigation. Because the vast majority of FBI terrorist-financing investigations involved intelligence, not crimes, agents could not avail themselves of even this imperfect vehicle for accessing critical foreign information. Informal requests were frequently ignored, even when made of U.S. allies in important cases. Moreover, simply to make a request required that the agents disclose the target and the nature of the evidence. The risk of potential compromise was great, and most agents were not willing to take the risk against such a speculative outcome. Obtaining foreign financial records thus was often a practical impossibility.

As was true in other areas of counterterrorism, agents perceived themselves as being stymied by rules regarding the commingling of intelligence and criminal cases. Chicago intelligence investigators looking at a Hamas subject thought, for example, that opening a criminal case precluded their ability to obtain approvals from the Justice Department for a FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) warrant to tap telephones. The agents believed that the Justice Department would think that the request under FISA would appear to be simply a pretext to further the criminal case.<sup>21</sup> No agents wanted to block themselves from using what could be the most productive investigative tool they had—FISA—so criminal investigations were not opened and potential criminal charges were not seriously contemplated.

Some agents also hesitated because of the nature of the cases. Indicting or even investigating an Islamic charity or group of high-profile Middle Easterners required special sensitivity. Fears of selective prosecution or inappropriate ethnic profiling were always a consideration in going after a high-profile and sensitive target. Certainly, the evidence had to be strong before a prosecution would be considered. As one highly experienced prosecutor told the Commission staff, if the FBI had aggressively targeted religious charities before 9/11, it would have ultimately had to explain its actions before a Senate committee.

Lastly, the legal tools in terrorist financing were largely new, untested, and unfamiliar to field agents and prosecutors in U.S. Attorney’s offices. Congress in 1996 had made it a crime to provide “material support” to foreign terrorist organizations.<sup>22</sup> Before the

---

<sup>21</sup> The actual procedures were somewhat different than the agent’s perceptions, however. See the 9/11 Commission, Final Report, at 78 to 80, and accompanying footnotes, for a discussion of the issue.

<sup>22</sup> 18 U.S.C. Section 2339B makes it a crime to provide “material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization.” The secretary of state designates foreign terrorist organizations in consultation with the secretary of the treasury and the attorney general.

enactment of this statute, prosecuting a financial supporter of terrorism required tracing donor funds to a particular act of terrorism—a practical impossibility. Under the 1996 law, the prosecutor had only to prove that the defendant had contributed something of value to an organization that had been named by the secretary of state, after a formal process, as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Unfortunately, al Qaeda was not named an FTO until 1999, so criminal prosecution could not be considered earlier. Even then, there was little impetus to focus on prosecuting material support cases or committing resources to train prosecutors and agents to use the new statutory powers. As a result, the prospect of bringing a criminal case charging terrorist financing seemed unrealistic to field agents.

It was far easier for agents to find a minor charge on which to convict a suspect, thereby ultimately immobilizing and disrupting the operation. This strategy was used in San Diego in 1999, for example; knowing that individuals may have been supporting a specific terrorist group, the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of California developed a case charging the individuals with relatively low-level fraud. This prosecution effectively disrupted the operation. More often, however, agents knew that it would have been hard to persuade a busy prosecutor to bring a case on low-level fraud or minor money-laundering crimes. If the prosecutors knew the classified intelligence underlying the case, the agents might have had a better shot at convincing them. But sharing that intelligence was difficult, and required approval from FBI headquarters and notice to OIPR. Additionally, some of these low-level crimes carried no jail time, and most agents did not think prosecution for a crime ultimately ending in a probationary sentence would have been sufficient to disrupt an ongoing funding operation.

On a national level, the FBI never gained a systematic or strategic understanding of the nature and extent of the jihadist or al Qaeda fund-raising problem within the United States. The FBI did not understand its role in assisting national policy coordination and failed to provide intelligence to government policymakers. For example, shortly after the East Africa embassy bombings in 1998, a staff member of the National Security Council was assigned the task of coordinating government resources in the hunt for Bin Ladin's finances and ensuring effective interagency coordination of the issue. The NSC wanted the FBI to produce an assessment of possible al Qaeda fund-raising in the United States by al Qaeda supporters, but the FBI shared little information regarding Usama Bin Ladin or al Qaeda. The NSC therefore concluded that the FBI did not have relevant information.

The problem stemmed in part from the FBI's failure to create high-quality analytic products on al Qaeda financing or an effective system for storing, searching, or retrieving information of intelligence value contained in the investigative files of various field offices.<sup>23</sup> There was very little finished intelligence that FBI program managers could use to show trends, estimate the extent of the problem, or distribute to policymakers or other agencies.

---

<sup>23</sup> The Commission staff, in interviews with field agents and in searching the FBI's automated case-tracking system, found a treasure trove of information regarding suspected terrorist fund-raising organizations in the United States, yet none of this information was readily accessible.

The FBI lacked a headquarters unit focused on terrorist financing. According to the then-head of its Counterterrorism Division, the FBI considered setting up such a unit prior to 9/11. However, the FBI viewed terrorist-financing cases as too difficult to make. It also believed that fighting terrorist financing would have little impact, since most terrorist acts were cheap. As a result, the issue was left to the FBI's general counterterrorism program office. Those agents, overworked and focusing on the day-to-day approvals and oversight of the entire FBI counterterrorism program, had neither the time nor the expertise to wade through reports, talk to case agents, or focus on the terrorist-financing problem.

For its part, the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice also lacked a national program for prosecuting terrorist-financing cases, under the 1996 "material support" statute or otherwise. The DOJ's Terrorism and Violent Crime Section (TVCS) had played a role in drafting the material support statute and took the lead in developing the administrative record to support the first round of FTO designations in 1997. After such designations began to be made, TVCS worked on developing a program to use the 1996 statute, but it had little practical success before 9/11.

The fundamental problem that doomed efforts to develop a program to prosecute terrorist fund-raising cases was that DOJ prosecutors lacked a systematic way to learn of evidence of prosecutable crimes in the FBI's intelligence files. The prosecutors simply did not have access to these files because of "the wall." Although the attorney general's 1995 guidelines required the FBI to pass to the Criminal Division intelligence information indicating potential past, current, or future violations of federal law, the FBI almost never did so with respect to terrorist fund-raising matters. Lacking access to the relevant FBI investigations, the TVCS made some efforts to investigate cases on its own, including a cooperative effort with a foreign service to probe potential Hamas fund-raising in the United States. These initiatives took a great deal of time and effort and did not produce any solid criminal leads. As a small section with many responsibilities, the TVCS had insufficient personnel for the resource-intensive task of investigating terrorist financing.

The wall may, in fact, have created a disincentive for FBI intelligence agents to share evidence of prosecutable crimes with criminal prosecutors. One experienced prosecutor believed that it would have violated every bone in their bodies for these agents—who were evaluated in large part on the number and quality of their FISA investigations—to share information with the Criminal Division and thereby jeopardize the continuing viability of a successful intelligence investigation. Another experienced prosecutor expressed the view that FBI agents were focused on potential violent threats and did not think the uncertain prospect of bringing a fund-raising case justified the risk of losing a FISA investigation that might locate terrorist operatives. In any event, the FBI and DOJ's relationship regarding terrorist financing was dysfunctional; FBI agents rarely shared information of potentially prosecutable crimes with DOJ prosecutors, who, therefore, could play no role in trying to develop a strategy to disrupt the fund-raising operations.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Richard Clarke of the NSC, who was interested in terrorist fund-raising in the United States, expressed concern about the lack of terrorist fund-raising prosecutions to the chief of the TVCS. Clarke actually brought to a meeting material he had printed off the Internet indicating extremists were soliciting support in

In early May 2000, in response to an inquiry from the NSC's Richard Clarke, a TVCS attorney drew up a detailed proposal for developing a program to prosecute terrorist-financing cases, providing a sophisticated analysis of the relevant legal and practical considerations. The memorandum pointed out that the "vast majority" of the FBI's terrorist-financing investigations were being run as intelligence investigations, and contended that the FBI gave preference to intelligence equities at the expense of the criminal when the two overlapped. To circumvent this problem, the memo proposed the creation of a unit to identify and pursue potential fund-raising matters as criminal rather than intelligence investigations, and described a systematic methodology to investigate and prosecute domestic fund-raisers for foreign terrorist organizations.

The memorandum had no effect; no resources were allocated to pursue the proposal, and it was not implemented. The FBI continued its intelligence investigations, and the criminal prosecutors largely sat on the sidelines.

Most fundamentally, the domestic strategy for combating terrorist financing within the United States never had any sense of urgency. The FBI investigations lacked an endgame. FBI agents in the field had no strategic intelligence that would have led them to believe that any of the fund-raising groups posed a direct domestic threat, so there was no push to disrupt their activities. Without access to the intelligence files, prosecutors had no ability to build criminal cases, and the DOJ was doing little on a practical level to change the situation. As a result, FBI intelligence agents merely kept tabs on the activities of suspected jihadist fund-raisers, even as millions of dollars flowed overseas.

### ***U.S. foreign intelligence collection and analysis***

As we note in chapter 2, the CIA's understanding of Usama Bin Ladin and al Qaeda before the September 11 attacks was incomplete. The intelligence reporting on the nature of his wealth was largely speculative, and sourced to general opinion in the Saudi business community.<sup>25</sup>

The intelligence community learned the reality only after White House-level prodding. In 1999 Vice President Al Gore spoke to Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah during a visit to Washington, DC about isolating and disrupting Bin Ladin's financial network. The two leaders agreed to set up a meeting on this issue between U.S. counterterrorism experts and high-ranking Saudi officials. As a result there were two NSC-initiated trips to Saudi Arabia, in 1999 and 2000. During these trips NSC, Treasury, and intelligence representatives spoke with Saudi officials, and later interviewed members of the Bin Ladin family, about Usama's inheritance. They learned that the Bin Ladin family had sold Usama's share of the inheritance and, at the direction of the Saudi government, placed the money into a specified account, which was then frozen by the Saudi

---

the United States and asked the TVCS chief what the DOJ was doing about the problem. The answer was, unfortunately, not much.

<sup>25</sup> For example, a 1998 intelligence report acknowledges that the CIA did not know the exact state of Bin Ladin's personal wealth, although it cited his inheritance as \$300 million.

government in 1994. The urban legend that Bin Ladin was a financier with a fortune of several hundred million dollars was nevertheless hard to shake, and U.S. government intelligence documents even after the September 11 attacks sometimes referred to him as such.

The lack of specific intelligence was a source of frustration to policymakers. As the NSC's Richard Clarke testified to the Senate Banking Committee in 2003:

The questions we asked then [in 1995] of the CIA were never answered—and we asked them for six years: how much money does it cost to be al Qaeda? What's their annual operating budget? Where do they get their money? Where do they stash their money? Where do they move their money? How? Those questions we asked from the White House at high levels for five or six years were never answered because, according to the intelligence community, it was too hard.<sup>26</sup>

The CIA's response to Clarke's criticism was that terrorist financing was an extraordinarily hard target and that, given the legal and policy limitations on covert action against banks during this period, there was little utility in simply collecting intelligence on terrorist financing.

The CIA obtained a very general understanding of how al Qaeda raised money. It knew relatively early on, for example, about the loose affiliation of financial institutions, businesses, and wealthy individuals who supported extremist Islamic activities. It also understood that nongovernmental agencies (NGOs) and Saudi-based charities played a role in funding al Qaeda and moving terrorist-related money. The problem, however, was that the government could not disrupt funding flows, through either covert action or economic sanctions, because the information was not specific enough. The CIA had intelligence reporting on Sudan and the purported businesses Bin Ladin owned there, but by the time of the East Africa embassy bombings this information was dated and not useful. Much of the early reporting on al Qaeda's financial situation and structure came from a single source, a former al Qaeda operative, who walked into the U.S. Embassy in Eritrea in 1996.

CIA devoted few resources to collecting the types of strategic financial intelligence that policymakers were looking for, or that would have informed the larger counterterrorism strategy. The CIA's virtual station—ALEC station—was originally named CTC-TFL (Counter Terrorism Center - Terrorist Financial Links), reflecting the CIA's early belief that Bin Ladin was simply a terrorist financier, as opposed to someone who actually planned and conducted operations. However, the intelligence reporting was so limited that one CIA intelligence analyst told Commission staff that, unassisted, he could read

---

<sup>26</sup> Clarke testimony before the Senate Banking Committee, Oct. 22, 2003; see also Clarke testimony to the Congressional Joint Inquiry. Contemporaneous documents support Clarke's recollection concerning his frustration. For example in November 1998, Clark wrote that four years after the NSC first asked the CIA to track down UBL's finances, the CIA can only guess at the main sources of Bin Ladin's budget, where he parks his money, and how he moves it.

and digest the universe of intelligence reporting on al Qaeda financial issues in the three years prior to the September 11 attacks. Another person assigned to ALEC station told the Commission staff that while its original name may have been Terrorist Financial Links, the station appeared to him to do everything but terrorist financing. Any intelligence it had on terrorist financing appeared to have been collected collaterally, as a consequence of gathering other intelligence. According to one witness, this approach stemmed in large part from the chief of ALEC station, who did not believe that simply following the money from point A to point B revealed much about the terrorists' plans and intentions. As a result, terrorist financing received very little emphasis. Another witness recalled that ALEC station made some effort to gather intelligence on al Qaeda financing, but it proved to be too hard a target, the CIA had too few sources, and, as a result, little quality intelligence was produced.

Some attributed the problem to the CIA's separation of terrorist-financing analysis from other counterterrorism activities. Within the Directorate of Intelligence, a group was devoted to the analysis of all financial issues, including terrorist financing. Called the Office of Transnational Issues (OTI), Illicit Transaction Groups (ITG), it dealt with an array of issues besides terrorist financing, including drug trafficking, drug money laundering, alien smuggling, sanctions, and corruption. The ITG was not part of the CTC, and rotated only a single analyst to the CTC. Moreover, ITG analysts were separated from the operational side of terrorist financing at the CTC, which planned operations against banks and financial facilitators. Members of the NSC staff stressed that this structure was defective because there was almost no intersection between those who understood financial issues and those who understood terrorism. As a result, the NSC was forced to try to educate two different groups on the issues. Inevitable turf wars also resulted.

Before 9/11, the National Security Agency had a handful of people working on terrorist-financing issues. The terrorist-financing group had no foreign-language capability. As a result, its collection had to focus on targets most likely to use the English language. The NSA's effectiveness was limited by sparse lead information from other elements of the intelligence community on financing and, like the rest of the intelligence community, by the wall between intelligence and law enforcement that gave it only limited access to law enforcement information.

One possible solution to these weaknesses in the intelligence community was the proposed all-source terrorist financing intelligence analysis center at Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), called the Foreign Terrorist Asset Tracking Center (FTATC), which had been recommended in 2000 by the National Commission on Terrorism (the so-called Bremer Commission). The NSC spearheaded efforts to create the FTATC, but bureaucratic delays and resistance by Treasury and CIA officials delayed its implementation until after the September 11 attacks. The delays resulted from the CIA's belief that the FTATC would duplicate some of its functions, the CIA's unwillingness to host the center temporarily until OFAC could accommodate it, and Treasury's reluctance to create a secure facility to host the center and allow OFAC direct access to intelligence.

The government also considered possible economic disruption, to be effected by targeting Bin Ladin's financial resources or by intercepting money couriers or hawaladars who handled Bin Ladin's money.

There is little doubt that the CIA had the authority to use methods of covert disruption to go after cash couriers or hawaladars. Ultimately it was unsuccessful in doing so, either because it was unable to identify specific useful targets or because such disruption was judged to be too dangerous.

### ***Economic and diplomatic efforts***

Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control had an early interest in searching out and freezing Bin Ladin assets. Its primary tool, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), allows the president to designate individuals and entities as a threat to the United States and thereby freeze their assets and block their transactions. OFAC, for example, had long experience in freezing assets associated with Libya and Cuba. In the 1990s the government began to use these powers in a different, more innovative way, to go after nonstate actors. It first imposed sanctions against persons and entities interfering with the Middle East peace process (MEPP) and then against other nonstate threats, such as the Cali, Colombia, narcotics-trafficking cartel. OFAC personnel were interested in trying to find and freeze Bin Ladin's assets, but to do so required either a presidential designation of Bin Ladin or the discovery of a link between Bin Ladin and someone named for disrupting the MEPP. Efforts were made before the East Africa bombings to link Bin Ladin to the names on the MEPP list, but their lack of usable intelligence on the issue hampered OFAC analysts. OFAC did not collect its own intelligence; rather, it relied on the intelligence community to collect and often analyze the evidence, which it then used to make designations.

After the East Africa bombings in August 1998, President Clinton formally designated Usama Bin Ladin and al Qaeda as subject to the sanctions available under the IEEPA program, giving OFAC the ability to search for and freeze any of their assets within the U.S. or in the possession or control of U.S. persons. OFAC had little specific information to go on, however, and few funds were frozen.<sup>27</sup> The futility of this effort is attributed to the lack of usable intelligence, OFAC's reluctance to rely on what classified information there was, and Bin Ladin's transfer of most of his assets out of the formal financial system by that time. Even if OFAC had received better intelligence from the intelligence community, it could have taken little effective action. OFAC has authority over only U.S. persons (individuals and entities), wherever located. Because Al Qaeda money flows depended on an informal network of hawalas and Islamic institutions moving money from Gulf supporters to Afghanistan, these funds would stay outside the U.S. formal financial system.

---

<sup>27</sup> OFAC did freeze accounts belonging to Salah Idris, the owner of the Al-Shifa facility bombed in response to the East Africa embassy bombings. Idris filed suit against his bank and OFAC, and OFAC subsequently authorized the unfreezing of those accounts.



The Taliban was designated by the president under the IEEPA in July 1999 for harboring Usama Bin Ladin and al Qaeda. Here, OFAC experienced better success against a more stationary target: it blocked more than \$34 million in Taliban assets held in U.S. banks, mostly consisting of assets of Afghanistan's central bank and national airline. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York's holdings of more than \$215 million in gold and \$2 million in demand deposits from the Afghan central bank were also blocked.

With the exception of some limited attempts by Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) to match classified information with reports filed by banks, U.S. financial institutions and Treasury regulators focused on finding and deterring or disrupting the vast flows of U.S. currency generated by drug trafficking and by high-level international fraud. Large-scale scandals, such the use of the Bank of New York by Russian money launderers to move millions of dollars out of Russia, captured the attention of the Department of the Treasury and Congress. As a result, little attention was paid to terrorist financing.<sup>28</sup>

A number of significant anti-money-laundering initiatives failed to gain traction during this time. One, the Money Laundering Control Act of 2000, championed by Treasury at the close of the Clinton administration, proposed controls on foreign banks with accounts in the United States. These accounts had been shown to be significant unregulated gateways into the U.S. financial system. The legislation had broad bipartisan support in the House of Representatives but foundered in the Senate Banking Committee, whose chair opposed further regulation of banks.

Additionally, the Treasury Department and the financial regulators had proposed draft regulations in 1999, under the rubric of "know your customer" requirements. Broadly, these regulations required a bank to know the beneficial owner of the money and the sources of the money flowing through the owner's accounts, and to take reasonable steps to determine this information. This proposal caused such a storm of controversy—Treasury received more than 200,000 negative comments and fierce resistance from the financial services industry—that it was abandoned. Congress even considered rolling back the money-laundering controls then in place. As a result, Treasury regulators hesitated to move forward with future directives.

Another foundering financial regulation involved "money services businesses" (MSBs) loosely defined as check cashers, businesses involved in wiring money, and those selling money orders and traveler's checks. It would also have covered informal movers of money, such as hawaladars and other neighborhood shops that could wire money to a foreign country for a fee. These businesses were unregulated for money laundering and posed a huge vulnerability: criminals shut out of the banking system by regulatory controls could easily turn to these industries to move and launder criminal proceeds. Investigators had seen a significant increase in the use of these casual money remitters. Drug traffickers in particular took advantage of this relatively inexpensive and risk-free method of moving money. A study commissioned by FinCEN in 1997 recognized the

---

<sup>28</sup> The 2001 National Money Laundering Strategy, for example, issued by Treasury in September 2001, does not discuss terrorist financing in any of its 50 pages.

vulnerability of MSBs to money laundering. In 1994 Congress directed Treasury to regulate these businesses to discourage money laundering, but Treasury failed until after 9/11 to implement regulations that would have required the businesses to register with the government and report activity judged to be suspicious.<sup>29</sup>

On the diplomatic front, the State Department formally designated al Qaeda in October 1999 as a “foreign terrorist organization.” This designation allowed the criminal prosecution of any U.S. person proven to be materially supporting the organization, required U.S. banks to block its funds, and denied U.S. visas to aliens associated with it. Additionally, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSCR 1267 on October 15, 1999, calling for the Taliban to surrender Bin Ladin or face a U.S.-style international freeze of assets and transactions. The resolution provided a 30-day period before sanctions would take effect, however, allowing al Qaeda operatives to repatriate funds from banks in the United Kingdom and Germany to Afghanistan. The United Nations adopted a second resolution, UNSCR 1333, against the Taliban and Usama Bin Ladin on December 19, 2000. These sanctions brought official international censure, but were easily circumvented. Other than this UN action, there was no multilateral mechanism to encourage countries to outlaw terrorist financing or ensure that their financial systems were not being used as conduits for terrorists.<sup>30</sup> The effect, according to a State Department assessment, was to leave the Middle East vulnerable to the exploitation of its financial systems because of generally weak or nonexistent financial controls.

Before the September 11 attacks, the Saudi government resisted cooperating with the United States on the al Qaeda financing problem, although the U.S. government did not make this issue a priority or provide the Saudis with actionable intelligence about al Qaeda fund-raising in the Kingdom. Despite high-level intervention by the U.S. government in early 1997, the Saudis universally refused to allow U.S. personnel access to al Qaeda’s senior financial figure, al-Ghazi Madani al Tayyib, who had turned himself in to Saudi authorities. Two NSC-led trips to Saudi Arabia, while producing useful intelligence about Bin Ladin’s personal finances, failed to gain any traction on the larger question of al Qaeda’s fund-raising or any commitment to cooperate on terrorist financing. However, the United States did little to prod the Saudis into action; the generalized and nonactionable nature of the existing intelligence made a confrontation

---

<sup>29</sup> Draft regulations did not come out until 1997; a final rule was not issued until 1999, setting the implementation date for December 31, 2001. In the summer of 2001, Treasury announced that it would push back the requirement for registration an additional six months and the requirement for reporting nine months. After the September 11 attacks, Treasury decided to maintain the earlier implementation date.

<sup>30</sup> The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a multilateral government organization dedicated to setting standards, focused on money laundering, particularly as it related to crimes involving vast amounts of illegally gotten money, such as drug trafficking and large-scale fraud. As part of the setting of standards, FATF engaged in a concentrated effort to assess the world’s anti-money-laundering efforts and “named and shamed” jurisdictions that failed to establish minimum safeguards by publicly listing them and instituting economic sanctions against them. Although in December 1999 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Convention for the Suppression of Financing Terrorism, which had been proposed by the French and drafted by the G-8 members, the convention did not enter into force until April 2002.

difficult.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, other issues, such as supporting the Middle East peace process, ensuring the steady flow of oil, cutting off support to the Taliban, and assisting in the containment of Iraq, took primacy on the U.S.-Saudi bilateral agenda.

Saudi Arabia had not enforced its professed money-laundering regulations and, like most of the countries in the Middle East, it had enacted no other controls on the movement of money. Moreover, it had delegated the regulation of charities to the government's religious establishment and did little to address the problem of al Qaeda fund-raising in the Kingdom.

The United Arab Emirates, the financial center for the Gulf area, also had a reputation for being "wide open," with few regulations on the control of money and a woefully inadequate anti-money-laundering program.<sup>32</sup> The UAE system had been a concern of U.S. policymakers long before the 9/11 attacks, and they directly raised their concerns with UAE officials. The UAE had no money-laundering law, although at U.S. urging in 1999 it started drafting one, which was not finalized until after 9/11. Although the UAE was aware that terrorists and other international criminals had laundered money through the UAE, and that it was the center for hawala and courier operations, it did little to address the problem. Additionally, the United States expressed its concern about UAE support for Ariana Airlines and the movement of Bin Ladin funds through Dubai. Shortly before the September 11 attacks, the departing U.S. ambassador to the UAE warned senior officials in the Emirates that they needed to move forward on money-laundering legislation, so as not to be placed on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) "blacklist" of countries not fully complying with international standards in this area. These warnings had no discernible effect.

### ***Intergovernmental coordination and policy development***

NSC Senior Director Richard Clarke considered terrorist financing important, and he established an NSC-led interagency group on terrorist financing after the East Africa embassy bombings. This group consisted of representatives from the NSC, Treasury, the CIA, the FBI, and State and was initially focused on determining and locating Bin Ladin's purported wealth. After interagency visits to Saudi Arabia in 1999 and 2000, the group succeeded in dispelling the myth that Bin Ladin was funding al Qaeda from his personal fortune. The group also focused on trying to figure out how to stop the flow of funds to Bin Ladin and was concerned about Bin Ladin's apparent ability to raise funds from charities. While the CIA paid more attention to terrorist financing during the interagency group's life span, Clarke was unable to get the FBI to participate

---

<sup>31</sup> State Department memorandum, Nov. 24, 1998 ("We are still far, however, from possessing detailed information that would enable us to approach key Middle Eastern and European government with specific action requests concerning Bin Ladin's financial network").

<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of the money funding the September 11 attacks flowed through the UAE. The fact that Ali Abdul Aziz Ali was able to use an alias or partial name, and show no identification, for five of the six wire transfers from the UAE should come as a surprise to no one.

meaningfully in the interagency process. Responsibility for the problem was dispersed among a myriad of agencies, each working independently and cooperating, if at all, on an ad hoc and episodic basis.

### ***Where Are We Now?***

Since September 11 the world has indeed changed, and nowhere more than in the area of countering terrorist financing. The attacks galvanized the world community and an international sanctions regime against terrorists and their supporters was established, with the United States leading the way with a vigorous effort to freeze their assets. With an understanding of the nature of the threat, both the intelligence and law enforcement communities established significant entities to focus on and bring expertise to this area. These new entities are led by experienced individuals committed to the issue who know how to use money flows to identify and locate unknown associates of known terrorists. They are supported by the leadership within their respective agencies, who have provided them significant resources and authority to do the job. A broad and active interagency mechanism was established and new legal provisions against terrorist financing were enacted, while many of the legal obstacles hampering terrorist-financing investigations were stripped away.

### ***Domestic intelligence and law enforcement***

In the days after the September 11 attacks, the FBI set up the Financial Review Group (FRG) to bring order to a chaotic financial analysis of the attacks, in which every FBI field office conducted its own investigation as though it were the originating office. The initial goals of the FRG were to investigate the September 11 plot and look for an al Qaeda support mechanism that could sustain a second attack. All relevant federal agencies, including Customs, the Internal Revenue Service, the banking regulators, FinCEN, and OFAC, agreed to staff the FRG and work together. The FRG brought in agents with financial investigative expertise from around the country. The local field offices continued their investigations, but provided everything they learned to the FRG for coordination.

The FRG, ultimately renamed the Terrorist Financing Operations Section (TFOS) and located in the FBI's counterterrorism division, is the FBI's national program office for terrorist financing. The FBI believes that TFOS allows for (1) consistency of financial investigations and the assurance that every major terrorism case will have a financial investigative component; (2) the establishment of effective working relationships with international banking, law enforcement, and intelligence communities;<sup>33</sup> (3) the development of a real-time financial tracking capability, resting in large part on the FBI's extensive relationships with the financial community, which has transformed financial investigations from the traditional, methodical, slow-paced analysis to a tool that can

---

<sup>33</sup> In this regard, one experienced criminal prosecutor said TFOS does a very good job at outreach to the financial community because its agents "speak the language" of accountants and auditors.

provide near real-time information in urgent situations;<sup>34</sup> and (4) the formation of teams that can be sent to field offices to bolster document-intensive financial investigations and provide guidance and leadership on conducting financial investigations. Significantly, it is the first time a single office has been given responsibility for coordinating the FBI's terrorist-financing efforts.

TFOS and the FBI still need to improve their abilities to systematically gather and analyze the information developed in their investigations and create high-quality analytic products and finished intelligence. As of spring 2004, the FBI has generated very little quality finished intelligence in the area of al Qaeda financing. The FBI's well-documented efforts to create an analytical career track and enhance its analytical capabilities are sorely needed in this area.<sup>35</sup> TFOS must also establish its own formal system for tracking and evaluating the extent of terrorist fund-raising by various groups in the United States. TFOS has created a program management unit responsible for, among other things, evaluating the extent and scope of the terrorist-financing problem in the United States. Such an effort is plainly needed to help guide the allocation of law enforcement resources and to help inform policymakers.

The individual FBI field offices retain primary responsibility for conducting terrorist-financing investigations, but TFOS provides field agents with resources not previously available as well as coherent programmatic leadership. To help integrate the field offices' efforts with TFOS, each field office has a terrorist-financing coordinator who serves as a liaison with headquarters and a resource to fellow field agents. As of spring 2004, this program is in its early stages, but it is a positive step toward a truly national effort.

The Department of Justice also has dramatically increased its focused efforts to investigate and disrupt terrorist financing in the United States. The Terrorism and Violent Crimes Section, using resources from various parts of the DOJ (including prosecutors from U.S. Attorney's offices, the Criminal Tax Section, and other sections of the Criminal Division), formed a unit to implement an aggressive program of prosecuting terrorist-financing cases. That unit ultimately evolved into a distinct Terrorist Financing Unit within the DOJ's Counterterrorism Section (CTS). The Terrorist Financing Unit coordinates and pursues terrorist-financing criminal investigations around the country and provides support and guidance to U.S. Attorney's offices on terrorist-financing issues.

---

<sup>34</sup> TFOS has made extraordinary strides in this area, including a great leap forward in the use of sophisticated software to help locate terrorist suspects in urgent situations.

<sup>35</sup> Some of the FBI's post-9/11 efforts in this area have been disappointing, in part because of a disconnect between the FBI's new analytical operation and TFOS. For example, a December 2002 analytical document titled "Al-Qaida's US Financial Network Broad and Adaptable" was distributed to FBI field offices and Legats worldwide. The then-head of TFOS told Commission staff that this piece was prepared by FBI analysts entirely without any involvement of TFOS and that its conclusion, as reflected in the title, was dramatically overstated and did not reflect a law enforcement judgment about what the evidence actually showed concerning any Al Qaeda financing network in the United States. Since December 2002, the FBI has taken steps to ensure analytical product about terrorist financing not be distributed without TFOS involvement.

In stark contrast to the dysfunctional relationship between the FBI and DOJ that plagued them before 9/11, the two entities now seem to be working cooperatively. The leadership of TFOS praises the CTS Terrorist Financing Unit for its unwavering support. TFOS leadership also believes that the U.S. Attorney's offices have been supportive and that the CTS Terrorist Financing Unit has been helpful in resolving any issues that have arisen between FBI field offices and U.S. Attorney's offices. The head of the CTS Terrorist Financing Unit identifies TFOS, as well as the FBI's post-9/11 International Terrorism Operating Section, as valuable allies, and describes the enthusiasm of these sections for criminal prosecutions as a "sea change" from the FBI's recalcitrance before 9/11.

Fundamentally, the FBI now understands that its terrorist fund-raising investigations must have an endgame. TFOS, in particular, with its financial investigative skills and prosecutorial mind-set, is a strong ally of the DOJ's terrorist-financing prosecutors. Generally, the demise of "the wall" has facilitated the flow of terrorist-financing information between the FBI and the DOJ's criminal prosecutors. This sharing of information has addressed the problems that stymied the DOJ before 9/11. Still, information-sharing problems arise in the field, and the DOJ must at times encourage its prosecutors to fight for access to classified FBI information.

Despite these improvements, prosecuting terrorist-financing cases continues to present vexing problems for prosecutors and agents. Although some within the DOJ argue that the average terrorist fund-raising case is no harder to investigate and prosecute than any complex white-collar criminal case,<sup>36</sup> sophisticated jihadist fund-raising operations, especially those involving international NGOs that support both humanitarian and militant causes, are generally very difficult to penetrate and prosecute. Investigating a material support case usually requires obtaining records from another country to show the destination of the money, which itself is often very difficult, as discussed above. Even with access to the relevant records, tying the funds to a specific criminal act or a designated terrorist group is extraordinarily difficult. Funds are often dispersed overseas in cash, making them virtually impossible to trace.

Unraveling terrorist-financing schemes can be even more complicated because the same groups that finance terror and jihad often provide real humanitarian relief as well. The people running these groups believe in charity, practice it, and keep voluminous records of it, thereby serving to conceal their illicit fund-raising activities more effectively. Prosecutors who fail to acknowledge that the corrupt NGOs do provide charity will likely be confronted with the beneficiaries of the charity lining up in the courtroom to testify for the defendant.

Even if money can be traced to an illicit activity or a designated group, proving the U.S. donors or NGOs knew where the money was going can also be extraordinarily difficult.

---

<sup>36</sup> It may well be that cases involving Hamas or certain other terrorist groups are easier to prosecute because the fund-raisers are more open about supporting causes that have legitimacy in certain circles and, therefore, are more likely to make incriminating comments on wiretaps or to informants. Anyone raising money in the United States for al Qaeda or groups affiliated with al Qaeda is likely to be extremely secretive and do everything possible to ensure the funds cannot be traced back to him or her.

Although there may be substantial grounds for suspicion, proving the level of knowledge required in a criminal case poses significant problems. Notwithstanding this difficulty, the DOJ appears to be committed to aggressive prosecution of terrorist fund-raisers in the United States, believing that such prosecutions can deter more fund-raising and disrupt ongoing fund-raising operations. The best cases may well require luck, fruitful electronic surveillance or a well-placed informant, or even the prosecution of the suspect organization for a non-terrorism-related charge such as fraud or tax evasion. This strategy can be effective in disrupting suspected terrorist fund-raisers, but can also lead to accusations of selective prosecution and oppression of Muslim charities.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the FBI, other agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the IRS's Criminal Investigative Division, play a role in investigating terrorist financing through their participation in the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). The FBI is the lead agency on terrorist-financing investigations through the FBI-led JTTF structure.<sup>38</sup> Commission staff believes this is appropriate. Terrorist-financing investigations are inextricably intertwined with overall terrorism enforcement; a fund-raising investigation may give rise to evidence of a group poised to commit a terrorist act, or the investigation of a terrorist group will necessarily use financial leads to further its investigation. One agency needs to be in charge of the entire counterterrorism effort and other agencies can still contribute expertise in particular cases through the JTTF. Of course, giving the FBI the lead requires continuing vigilance to ensure that the FBI properly shares information and willingly coordinates with its JTTF partners.

### ***U.S. foreign intelligence collection and analysis***

The day after the September 11 attacks, the CIA began beefing up its effort on terrorist financing and by mid-month had created a new section dedicated to terrorist financing, whose purpose was to create long-term intelligence capacity in this area. It is staffed with personnel from the FBI, NSA, and DoD and it absorbed the CIA intelligence analysts working on terrorist-financing issues in the Office of Transnational Issues, thereby correcting the perceived structural defect previously identified. This new section's mission is to use information about terrorist money to understand their networks, search them out, and disrupt their operations. The CIA has devoted considerable resources to the task, and the effort is led by individuals with extensive expertise in the clandestine movement of money. It appears that the CIA is devoted to developing an institutional and long-term expertise in this area.

---

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 6 (discussing reaction to non-terrorism conviction of the executive director of the Benevolence International Foundation).

<sup>38</sup> This designation occurred in a May 2003 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the secretary of the DHS and the attorney general. The MOU became necessary to resolve turf battles between the FBI and ICE, largely resulting from Operation Green Quest, which began as a U.S. Customs-led initiative to investigate terrorist financing after 9/11 and followed Customs when it moved from Treasury to become part of DHS/ICE. For a report on the success of the MOU, see GAO Report 04-464R, *Investigations of Terrorist Financing, Money Laundering and Other Financial Crimes* (Feb. 20, 2004).

The FBI and CIA report that the information sharing between the FBI and the CIA is excellent, and that FBI personnel assigned to the CTC's new unit have duties indistinguishable from those of the CIA personnel and have complete access to all CIA data systems, subject to a need-to-know requirement. The CIA has access to FBI data as well. The CIA distributes its information to the FBI through criminal information referrals, liaisons at the field-level JTTFs, and interactions between their respective headquarters units.

### ***Economic and diplomatic efforts***

On September 23, 2001, President Bush signed Executive Order 13224 against al Qaeda, Bin Ladin, and associated terrorist groups, freezing any assets belonging to the listed terrorists or their supporters and blocking any economic transactions with them. Thereafter, the U.S. government embarked on a public course of issuing additional lists of designated terrorist supporters—a pattern that continued into the winter of 2002. The goal was to try to deprive the terrorists of money, but this approach also served to assure the general public that action was being taken in the area of terrorist financing and to keep the intelligence and world communities focused on identifying terrorist financiers.

The United States, understanding that an executive order covered only U.S. persons and transactions, pushed at the United Nations for a near-universal system of laws to freeze terrorist assets worldwide. The United Nations Security Council, galvanized into action as a result of the attacks, passed Resolution 1373 on September 28, mandating member nations formulate laws to designate individuals and entities as supporters of terrorism and freeze their assets. In the weeks after 9/11, in an intense effort around the world, more than 100 nations drafted and passed laws addressing terrorist financing or money laundering. Worldwide, more than \$136 billion, including \$36 billion in the United States, has been frozen. Currently, approximately 170 nations have the legal ability to freeze terrorist assets. Moreover, the United States engaged in a broad diplomatic and educational offensive to make other countries aware of some of the basic methods of raising and moving money in support of terrorist activities.

There are significant multilateral norms now in place to set standards for ensuring that terrorists do not use the formal financial system. Chief among these are the efforts of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which, prior to 9/11, had been the multilateral body responsible for setting international standards for the detection and prosecution of money laundering. In the months after 9/11, the FATF expanded its remit to include setting standards for terrorist financing, and made eight recommendations to prevent terrorist financing. These recommendations included, for example, creating the ability to freeze terrorist assets, licensing informal money remitters, and regulating nongovernmental organizations.<sup>39</sup> While setting standards is a necessary exercise, far more will depend on each country's diligently implementing and enforcing these standards.

---

<sup>39</sup> FATF, "Special Recommendations on Terrorist Financing," Oct. 31, 2001 (online at [http://www1.oecd.org/fatf/pdf/SRecTF\\_en/pdf](http://www1.oecd.org/fatf/pdf/SRecTF_en/pdf)); FATF, "Guidance for Financial Institutions in Detecting



As part of the USA PATRIOT Act, Congress enacted financial institution regulations that had been largely rejected before the attacks; many were only tangentially related to terrorist financing. In part, they give the Secretary of the Treasury the power to name countries, institutions, or transactions found to be of primary money-laundering or terrorist-financing concern and implement new requirements that banks more closely scrutinize their relationships with foreign persons and banks. A broader range of industries—insurance companies, money services businesses, broker-dealers, and credit card companies, for example—were potentially subject to a host of new requirements, including reporting suspicious financial activity on the part of their customers to the Treasury Department. Federal Reserve examiners now inspect banks for compliance with antiterrorism directives. As noted in chapter 4, private financial institutions provided, and continue to provide, significant assistance in investigating terrorist groups.

Although Saudi Arabia's cooperation on al Qaeda financing was limited and inconsistent in the first year and a half after the September 11 attacks, the situation changed dramatically after the May 12, 2003, al Qaeda attacks in Riyadh. Saudi leadership, now finally understanding the al Qaeda threat, is by all accounts providing significantly higher levels of cooperation. Much of the Saudi government's efforts understandably focus on killing or capturing terrorist operatives, but the Saudis also have moved against fund-raisers and facilitators, shared intelligence, and enacted financial controls, such as requiring that all charitable donations destined for overseas be administered by the government and banning cash donations in mosques. They have taken significant action against al Haramain, for example, a charity suspected of funneling money to terrorist organizations, and seem prepared to go further. In addition, the Saudis are participating in a joint task force on terrorist financing with the United States, in which U.S. law enforcement agents are working side by side with Saudi security personnel to combat terrorist financing. To further this effort, the Saudis have accepted substantial—and much needed—U.S. training in conducting financial investigations and identifying suspicious financial transactions, help that the Saudis had long refused. Although Saudi Arabia likely remains the best and easiest place for al Qaeda to raise money, the Saudi crackdown appears to have had a real impact in reducing its funding. In addition, the Saudi population may feel that as a result of the attacks against their own people, they should be more cautious in their giving.<sup>40</sup>

The Saudis have demonstrated they can and will act against Saudi financiers of al Qaeda when the United States provides them with actionable intelligence and consistently applies high-level pressure on them to take action. At least until recently, as noted in chapter 7, the Saudis have generally moved slowly, and only after considerable U.S. prodding. Because Saudi Arabia remains the primary source for al Qaeda fund-raising, it is in a better position than the United States to identify the fund-raisers and collect intelligence about their activities. Apparently the Saudis may now be willing to take the

---

Terrorist Financing,” Apr. 24, 2002 (online at [http://www1.oecd.org/fatf/pdf/GuidFIT01\\_en/pdf](http://www1.oecd.org/fatf/pdf/GuidFIT01_en/pdf)); Jaime Caruana and Claes Norgren, “Wipe Out the Treasuries of Terror,” *Financial Times*, Apr. 7, 2004, p.17.

<sup>40</sup> See chapter 7, the case study on al Haramain, and chapter 2, on al Qaeda financing, for more on these issues.

initiative. Certainly, the joint task force, their willingness to accept U.S. training in conducting financial investigations, and their recent successful actions against key facilitators are significant steps in the right direction. Time will tell whether the Saudis follow through on these efforts and accept their responsibility to lead the fight against al Qaeda fund-raising by Saudi sources.

### ***Intergovernmental coordination and policy development***

Terrorist financing is now, and has been since the attacks, the subject of extensive interagency coordination mechanisms involving the intelligence community, law enforcement, Treasury, and State. An NSC-level Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) on Terrorist Financing was established in March 2002 to replace the ad hoc structure that had arisen in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The PCC was chaired by the General Counsel of the Department of the Treasury until he left government service in November 2003. The process, often driven by force of personality rather than by any structural mechanism, appears to have worked well in resolving differing points of view on terrorist-financing policy and operational differences. The key participants in the interagency process, especially the leaders of the CIA and FBI terrorist-financing units, have lavishly praised each other's commitment to cooperation and information sharing. The PCC often was not fully integrated into the United States' broader counterterrorism policy and Saudi relations, however.

### ***An Assessment***

After 9/11, the government, in an attempt to "starve the terrorists of money," engaged in a series of aggressive and high-profile actions to designate terrorist financiers and freeze their money, both in the United States and through the United Nations. Donors and al Qaeda sympathizers, wary of being publicly named and having their assets frozen, may have become more reluctant to provide overt support. The overall or long-term effect of these actions, however, is not clear.

Moreover, these initial designations were undertaken with limited evidence, and some were overbroad, resulting in legal challenges. Faced with having to defend actions in courts that required a higher standard of evidence than was provided by the intelligence that supported the designations in the first place, the United States and the United Nations were forced to "unfreeze" assets (see, generally, chapter 5).

The difficulty, not completely understood by the policymakers when they instituted the freezes, was that the intelligence community "linked" certain entities or individuals to known terrorist groups primarily through common acquaintances, group affiliations, historic relationships, phone communications, and other such contacts. It proved far more difficult to actually trace the money from a suspected entity or individual to the terrorist group, or to otherwise show complicity, as required in defending the designations in court. Intelligence agents, long accustomed to the Cold War reality of collecting intelligence for extended periods of time before public action was necessary, were now

faced with a new demand for intelligence that needed not only to be immediately and publicly acted on but to be defended in court as well. Policymakers, many newly thrust into the world of intelligence, were sometimes surprised to find that intelligence assessments were often supported by information far less reliable than they had presumed.<sup>41</sup>

These early missteps have made other countries unwilling to freeze assets or otherwise act merely on the basis of a U.S. action. Multilateral freezing mechanisms now require waiting periods before money can be frozen, a change that has eliminated the element of surprise and virtually ensured that little money is actually frozen. The worldwide asset freezes have not been adequately enforced and have been easily circumvented, often within weeks, by simple methods.

Treasury officials were forthright in recognizing the difficulty in stopping enough of the money flow to stop terrorist attacks, but argue that such freezes and the prohibition of transactions have other benefits. Designations prevent open fund-raising and assist, for example, in preventing al Qaeda from raising the amounts of money necessary to create the kind of refuge it had in Afghanistan, or from expending the sums necessary to buy or develop a weapon of mass destruction. Moreover, freezing groups or individuals out of the world's financial systems forces them into slow, expensive, and less reliable methods of storing and moving money. Additionally, there is significant diplomatic utility in having the world governments join together to condemn named individuals and groups as terrorists.

A far more nuanced and integrated strategy has since evolved. As the government's understanding of the methods al Qaeda uses to raise, move, and spend money has sharpened, the United States has recognized that measures to counter terrorist financing are among the many tools for understanding terrorist networks, to be used in conjunction with and in close proximity to other types of intelligence. Moreover, these measures, again when closely coordinated with the overall counterterrorism effort, can be used to disrupt terrorist operations and support systems. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies have targeted the relatively small number of financial facilitators—individuals al Qaeda relied on for their ability to raise and deliver money—at the core of al Qaeda's revenue stream (see chapter 2), and appear to have reaped benefits as a result. The death and capture of several important facilitators have decreased the amount of money al Qaeda has raised and have increased the costs and difficulty of raising and moving that money. These captures have additionally provided a windfall of intelligence, which can then be used to continue the disruption.

Some entirely corrupt charities are now completely out of business, with many of their principals killed or captured. Charities that have been identified as likely avenues for

---

<sup>41</sup> Compare Tenet's speech at Georgetown University, Feb. 5, 2004 ("In the intelligence business, you are almost never completely wrong or completely right") with Mueller's testimony to the 9/11 Commission, April 14, 2004, p. 126 ("If there's one concern I have about intelligence, it is that often there are statements made about an uncorroborated source with indirect access and then there is a stating of a particular fact...I think there has to be a balance between the information we get and the foundation of that information").

terrorist financing have seen their donations diminish and their activities come under more scrutiny. Controlling overseas branches of Gulf-area charities remains a complex task, however. The sheer volume of charitable dollars originating in the Gulf region, the nature of charitable giving in the Islamic world, and the austere and uncompromising version of Islam practiced by many Saudis pose a daunting challenge.<sup>42</sup> U.S. efforts have shown that detecting and disrupting the terrorist money among the billions is extremely difficult, even with the best capabilities and intentions.<sup>43</sup>

The May 2003 terrorist attacks in Riyadh, moreover, apparently have contributed to a reduction of funds available to al Qaeda. Increased public scrutiny and public designations of high-profile Gulf-area donors have made other donors cautious. The fight has come to the Saudi homeland, and Saudis and their government (as well as other Gulf-area governments) have come to realize the problems that unfettered financial flows may bring.<sup>44</sup> Although Saudi Arabia has by most accounts become more fully engaged in stopping al Qaeda financial flows, the Kingdom requires considerable technical assistance and must take the initiative in combating terrorist financing, as opposed to merely responding to U.S. requests. The Saudi regime must balance its terrorist-financing efforts, the legitimate charitable relief Saudi charities provide, and the need to maintain its own stability. A critical part of the U.S. strategy to combat terrorist financing must be to monitor, encourage, and nurture Saudi cooperation while simultaneously recognizing that terrorist financing is only one of a number of crucial issues that the U.S. and Saudi governments must address together. Managing this nuanced and complicated relationship will play a critical part in determining the success of U.S. counterterrorism policy for the foreseeable future.

While overall al Qaeda funding has apparently been reduced, it is nevertheless relatively easy to fund terrorist operations. When investigators do not know where to look, the tiny amounts of money needed for deadly operations are impossible to find and stop in a multi-trillion-dollar global economy. The U.S. intelligence community has attacked the problem with imagination and vigor, and cooperation among the world's security services seems to be at unprecedented levels, but terrorist financing remains a notoriously hard target. The small sums involved, al Qaeda's use of decentralized and informal methods of moving funds (including trusted hawaladars and relatively anonymous couriers), and the existence of a cadre of dedicated financial facilitators who raise money from potentially unwitting sources all contribute to a significant and ongoing challenge for the intelligence community for the foreseeable future.

---

<sup>42</sup> See chapters 2 and 7 for a discussion of the role of charities in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>43</sup> The United States perhaps leads the world in its ability to conduct financial investigations, yet often finds itself stymied in doing the financial tracing and analysis necessary to detect terrorist money flows. See generally chapter 6.

<sup>44</sup> As noted in chapter 2, despite numerous allegations about Saudi government complicity in al Qaeda, the Commission has found no persuasive evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior officials within the Saudi government knowingly support or supported al Qaeda. A lack of awareness of the problem and failure to conduct oversight over institutions, however, probably created an environment in which such activity has flourished.

The U.S. financial community and some international financial institutions have generally provided law enforcement and intelligence agencies with extraordinary cooperation, particularly in furnishing information to support quickly developing investigations. Obvious vulnerabilities in the U.S. financial system, such as the largely unchecked use of correspondent or private banking accounts by foreign banks or other high-risk customers, have been corrected. However, no valid financial profile of terrorist financing exists (despite efforts to create one), and the ability of financial institutions to detect terrorist financing without receiving more information from the government remains limited.

Law enforcement investigations often fail to prove the destination and purpose of money transferred across continents in complex transactions, and transactions recorded in a bank statement or a wire transfer say nothing about their source or purpose. Funds are sent overseas through a charity; a fraction of these funds may then be diverted for terrorist or jihadist purposes, often through additional charities and cash transactions. The investigations of the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) and the Global Relief Foundation (GRF) vividly illustrate that even substantial intelligence of ties to terrorist groups can be insufficient to prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt (see chapter 6). When terrorism charges are not possible, the government has brought nonterrorist criminal charges against those suspected of terrorist financing. Such an approach, while perhaps necessary, leaves the government susceptible to accusations of ethnic or religious profiling that can undermine support in the very communities where the government needs it most. Moreover, ethnic or geographic generalizations, unsupported even by intelligence, can both divert scarce resources away from the real threats and violate the Constitution.

Because prosecuting criminal terrorist fund-raising cases can be difficult and time-consuming, the government has at times used administrative orders under the IEEPA to block transactions and freeze assets even against U.S. citizens and entities, as we show in the case studies of the al-Barakaat money remitters and the Chicago charities (in chapters 5 and 6). In some cases, there may be little alternative. But the use of administrative orders with few due process protections, particularly against our own citizens, raises significant civil liberty concerns and risks a substantial backlash. The government ought to exercise great caution in using these powers, as officials who have participated in the process have acknowledged,<sup>45</sup> particularly when the entities and individuals involved have not been convicted of terrorism offenses.

The designated person or entity in such a situation does not have certain rights that might be available in a civil forfeiture action, when the government in most circumstances must file a lawsuit and bear the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence. As in any other lawsuit, the owner of the property has the right to conduct discovery of the government's evidence, such as taking sworn depositions and obtaining documents. Moreover, the defendant has the right to avoid forfeiture by demonstrating that he or she

---

<sup>45</sup>See, e.g., Treasury Memorandum, Apr. 12, 2002. The memorandum proposed a six-month limit for discussion purposes, and offered a "clear recommendation" that "temporary blocking orders be pursued with due diligence and an anticipated end date."

is an innocent owner—that is, obtained or possessed the property in question without knowing its illegal character or nature. The difference between an IEEPA freeze and a civil forfeiture is that a freeze does not technically divest title. But when a freeze separates the owner from his or her money for dozens of years, as it has in other IEEPA contexts, that is a distinction without a difference.

Even more controversial is the government’s use of the provisions to block assets “during the pendency of an investigation,” codified in the USA PATRIOT Act. The government is able to (and has, on at least three occasions) shut down U.S. entities without developing even the administrative record necessary for a designation. Such action requires only the signature of a midlevel government official. The “pending investigation” provision may be necessary in true emergency situations, when there is not time to marshal the evidence to support a formal designation before a terrorist financier must be shut down. But when the interim blocking lasts 10 or 11 months, as it did in the Illinois charities cases (as we note in chapter 6), real issues of administrative due process and fundamental fairness arise.

The premise behind the government’s efforts here—that terrorist operations need a financial support network—may itself be outdated. The effort to find, track, and stop money presumes that it is being sent from a central source or group of identifiable sources. As al Qaeda is further disrupted and its members are killed and dispersed, it loses the central command and control structure it had before. Some terrorist operations do not rely on outside sources of money, and cells may now be self-funding, either through legitimate employment or through low-level criminal activity. Terrorist groups only remotely affiliated with al Qaeda—and dependent on al Qaeda as a source of inspiration rather than operational funding—pose a significant threat of mass casualty attacks. Our terrorist-financing efforts can do little to stop them, as there is no “central command” from which the money flowed, as in the 9/11 attacks. Terrorist operations cost next to nothing. It is to our advantage to ensure that operational cells receive as little money as possible from established terrorist organizations, but our success in doing so will not guarantee our safety.