

set a bomb in an attempt to kill U.S. troops in Aden in 1992. State Department sources even saw suspicious links with Omar Abdel Rahman, the “Blind Sheikh” in the New York area, commenting that Bin Ladin seemed “committed to financing ‘Jihads’ against ‘anti Islamic’ regimes worldwide.” After the department designated Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993, it put Bin Ladin on its TIPOFF watchlist, a move that might have prevented his getting a visa had he tried to enter the United States. As late as 1997, however, even the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center continued to describe him as an “extremist financier.”¹

In 1996, the CIA set up a special unit of a dozen officers to analyze intelligence on and plan operations against Bin Ladin. David Cohen, the head of the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, wanted to test the idea of having a “virtual station”—a station based at headquarters but collecting and operating against a subject much as stations in the field focus on a country. Taking his cue from National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who expressed special interest in terrorist finance, Cohen formed his virtual station as a terrorist financial links unit. He had trouble getting any Directorate of Operations officer to run it; he finally recruited a former analyst who was then running the Islamic Extremist Branch of the Counterterrorist Center. This officer, who was especially knowledgeable about Afghanistan, had noticed a recent stream of reports about Bin Ladin and something called al Qaeda, and suggested to Cohen that the station focus on this one individual. Cohen agreed. Thus was born the Bin Ladin unit.²

In May 1996, Bin Ladin left Sudan for Afghanistan. A few months later, as the Bin Ladin unit was gearing up, Jamal Ahmed al Fadl walked into a U.S. embassy in Africa, established his bona fides as a former senior employee of Bin Ladin, and provided a major breakthrough of intelligence on the creation, character, direction, and intentions of al Qaeda. Corroborating evidence came from another walk-in source at a different U.S. embassy. More confirmation was supplied later that year by intelligence and other sources, including material gathered by FBI agents and Kenyan police from an al Qaeda cell in Nairobi.³

By 1997, officers in the Bin Ladin unit recognized that Bin Ladin was more than just a financier. They learned that al Qaeda had a military committee that was planning operations against U.S. interests worldwide and was actively trying to obtain nuclear material. Analysts assigned to the station looked at the information it had gathered and “found connections everywhere,” including links to the attacks on U.S. troops in Aden and Somalia in 1992 and 1993 and to the Manila air plot in the Philippines in 1994–1995.⁴

The Bin Ladin station was already working on plans for offensive operations against Bin Ladin. These plans were directed at both physical assets and sources of finance. In the end, plans to identify and attack Bin Ladin’s money sources did not go forward.⁵

In late 1995, when Bin Ladin was still in Sudan, the State Department and the CIA learned that Sudanese officials were discussing with the Saudi gov-