

Taliban leader said no. Both sides shouted at each other, with Mullah Omar denouncing the Saudi government. Riyadh then suspended its diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime. (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates were the only countries that recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.) Crown Prince Abdullah told President Clinton and Vice President Gore about this when he visited Washington in late September. His account confirmed reports that the U.S. government had received independently.⁶⁵

Other efforts with the Saudi government centered on improving intelligence sharing and permitting U.S. agents to interrogate prisoners in Saudi custody. The history of such cooperation in 1997 and 1998 had been strained.⁶⁶ Several officials told us, in particular, that the United States could not get direct access to an important al Qaeda financial official, Madani al Tayyib, who had been detained by the Saudi government in 1997.⁶⁷ Though U.S. officials repeatedly raised the issue, the Saudis provided limited information. In his September 1998 meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah, Vice President Gore, while thanking the Saudi government for their responsiveness, renewed the request for direct U.S. access to Tayyib.⁶⁸ The United States never obtained this access.

An NSC staff-led working group on terrorist finances asked the CIA in November 1998 to push again for access to Tayyib and to see “if it is possible to elaborate further on the ties between Usama bin Ladin and prominent individuals in Saudi Arabia, including especially the Bin Ladin family.”⁶⁹ One result was two NSC-led interagency trips to Persian Gulf states in 1999 and 2000. During these trips the NSC, Treasury, and intelligence representatives spoke with Saudi officials, and later interviewed members of the Bin Ladin family, about Usama’s inheritance. The Saudis and the Bin Ladin family eventually helped in this particular effort and U.S. officials ultimately learned that Bin Ladin was not financing al Qaeda out of a personal inheritance.⁷⁰ But Clarke was frustrated about how little the Agency knew, complaining to Berger that four years after “we first asked CIA to track down [Bin Ladin]’s finances” and two years after the creation of the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit, the Agency said it could only guess at how much aid Bin Ladin gave to terrorist groups, what were the main sources of his budget, or how he moved his money.⁷¹

The other diplomatic route to get at Bin Ladin in Afghanistan ran through Islamabad. In the summer before the embassy bombings, the State Department had been heavily focused on rising tensions between India and Pakistan and did not aggressively challenge Pakistan on Afghanistan and Bin Ladin. But State Department counterterrorism officials wanted a stronger position; the department’s acting counterterrorism coordinator advised Secretary Albright to designate Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, noting that despite high-level Pakistani assurances, the country’s military intelligence service continued “activities in support of international terrorism” by supporting attacks on civilian targets in Kashmir. This recommendation was opposed by the State Department’s South Asia bureau, which was concerned that it would damage already