

Usama Bin Ladin first came to the attention of the Intelligence Community in the early 1990s, initially as a financier of terrorist activities. In 1996, as Bin Ladin's direct involvement in planning and directing terrorist acts became more evident, the DCI's Counterterrorist Center (CTC) created a special unit to focus specifically on him and the threat he posed to the interests of the United States. Personnel within CTC recognized as early as 1996 and 1997 that Usama Bin Ladin posed a grave danger to the United States.

Following the August 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa, the DCI made combating the threat posed by Usama Bin Ladin one of the Intelligence Community's highest priorities, establishing it as a "Tier 0 priority." The DCI raised the status of the Bin Ladin threat still further when he announced in writing in December 1998 regarding Bin Ladin: "We are at war...I want no resources or people spared in this effort, either inside the CIA or the [Intelligence] Community." This declaration appeared in a memorandum from the DCI to CIA senior managers, the Deputy DCI for Community Management and the Assistant DCI for Military Support.

The Intelligence Community as a whole, however, had only a limited awareness of this declaration. For example, some senior managers in the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency say they were aware of the declaration. However, it was apparently not well known within the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In fact, the Assistant Director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division testified to the Joint Inquiry that he "was not specifically aware of that declaration of war."

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Furthermore, and even more disturbing, Joint Inquiry interviews of FBI field office personnel indicated that they were not aware of the DCI's declaration, and some had only a passing familiarity with the very existence of Usama Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida prior to September 11. Neither were the Deputy Secretary of Defense or the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff aware of the DCI's declaration. This suggests a fragmented Intelligence Community that was operating without a comprehensive strategy for combating the threat posed by Bin Ladin, and a DCI without the ability to enforce consistent priorities at all levels throughout the Community.