


[Print this Page](#)
[Close Window](#)

The Atlantic Monthly | September 2004

INSIDE AL-QAEDA'S HARD DRIVE

Budget squabbles, baby pictures, office rivalries—and the path to 9/11

BY ALAN CULLISON

.....

In the autumn of 2001 I was one of scores of journalists who ventured into northern Afghanistan to write about the U.S.-assisted war against the Taliban. As I crossed the Hindu Kush to cover the fighting for *The Wall Street Journal*, my journey took what looked like a fatal turn: the battered black pickup truck I had rented—which in its better years had been a war wagon for Afghan gunmen—lost its brakes as it headed down a steep mountain path, careened along the edge of a gorge, slammed headlong into the back of a Northern Alliance fuel truck that was creeping down the mountain, and slid to rest on its side in the middle of the road. My bags spilled down the mountainside or were crushed beneath the pickup.

Fortunately, none of the pickup's occupants—a Japanese journalist, two Afghan interpreters, the driver, and a shoeless boy who had been riding on the roof and wiping dust from the windshield—was seriously injured. Only my interpreter, a Russian-speaking Afghan, seemed to be hurt; he clutched his side and said that something had hit him in the ribs. We nursed some cuts and bruises, and climbed aboard a Northern Alliance truck carrying wooden crates of Kalashnikov ammunition.

The wreck might have been just a minor bump in my travels through a land where inhabitants display a whoopsy-daisy attitude toward fatal accidents and killings. But a day later, after bedding down forty miles north of Kabul, I asked my interpreter what had hit him in the ribs. He said it was my computer, which he'd always held in his lap for safekeeping. I got up and removed the computer from its black bag, opened its lid, and saw that the screen was smashed. In the coming weeks, living in a fly-infested hut, I scrawled stories by candlelight with a ballpoint pen and read dispatches to my editors over a satellite phone.

That crash became memorable for reasons I never expected. When the Taliban's defenses crumbled, in November of 2001, I joined a handful of malnourished correspondents who rushed into Kabul and filed stories about the city's liberation. We pounced like so many famished crows on the first Western staples we had seen since leaving home: peanut butter, pasteurized milk, and canned vegetables, all of which we found on Chicken Street, Kabul's version of a shopping district. We raided the houses

Sidebar:

"Tips for the Traveling Terrorist"

"Underwear should be the normal type that people wear, not anything that shows you're a fundamentalist." Suggestions lifted from the laptop on how to pass unnoticed in the West.

Sidebar:

"Letters From a Young Martyr"

Farewell letters and poems found on the laptop from a young man selected for a suicide mission.

where Arab members of al-Qaeda had been holed up during their stay in Afghanistan, grabbing whatever documents were left in their file cabinets. But unlike most correspondents, I needed to spend some time getting to know Kabul's computer dealers, because I wanted to replace my laptop. It took about an hour to shake hands with all of them.

The regime that had forbidden television and kite-flying as un-Islamic had also taken a dim view of computers. I searched through the bazaars and found Soviet-era radios and television sets, but the electronics dealers had never even seen a computer, and certainly didn't know how to wire one to a satellite phone.

I found my first computer dealer in a drafty storefront office in downtown Kabul, near the city's central park. He worked alone and didn't have a computer in his office, because, he said, he couldn't afford one. He bragged that he was the sole computer consultant for the Afghan national airline, Ariana. This impressed me deeply—until I learned that Ariana had only one computer and only one working airplane.

He told me about another dealer, who ran a computer training school on the second floor of a building overlooking the park. I fumbled my way up a decrepit, unlit stairwell and along a dusty hallway to an office: a long room with a threadbare couch and a desk with a computer on it.

The second dealer told me that he had serviced computers belonging to the Taliban and to Arabs in al-Qaeda. I forgot about my own computer problems and hired him to search for these computers. Eventually he led me to a semiliterate jewelry salesman with wide-set eyes and a penchant for gold chains. This was the man who that December would take \$1,100 from me in exchange for two of al-Qaeda's most valuable computers—a 40-gigabyte IBM desktop and a Compaq laptop. He had stolen them from al-Qaeda's central office in Kabul on November 12, the night before the city fell to the Northern Alliance. He wanted the money, he said, so that he could travel to the United States and meet some American girls.

My acquisition of the al-Qaeda computers was unique in the experience of journalists covering radical Islam. In the 1990s the police had seized computers used by al-Qaeda members in Kenya and the Philippines, but journalists and historians learned very little about the contents of those computers; only some information from them was released in U.S. legal proceedings. A much fuller picture would emerge from the computers I obtained in Kabul (especially the IBM desktop), which had been used by al-Qaeda's leadership.

On the night before Kabul fell, Taliban officials were fleeing the city in trucks teetering with their personal effects. The looter who sold me the computers figured that al-Qaeda had fled as well, so he crawled over a brick wall surrounding the house that served as the group's office. Finding nobody inside, he took the two computers, which he had discovered in a room on the building's second floor. On the door of the room, he said, was the name of Muhammad Atef—al-Qaeda's military commander and a key planner of 9/11. Each day, he said, Atef would walk into the office carrying the laptop in its black case. The looter knew he had something good.

So did the U.S. military when it heard what I had bought. The offices of *The Wall Street Journal*, just across from the World Trade Center, had been destroyed on 9/11. Our New York staff, which was working out of a former warehouse in Lower Manhattan, was acutely aware of potential threats; it was carefully screening mail for anthrax. Thinking that the computers might hold information about future attacks, my editors called the U.S. Central Command, which sent three CIA agents to my hotel

room in Kabul. They said they needed the computers immediately; I had time to copy only the desktop computer before handing them both over. Atef's laptop was returned to me two months later, by an agent named Bert, at a curbside in Washington, D.C. The CIA said that the drive had been almost empty, but I've always wondered if this was true.

The desktop computer, it turned out, had been used mostly by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's top deputy. It contained nearly a thousand text documents, dating back to 1997. Many were locked with passwords or encrypted. Most were in Arabic, but some were in French, Farsi, English, or Malay, written in an elliptical and evolving system of code words. I worked intensively for more than a year with several translators and with a colleague at *The Wall Street Journal*, Andrew Higgins, interviewing dozens of former *jihadis* to decipher the context, codes, and intentions of the messages for a series of articles that Higgins and I wrote for the Journal in 2002.

What emerged was an astonishing inside look at the day-to-day world of al-Qaeda, as managed by its top strategic planners—among them bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, Atef, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, all of whom were intimately involved in the planning of 9/11, and some of whom (bin Laden and al-Zawahiri) are still at large. The documents included budgets, training manuals for recruits, and scouting reports for international attacks, and they shed light on everything from personnel matters and petty bureaucratic sniping to theological discussions and debates about the merits of suicide operations. There were also video files, photographs, scanned documents, and Web pages, many of which, it became clear, were part of the group's increasingly sophisticated efforts to conduct a global Internet-based publicity and recruitment effort.

The *jihadis'* Kabul office employed a zealous manager—Ayman al-Zawahiri's brother Muhammad, who maintained the computer's files in a meticulous network of folders and subfolders that neatly laid out the group's organizational structure and strategic concerns. (Muhammad's system fell apart after he was arrested in 2000 in Dubai and extradited to Egypt.) The files not only provided critical active intelligence about the group's plans and methods at the time (including the first leads about the shoe bomber Richard Reid, who had yet to attempt his attack) but also, in a fragmentary way, revealed a road map of al-Qaeda's progress toward 9/11. Considered as a whole, the trove of material on the computer represents what is surely the fullest sociological profile of al-Qaeda ever to be made public.

Perhaps one of the most important insights to emerge from the computer is that 9/11 sprang not so much from al-Qaeda's strengths as from its weaknesses. The computer did not reveal any links to Iraq or any other deep-pocketed government; amid the group's penury the members fell to bitter infighting. The blow against the United States was meant to put an end to the internal rivalries, which are manifest in vitriolic memos between Kabul and cells abroad. Al-Qaeda's leaders worried about a military response from the United States, but in such a response they spied opportunity: they had fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and they fondly remembered that war as a galvanizing experience, an event that roused the indifferent of the Arab world to fight and win against a technologically superior Western infidel. The *jihadis* expected the United States, like the Soviet Union, to be a clumsy opponent. Afghanistan would again become a slowly filling graveyard for the imperial ambitions of a superpower.

Like the early Russian anarchists who wrote some of the most persuasive tracts on the uses of terror, al-Qaeda understood that its attacks would not lead to a quick collapse of the great powers. Rather, its aim was to tempt the powers to strike back in a way that would create sympathy for the terrorists. Al-Qaeda has so far gained little from the ground war in Afghanistan; the conflict in Iraq, closer to the

center of the Arab world, is potentially more fruitful. As Arab resentment against the United States spreads, al-Qaeda may look less like a tightly knit terror group and more like a mass movement. And as the group develops synergy in working with other groups branded by the United States as enemies (in Iraq, the Israeli-occupied territories, Kashmir, the Mindanao Peninsula, and Chechnya, to name a few places), one wonders if the United States is indeed playing the role written for it on the computer.

LIFE IN AFGHANISTAN

Al-Qaeda's leaders began decamping to Afghanistan in 1996, after the group was expelled from Sudan. Ayman al-Zawahiri, at the time also the leader of the militant Egyptian group Islamic Jihad, issued a call for other Islamists to follow, and in one letter found on the computer described Afghanistan as a "den of garrisoned lions." But not all Arabs were happy with the move. Afghanistan, racked by more than a decade of civil war and Soviet occupation, struck many as unfit to be the capital of global *jihad*. *Jihadis* complained about the food, the bad roads, and the Afghans themselves, who, they said, were uneducated, venal, and not to be trusted.

In April of 1998 a *jihadi* named Tariq Anwar visited Afghanistan for a meeting of Islamists and wrote back to his colleagues in Yemen about his impressions.

TO: Al-Qaeda Members in Yemen
FROM: Tariq Anwar
FOLDER: Outgoing Mail—To Yemen
DATE: April 1998

I send you my greetings from beyond the swamps to your country, where there is progress and civilization ... You should excuse us for not calling. There are many reasons, the most important of which is the difficulty of calling from this country. We have to go to the city, which involves a number of stages. The first stage involves arranging for a car (as we don't have a car). Of course, we are bound by the time the car is leaving, regardless of the time we want to leave. The second stage involves waiting for the car (we wait for the car, and it may be hours late or arrive before the agreed time). The next stage is the trip itself, when we sit like sardines in a can. Most of the time I have 1/8 of a chair, and the road is very bad. After all this suffering, the last stage is reaching a humble government communication office. Most of the time there is some kind of failure—either the power is off, the lines out of order, or the neighboring country [through which the connection is made] does not reply. Only in rare cases can we make problem-free calls ...

The Arabs' general contempt for the backwardness of Afghanistan was not lost on the Taliban, whose leaders grew annoyed with Osama bin Laden's focus on public relations and the media. Letters found on the computer reveal that relations between the Arabs and the Taliban had grown so tense that many feared the Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, would expel the Arabs from the country. A dialogue to resolve the two sides' differences was carried on at the highest levels, as the memo below, from two Syrian operatives, demonstrates. ("Abu Abdullah" is a code name for bin Laden; "Leader of the Faithful" refers to Mullah Omar, in his hoped-for capacity as the head of a new Islamic emirate, based in Afghanistan.)

TO: Osama bin Laden

FROM: Abu Mosab al-Suri and Abu Khalid al-Suri
VIA: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FOLDER: Incoming Mail—From Afghanistan
DATE: July 19, 1999

Noble brother Abu Abdullah,
Peace upon you, and God's mercy and blessings.
This message [concerns] the problem between you
and the Leader of the Faithful ...

The results of this crisis can be felt even here in Kabul and other places. Talk about closing down the camps has spread. Discontent with the Arabs has become clear. Whispers between the Taliban with some of our non-Arab brothers has become customary. In short, our brother Abu Abdullah's latest troublemaking with the Taliban and the Leader of the Faithful jeopardizes the Arabs, and the Arab presence, today in all of Afghanistan, for no good reason. It provides a ripe opportunity for all adversaries, including America, the West, the Jews, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Mas'ud-Dostum alliance, etc., to serve the Arabs a blow that could end up causing their most faithful allies to kick them out ... Our brother [bin Laden] will help our enemies reach their goal free of charge! ...

The strangest thing I have heard so far is Abu Abdullah's saying that he wouldn't listen to the Leader of the Faithful when he asked him to stop giving interviews ... I think our brother [bin Laden] has caught the disease of screens, flashes, fans, and applause ...

The only solution out of this dilemma is what a number of knowledgeable and experienced people have agreed upon ...

Abu Abdullah should go to the Leader of the Faithful with some of his brothers and tell them that ... the Leader of the Faithful was right when he asked you to refrain from interviews, announcements, and media encounters, and that you will help the Taliban as much as you can in their battle, until they achieve control over Afghanistan. ... You should apologize for any inconvenience or pressure you have caused ... and commit to the wishes and orders of the Leader of the Faithful on matters that concern his circumstances here ...

The Leader of the Faithful, who should be obeyed where he reigns, is Muhammad Omar, not Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden and his companions are only guests seeking refuge and have to adhere to the terms laid out by the person who provided it for them. This is legitimate and logical.

The troubled relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban hadn't interfered with global plans. Al-Qaeda had developed a growing interest in suicide operations as an offensive weapon against Americans and other enemies around the world. On August 7, 1998, the group simultaneously struck the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania with car bombs, killing more than 220 people and wounding more than 4,000. Concerned that inflicting such heavy casualties on civilians would tarnish its image even among its supporters, al-Qaeda actively sought religious and legal opinions from Islamic scholars around the world who could help to justify the killing of innocents. The following letter is presumably a typical request for theological guidance.

TO: Unknown
FROM: Unknown
FOLDER: Outgoing Mail
DATE: September 26, 1998

Dear highly respected _____

...I present this to you as your humble brother ... concerning the preparation of the lawful study that I am doing on the killing of civilians. This is a very sensitive case—as you know—especially these days ...

It is very important that you provide your opinion of this matter, which has been forced upon us as an essential issue in the course and ideology of the Muslim movement ...

[Our] questions are:

1- Since you are the representative of the Islamic Jihad group, what is your lawful stand on the killing of civilians, specifically when women and children are included? And please explain the legitimate law concerning those who are deliberately killed.

2- According to your law, how can you justify the killing of innocent victims because of a claim of oppression?

3- What is your stand concerning a group that supports the killing of civilians, including women and children?

With our prayers, wishing you success and stability.

SECRET OPERATIONS

As al-Qaeda established itself in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and began managing international operations of ever increasing complexity and audacity, the group focused on ensuring the secrecy of its communications. It discouraged the use of e-mail and the telephone, and recommended faxes and couriers. The electronic files reflect the global nature of the work being done; much of the correspondence was neatly filed by country name. Messages were usually encrypted and often couched in language mimicking that of a multinational corporation; thus Osama bin Laden was sometimes "the contractor," acts of terrorism became "trade," Mullah Omar and the Taliban became "the Omar Brothers Company," the security services of the United States and Great Britain became "foreign competitors," and so on. Especially sensitive messages were encoded with a simple but reliable cryptographic system that had been used by both Allied and Axis powers during World War II—a "one-time pad" system that paired individual letters with randomly assigned numbers and letters and produced messages readable only by those who knew the pairings. The computer's files reveal that in 1998 and 1999, when a number of Islamists connected to al-Qaeda were arrested or compromised abroad, the *jihadis* in Afghanistan relied heavily on the one-time-pad system. They also devised new code names for people and places.

Letters sent from and to Ayman al-Zawahiri in 1999 contain coded language typical of many files on the computer; they also show the degree to which al-Qaeda operatives abroad were being exposed and detained because of their efforts. In the first of the following two letters much of the code remains mysterious.

TO: Yemen Cell Members
FROM: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FOLDER: Outgoing Mail—To Yemen
DATE: February 1, 1999

... I would like to clarify the following with relation to the birthday [probably an unspecified attack]:

- a) Don't think of showering as it may harm your health.
- b) We can't make a hotel reservation for you, but they usually don't mind making reservations for guests. Those who wish to make a reservation should go to Quwedat [a famous pastry shop in Cairo].
- c) I suggest that each of you takes a recipient to Quwedat to buy sweets, then make the hotel reservation. It is easy. After you check in, walk to Nur. After you attend the birthday go from Quwedat to Bushra St., where you should buy movie tickets to the Za'bolla movie theater.
- d) The birthday will be in the third month. How do you want to celebrate it in the seventh? Do you want us to change the boy's birth date? There are guests awaiting the real date to get back to their work.
- e) I don't have any gravel [probably ammunition or bomb-making material].

TO: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FROM: Unknown
FOLDER: Incoming Mail—From Yemen
DATE: May 13, 1999

Dear brother Salah al-Din:

... Forty of the contractor's [bin Laden's] friends here were taken by surprise by malaria [arrested] a few days ago, following the telegram they sent, which was similar to Salah al-Din's telegrams [that is, it used the same code]. The majority of them are from here [Yemen], and two are from the contractor's country [Saudi Arabia] ...

We heard that al-Asmar had a sudden illness and went to the hospital [prison]. He will have a session with the doctors [lawyers] early next month to see if he can be treated there, or if he should be sent for treatment in his country [probably Egypt, where *jihadis* were routinely tortured and hanged] ...

Osman called some days ago. He is fine but in intensive care [being monitored by the police]. When his situation improves he will call. He is considering looking for work with Salah al-Din [in Afghanistan], as opportunities are scarce where he is, but his health condition is the obstacle.

Though troubled by arrests abroad, the *jihadis* had time and safety for contemplation in Afghanistan. In 1999 al-Zawahiri undertook a top-secret program to develop chemical and biological weapons, a program he and others referred to on the computer as the "Yogurt" project. Though fearsome in its

intent, the program had a proposed start-up budget of only \$2,000 to \$4,000. Fluent in English and French, al-Zawahiri began by studying foreign medical journals and provided summaries in Arabic for Muhammad Atef, including the one that follows.

TO: Muhammad Atef
FROM: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FOLDER: Outgoing Mail— To Muhammad Atef
DATE: April 15, 1999

I have read the majority of the book [an unnamed volume, probably on biological and chemical weapons] ... [It] is undoubtedly useful. It emphasizes a number of important facts, such as:

- a) The enemy started thinking about these weapons before WWI. Despite their extreme danger, we only became aware of them when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concerns that they can be produced simply with easily available materials ...
- b) The destructive power of these weapons is no less than that of nuclear weapons.
- c) A germ attack is often detected days after it occurs, which raises the number of victims.
- d) Defense against such weapons is very difficult, particularly if large quantities are used ...

I would like to emphasize what we previously discussed—that looking for a specialist is the fastest, safest, and cheapest way [to embark on a biological- and chemical-weapons program]. Simultaneously, we should conduct a search on our own ... Along these lines, the book guided me to a number of references that I am attaching. Perhaps you can find someone to obtain them ...

The letter goes on to cite mid-twentieth-century articles from, among other sources, *Science*, *The Journal of Immunology*, and *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and lists the names of such books as *Tomorrow's Weapons* (1964), *Peace or Pestilence* (1949), and *Chemical Warfare* (1921).

Al-Zawahiri and Atef appear to have settled on the development of a chemical weapon as the most feasible option available to them. Their exchanges on the computer show that they hired Medhat Mursi al-Sayed, an expert to whom they refer as Abu Khabab, to assist them. They also drew up rudimentary architectural plans for their laboratory and devised a scheme to create a charitable foundation to serve as a front for the operation. According to other sources, Abu Khabab gassed some stray dogs at a testing field in eastern Afghanistan, but there is no indication that al-Qaeda ever developed a chemical weapon it could deploy.

THE BANALITY OF OFFICE LIFE

Although al-Qaeda has been mythologized as a disciplined and sophisticated foe, united by a deadly commonality of purpose and by the wealth of its leader, internal correspondence on the computer reveals a somewhat different picture. In the years leading up to 9/11 the group was a

loose confluence of organizations whose goals did not meld easily, as was seen in both tactical discussions (for example, should they attack Arab governments, America, or Israel?) and day-to-day office operations. At the most basic—that is to say, human—level the work relationships of al-Qaeda's key players were characterized by the same sort of bickering and gossiping and griping about money that one finds in offices everywhere. The following exchange is similar in tone and substance to much of what was found on the computer.

TO: Ezzat (real name unknown)
FROM: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FOLDER: Outgoing Mail—To Yemen
DATE: February 11, 1999

Noble brother Ezzat ...

Following are my comments on the summary accounting I received:

... With all due respect, this is not an accounting. It's a summary accounting. For example, you didn't write any dates, and many of the items are vague.

The analysis of the summary shows the following:

1- You received a total of \$22,301. Of course, you didn't mention the period over which this sum was received. Our activities only benefited from a negligible portion of the money. This means that you received and distributed the money as you please ...

2- Salaries amounted to \$10,085—45 percent of the money. I had told you in my fax ... that we've been receiving only half salaries for five months. What is your reaction or response to this?

3- Loans amounted to \$2,190. Why did you give out loans? Didn't I give clear orders to Muhammad Saleh to ... refer any loan requests to me? We have already had long discussions on this topic ...

4- Why have guesthouse expenses amounted to \$1,573 when only Yunis is there, and he can be accommodated without the need for a guesthouse?

5- Why did you buy a new fax for \$470? Where are the two old faxes? Did you get permission before buying a new fax under such circumstances?

6- Please explain the cell-phone invoice amounting to \$756 (2,800 riyals) when you have mentioned communication expenses of \$300.

7- Why are you renovating the computer? Have I been informed of this?

8- General expenses you mentioned amounted to \$235. Can you explain what you mean?
...

TO: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FROM: Ezzat
FOLDER: Incoming Mail—From Yemen

DATE: February 17, 1999

Kind brother Nur al-Din [al-Zawahiri]:

... We don't have any guesthouses. We have bachelor houses, and the offices are there too. We called it a guesthouse hypothetically, and we don't have any bachelors except Basil and Youssef. And Abd al-Kareem lives at his work place.

If I buy a fax and we have two old ones, that would be wanton or mad.

Communication expenses were \$300 before we started using the mobile phone—and all these calls were to discuss the crises of Ashraf and Dawoud and Kareem and Ali and Ali Misarra and Abu Basel and others, in compliance with the orders.

Renovating our computer doesn't mean buying a new one but making sure that adjustments are made to suit Abdullah's [bin Laden's] work. There were many technical problems with the computer. These matters do not need approval.

There are articles for purchase that are difficult to keep track of, so we have put them under the title of general expenses ...

The first step for me to implement in taking your advice is to resign from ... any relationship whatsoever between me and your Emirate. Consider me a political refugee ...

THE MERGER

Al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban, though strained at times, grew cozier as the attacks on New York and Washington approached. Mullah Omar was enraged at the U.S. missile strikes on Khost, Afghanistan, in 1998—strikes that were made in retaliation for bin Laden's African-embassy bombings that year. Bin Laden, meanwhile, kept after the Taliban leader with a campaign of flattery. He hailed Mullah Omar as Islam's new caliph (a lofty title not used since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire) and talked of Afghanistan as the kernel of what would become a sprawling and pure Islamic state that would embrace Central Asia and beyond. By 2001, some said, bin Laden had become a confidant of Mullah Omar, helping him to understand the outside world. He encouraged the Taliban leader to destroy the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas and sent him a congratulatory note afterward.

TO: Mullah Omar
FROM: Osama bin Laden
FOLDER: Publications
DATE: April 11, 2001

... I pray to God—after having granted you success in destroying the dead, deaf, and mute false gods—that He will grant you success in destroying the living false gods, the ones that talk and listen. God knows that those [gods] pose more danger to Islam and monotheism than the dead false gods. Among the most important such false gods in our time is the United Nations, which has become a new religion that is worshipped to the exclusion of God. The prophets of this religion are present in the UN General Assembly ... The UN imposes all sorts of penalties on all those who contradict its religion. It issues

documents and statements that openly contradict Islamic belief, such as the International Declaration for Human Rights, considering all religions are equal, and considering that the destruction of the statues constitutes a crime ...

Meanwhile, Ayman al-Zawahiri rallied the support of other *ihadis*, especially in his militant group Islamic Jihad, which eventually became the largest component of al-Qaeda. Those *ihadis* from Egypt had been suspicious of him because of his close ties to bin Laden, whom they considered a publicity hound. In the summer of 1999 they ousted al-Zawahiri as the leader of Islamic Jihad and replaced him with a veteran, Tharwat Shehata, who wanted to limit the relationship with bin Laden and concentrate the group's fight against Egypt, not America. But with money scarce and morale low, Shehata soon resigned, and by the spring of 2001 al-Zawahiri had assumed control again. He sent a note to his colleagues in Islamic Jihad proposing a formal merger with bin Laden and al-Qaeda as "a way out of the bottleneck." Borrowing terms from global commerce, he warned of increased market share for "international monopolies"—the CIA and probably also Egyptian intelligence. The merger, he said, could "increase profits"—the publicity and support that terrorism could produce.

TO: Unknown
FROM: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FOLDER: Letters
DATE: May 3, 2001

The following is a summary of our situation: We are trying to return to our previous main activity [probably the merger]. The most important step was starting the school [training camps], the programs of which have been started. We also provided the teachers with means of conducting profitable trade as much as we could. Matters are all promising, except for the unfriendliness of two teachers, despite what we have provided for them. We are patient.

As you know, the situation below in the village [probably Egypt] has become bad for traders [*ihadis*]. Our Upper Egyptian relatives have left the market, and we are suffering from international monopolies. Conflicts take place between us for trivial reasons, due to the scarcity of resources. We are also dispersed over various cities. However, God had mercy on us when the Omar Brothers Company [the Taliban] here opened the market for traders and provided them with an opportunity to reorganize, may God reward them. Among the benefits of residence here is that traders from all over gather in one place under one company, which increases familiarity and cooperation among them, particularly between us and the Abdullah Contracting Company [bin Laden and his associates]. The latest result of this cooperation is ... the offer they gave. Following is a summary of the offer:

Encourage commercial activities [*ihad*] in the village to face foreign investors; stimulate publicity; then agree on joint work to unify trade in our area. Close relations allowed for an open dialogue to solve our problems. Colleagues here believe that this is an excellent opportunity to encourage sales in general, and in the village in particular. They are keen on the success of the project. They are also hopeful that this may be a way out of the bottleneck to transfer our activities to the stage of multinationals and joint profit. We are negotiating the details with both sides ...

Al-Zawahiri's proposal set off a storm of protest from some members of Islamic Jihad, who—again—favored focusing on the struggle against the Egyptian government. They accused al-Zawahiri

of leading their group in dangerous directions.

TO: Ayman al-Zawahiri
FROM: Unknown
FOLDER: Letters
DATE: Summer, 2001

Dear brother Abdullah al-Dayem:

[another name for al-Zawahiri]

... I disagree completely with the issue of sales and profits. These are not profits. They are rather a farce of compound losses. I believe that going on in this is a dead end, as if we were fighting ghosts or windmills. Enough of pouring musk on barren land.

I don't believe that we need to give indications of how this unplanned path will fail. All we need to do is to estimate the company's assets since the beginning of this last phase, then take inventory of what remains. Count the number of laborers in your farms [probably cells] at the mother's area [probably Egypt], then see if anyone has stayed. Consider any of the many projects where you enthusiastically participated. Did any of them succeed, other than the Badr external greenhouses, which enjoyed limited success?

All indicators point out that the place and time are not suitable for this type of agriculture. Cotton may not be planted in Siberia, just as apples cannot be planted in hot areas. I'm sure you are aware that wheat is planted in winter and cotton in summer. After all our efforts we haven't seen any crops in winter or summer.

This type of agriculture is ridiculous. It's as if we were throwing good seeds onto barren land.

In previous experiments where the circumstances and seeds were better we made major losses. Now everything has deteriorated. Ask those with experience in agriculture and history.

Despite the protests of certain Islamic Jihad members, a merger with al-Qaeda had been cemented in the spring of 2001, and in June the new group issued "Statement No. 1"—a press release of sorts, found on the computer, that warned the "Zionist and Christian coalition" that "they will soon roast in the same flame they now play with." The following month someone sat down at the computer and composed a short message, titled "The Solution," which trumpeted "martyrdom operations" as the key to the battle against the West. On August 23 another operative tapped out a report on a target-spotting mission in Egypt and Israel that had been carried out by Richard Reid—the British national who would later try to blow up a Paris-to-Miami airline flight with a bomb packed in one of his high-top sneakers. And on that same day in August the following plan for sending an agent on a target-spotting mission to the U.S.-Canadian border region was typed into the computer.

TO: Real name unknown
FROM: Unknown
FOLDER: Hamza
DATE: August 23, 2001

Special file for our brother Abu Bakr al-Albani ["the Albanian"] on the nature of his mission.

First, the mission: Gather information on:

1. Information on American soldiers who frequent nightclubs in the America-Canada border areas
2. The Israeli embassy, consulate, and cultural center in Canada
3. If it is possible to enter America and gather information on American soldier checkpoints, or on the American army in the border areas inside America
4. Information on the possibility of obtaining explosive devices inside Canada ...

I have given to our brother \$1,500 for travel expenses in Canada and America, and also the cost of the ticket for the trip back to us after four months, God willing.

AFTER 9/11

The first evidence of work on the computer following 9/11 comes just days after the attacks, in the form of a promotional video called "The Big Job"—a montage of television footage of the attacks and their chaotic aftermath, all set to rousing victory music. The office was surely busier than it had ever been before, and soon many members of al-Qaeda's inner circle were competing for time on the computer. Ramzi bin al-Shibh, the senior Yemeni operative who coordinated with Khalid Sheikh Muhammad in masterminding the attacks, used the computer to work on a hasty and unfinished ideological justification for the operation, which he titled "The Truth About the New Crusade: A Ruling on the Killing of Women and Children of the Non-Believers," excerpts of which follow:

Concerning the operations of the blessed Tuesday [9/11] ... they are legally legitimate, because they are committed against a country at war with us, and the people in that country are combatants. Someone might say that it is the innocent, the elderly, the women, and the children who are victims, so how can these operations be legitimate according to *sharia*? And we say that the sanctity of women, children, and the elderly is not absolute. There are special cases ... Muslims may respond in kind if infidels have targeted women and children and elderly Muslims, [or if] they are being invaded, [or if] the non-combatants are helping with the fight, whether in action, word, or any other type of assistance, [or if they] need to attack with heavy weapons, which do not differentiate between combatants and non-combatants ... Now that we know that the operations were permissible from the Islamic point of view, we must answer or respond to those who prohibit the operations from the point of view of benefits or harms ...

There are benefits ... The operations have brought about the largest economic crisis that America has ever known. Material losses amount to one trillion dollars. America has lost about two thousand economic brains as a result of the operations. The stock exchange dropped drastically, and American consumer spending deteriorated. The dollar has dropped, the airlines have been crippled, the American globalization system, which was going to spoil the world, is gone ...

Because of Saddam and the Baath Party, America punished a whole population. Thus its bombs and its embargo killed millions of Iraqi Muslims. And because of Osama bin Laden, America surrounded

Afghans and bombed them, causing the death of tens of thousands of Muslims ... God said to assault whoever assaults you, in a like manner ... In killing Americans who are ordinarily off limits, Muslims should not exceed four million non-combatants, or render more than ten million of them homeless. We should avoid this, to make sure the penalty [that we are inflicting] is no more than reciprocal. God knows what is best.

Osama bin Laden himself was composing letters on the computer just weeks before the fall of Kabul. In them he defiantly addressed the American people with a statement of al-Qaeda's goals, which he then went on to spell out at much greater length for Mullah Omar, in the spirit of a powerful, high-level political adviser offering advice to a head of state.

TO: The American People
FROM: Osama bin Laden
FOLDER: Publications
DATE: October 3, 2001

What takes place in America today was caused by the flagrant interference on the part of successive American governments into others' business. These governments imposed regimes that contradict the faith, values, and lifestyles of the people. This is the truth that the American government is trying to conceal from the American people.

Our current battle is against the Jews. Our faith tells us we shall defeat them, God willing. However, Muslims find that the Americans stand as a protective shield and strong supporter, both financially and morally. The desert storm that blew over New York and Washington should, in our view, have blown over Tel Aviv. The American position obliged Muslims to force the Americans out of the arena first to enable them to focus on their Jewish enemy. Why are the Americans fighting a battle on behalf of the Jews? Why do they sacrifice their sons and interests for them?

TO: Mullah Omar
FROM: Osama bin Laden
FOLDER: Deleted File (Recovered)
DATE: October 3, 2001

Highly esteemed Leader of the Faithful,
Mullah Muhammad Omar, Mujahid,
May God preserve him ...

1- We treasure your message, which confirms your generous, heroic position in defending Islam and in standing up to the symbols of infidelity of this time.

2- I would like to emphasize the major impact of your statements on the Islamic world. Nothing harms America more than receiving your strong response to its positions and statements. Thus it is very important that the Emirate respond to every threat or demand from America ... with demands that America put an end to its support of Israel, and that U.S. forces withdraw from Saudi Arabia. Such responses nullify the effect of the American media on people's morale.

Newspapers mentioned that a recent survey showed that seven out of every ten

Americans suffer psychological problems following the attacks on New York and Washington.

Although you have already made strong declarations, we ask you to increase them to equal the opponent's media campaign in quantity and force.

Their threat to invade Afghanistan should be countered by a threat on your part that America will not be able to dream of security until Muslims experience it as reality in Palestine and Afghanistan.

3- Keep in mind that America is currently facing two contradictory problems:

- a) If it refrains from responding to *jihad* operations, its prestige will collapse, thus forcing it to withdraw its troops abroad and restrict itself to U.S. internal affairs. This will transform it from a major power to a third-rate power, similar to Russia.
- b) On the other hand, a campaign against Afghanistan will impose great long-term economic burdens, leading to further economic collapse, which will force America, God willing, to resort to the former Soviet Union's only option: withdrawal from Afghanistan, disintegration, and contraction.

Thus our plan in the face of this campaign should focus on the following:

—Serving a blow to the American economy, which will lead to:

- a) Further weakening of the American economy
- b) Shaking the confidence in the American economy. This will lead investors to refrain from investing in America or participating in American companies, thus accelerating the fall of the American economy ...

—Conduct a media campaign to fight the enemy's publicity. The campaign should focus on the following important points:

- a) Attempt to cause a rift between the American people and their government, by demonstrating the following to the Americans:

—That the U.S. government will lead them into further losses of money and lives.

—That the government is sacrificing the people to serve the interests of the rich, particularly the Jews.

—That the government is leading them to the war front to protect Israel and its security.

—America should withdraw from the current battle between Muslims and Jews.

This plan aims to create pressure from the American people on their government to stop its campaign against Afghanistan, on the grounds that the campaign will cause major losses to the American people.

—Imply that the campaign against Afghanistan will be responded to with revenge blows against America.

I believe that we can issue, with your permission, a number of speeches that we expect will have the greatest impact, God willing, on the American, Pakistani, Arab, and Muslim people.

Finally, I would like to emphasize how much we appreciate the fact that you are our Emir. I would like to express our great appreciation of your historical stands in the service of Islam and in the defense of the Prophet's tradition. We ask God to accept and reward such stands.

We ask God to grant the Muslim Afghani nation, under your leadership, victory over the American infidels, just as He singled this nation out with the honor of defeating the Communist infidels.

We ask God to lead you to the good of both this life and the afterlife.

Peace upon you and God's mercy and blessings.

Your brother,
Osama Bin Muhammad Bin Laden

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200409/cullison>.

Print this Page

Close Window

SUBSCRIBE TO THE ATLANTIC TODAY!

Take advantage of our great rate to subscribe to a year of The Atlantic Monthly. Go to the following Web address to sign up today:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/subscribe12>

All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.