1. Bin Laden’s starting point

Two anti-terrorist experts, writing in 2007, summarised the history of al Qaeda and in doing so took a long-term perspective. They divided the financial development of al Qaeda into four periods. There was, firstly the Pakistan phase, then secondly Bin Laden’s time in the Sudan in alliance with al Turabi, thirdly Bin Laden’s stay in Afghanistan. The fourth and final phase was marked by self-financing autonomous cells, gaining revenue by petty criminality. The second period, that of Bin Laden’s and al Qaeda’s pre 9/11 period in Africa, is a significant one.

During the period December 1991 to 1996 Sudan was host to al Qaeda. Giving sanctuary to terrorist organisations was not a new development for Sudan as it had given, or was still providing, safe havens to national and international terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah, Abu Nidal, Hamas (and after 2011 it increased its presence in Sudan), the Lord’s Resistance Army, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Eritrean Islamic Jihad, Gama ‘at al Islamiyah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, in giving sanctuary to Bin Laden and al Qaeda Sudan ensured that al Qaeda was able to operate and extend its influence into other areas of Africa. The headquarters of al Qaeda was based in Khartoum, in several scattered buildings, and Bin Laden himself had moved to Sudan by late 1991. There he was fully and steadily supported by the governing regime, particularly by the spiritual leader of Sudan, Dr Hassan al Turabi.

Al Turabi was a law graduate from the university in Khartoum and had gained a Masters in Law at a London University. He became a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Returning to Sudan, he founded a coalition of Islamic political groups, the Islamic Charter Front. He rose within Sudanese politics whilst being active professionally in reconciling Sharia Law to the needs of the legal system of a modernising state. In June 1989 a military coup in the Sudan brought General Omar al Bashir.

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to power. Al Bashir turned to Turabi to assist him and Turabi became the spiritual leader of Sudan and an essential part of al Bashir’s dictatorship team.

During his period in the Sudan Bin Laden engaged in frenetic commercial activity. A variety of companies were established. These included Wadi al-Aqiq, a multi-faceted import–export company, Laden International, trading in food commodities, Al Ikhlas, producing sweets and refining honey and Taba Investments dealing in cornflower and sesame products. According to the US State Department, Taba Investments established a monopoly over its commodities within Sudan. Also, a leather company was established, Khartoum Tannery. Bin Laden also started a construction company, al-Hijra, which built roads and bridges, and he set up a trucking and haulage company, al-Qudarat. Both the industrial and agricultural activity benefitted Sudan, the former improving the infrastructure, the latter helping exports. To stimulate investment Bin Laden invested the equivalent of US$50 million into a bank, the al Shamal Islamic Bank, based in Khartoum. In reality, Bin Laden bought and owned this bank outright. Bin Laden’s companies maintained bank accounts at banks in Cyprus, Vienna, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Dubai. One leading expert on al Qaeda has stated that in establishing the network of companies and accounts, Bin Laden had learned from and adopted the international financial model of the notorious – and by now thoroughly exposed – Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI).

Bin Laden during his time in the Sudan was aided and facilitated by the Sudan government, and established a training camp a short distance outside Khartoum. This was used for training members of the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), fighting the government regime in nearby Uganda. The Sudanese government sent supplies and finances to those LRA fighters operating in Uganda.

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6 Confidential source, FBI analyst, interview with author, October 2002.
The dual bombing operation, with its targets of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, had been planned by al Qaeda since 1994.9 As such it was to mark a new operational development of al Qaeda, taken from Hezbollah attacks on the US and French forces in 1983; this development was coordinated truck bombs.

On 7 August 1998 the terrorist group approached the US Embassy building in Nairobi in two vehicles. The first was a command vehicle, the second the bomb carrier. The group attempted to place the bomb vehicle next to the front wall of the Embassy, and stated to the sentry on the front gate that they were caterers with supplies for the cafeteria. However, they were ordered to move the vehicle, which they did, and drove both trucks round to the rear of the building. Seeking to gain entry by the rear entrance, they were refused. With time running against them, the first vehicle surged forward, the occupants firing from within the vehicle or alighting and firing on foot, to distract the guards. The second vehicle remained stationary, the driver and passenger fired, and threw a hand grenade, trying to force entry, and whilst doing so the bomb detonated. The impact – of 1800 lbs of military high explosive – caused an adjacent seven-storey building to collapse and implode and severely damaged the US Embassy.

On the same day in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, two vehicles approached the US Embassy. One was a water tanker, which regularly serviced the embassy. The other vehicle was a refrigeration truck which contained a converted refrigerator housing the bomb, mounted upon a two-ton Nissan Atlas truck. The plan was that the refrigerator truck, driven and manned by the terrorists, would follow the genuine water truck into the embassy, as the latter was waved though by the guards. The water tanker pulled up in front of the embassy. The refrigeration truck following behind then surged forward and aligned itself alongside. The original plan was for the terrorists to slowly follow the water tanker into the embassy to the usual water transfer point. However, apparently a security guard with a detection device insisted on opening the hood of the water tanker truck; his device had been activated by materials under the hood of the water tanker. As he stepped forward to make this inspection the terrorists had no other choice but to detonate immediately. The bomb in the refrigerator truck was detonated by a remote device held by another group of terrorists who were monitoring the whole operation in a third vehicle. The explosive materials in the water tanker were suspected to have been

planted by the assistant driver, whose normal role was that of connecting the water tanker to the water transfer point inside the embassy compound. (No remains of him were found in the aftermath, and it is believed that, having planted the materials, he did not travel in the tanker in its journey to the embassy). The materials were to serve as a distraction, but it was anticipated that they would not be discovered until a later set of guards checked, after both vehicles had just entered the embassy compound. However, in terms of the attack, the bomb was detonated, caused fatalities, and occurred, as planned, on the same morning as the Nairobi bombing.

The twin coordinated attacks on the two US Embassies caused 250 fatalities, and over 5000 were injured. Al Qaeda, communicating from Afghanistan, had provided its London-based front organisation, the Advice and Reconciliation Committee, with full information on the attacks in advance. As soon as they were perpetrated, the Advice and Reconciliation Committee released full briefings to the media on a global scale.  

Both operations had common points. The explosives originated from Pakistan and were shipped to Dar-es-Salaam and Mombasa, and from there were driven to safe houses. The bombs were then constructed in the safe houses and moved on to other safe houses in the middle of the two capital cities. The bombs were expertly made. Both operations were regimented and well planned with participants using noms de guerre, code words and coordinated meeting and phone call contacts. The two networks involved in the Nairobi bombings were kept separate from each other, every member ignorant of the identities of those in the other network and coordinated by the principal in command.

The individuals in command of both operations left their respective cities before the bombings were carried out. The senior of the two individuals in charge of the attacks was Muhammad Sadiq Odeh. He was commander of the Nairobi attack, and had some oversight over the other attack. The planner of the Nairobi attack was Ali Salah, a long-term member of Islamic Jihad and an associate of Osama bin Laden. During the planning stage Odeh was in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. One of the would-be suicide bombers of the Nairobi attack was a UK national. This individual, al’Owali, unexpectedly survived and was hastily transported to an al Qaeda safe house in Kenya, where he telephoned to Yemen. During the next few hours, whilst monies were being

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transferred to help al’Owali’s attempts to flee Kenya, Osama bin Laden himself contacted the same telephone number in Yemen. Al’Owali was eventually arrested by the Kenyan authorities and transferred to the custody of the FBI for questioning.

Odeh fled the country, taking a flight to Pakistan, but was arrested by Pakistani authorities as he arrived at Karachi International Airport and subsequently extradited back to Kenya. The arrests and interrogations of Odeh and al’Owali gave definitive indicators of al Qaeda’s role in and responsibility for both bomb outrages. On 20 August 1998 President Clinton made an announcement to a hastily convened press conference that cruise missiles had been launched against Afghanistan and Sudan in retaliation for the bombings of the US embassies. The target was officially designated as attacks on the terrorists’ infrastructure, and in the case of Afghanistan was to coincide with a supposed meeting of al Qaeda leaders. In fact the raid on Afghanistan failed to eliminate any al Qaeda leaders, let alone Bin Laden. Odeh was reported to have told an FBI agent during one of his interrogations 24 hours before the launching of the missiles that the Afghan camp had been evacuated as a retaliation strike was fully expected. The attack on the Sudanese targets was also ill conceived. The target was the al Shifa chemical plant, assessed by intelligence that this was manufacturing chemical weapons. The intelligence proved false. After the strikes the German ambassador to Sudan sent an urgent communication to his government in Bonn informing them that the United States had made a serious mistake. Other members of the corps diplomatique in Khartoum informed the UK press that there were not, and never had been, any chemical weapons at the refinery. One eminent correspondent and specialist on Bin Laden drew parallels between the airstrike on al Shifa and the mistaken airstrike during the Kosovo crisis of 1999 when the US forces bombed the Chinese Embassy.

13 Statement of US Defence Secretary Cohen and Secretary of State Albright, 21 August 1998.
in Belgrade.\textsuperscript{17} Speaking half a decade after both mistakes, one US representative of a government aid and training organisation commented ruefully:

Was the Chinese embassy an accident – it was possibly more deliberate, just to say to the Chinese at that stage of the Serbian-Kosovo crisis, ‘stay out – don’t even think about it’, to give them a warning. Unfortunately the Chinese haven’t forgotten, whilst others, that is Sudan, just accepted and moved on.\textsuperscript{18}

In admitting the fault regarding the Chinese, the representative inadvertently revealed a significant underestimation of the African dimension. Sudan, and Africa, have not forgotten.

Even the original embassy attacks were compounded by an oversight. On 26 May 1998, Bin Laden gave a news conference where threats were made against the United States. A fortnight later the US State Department issued a general warning, stating that it took such threats seriously and that ‘the United States is increasing security at many US government facilities …’.\textsuperscript{19}

These premises were in the Middle East and Asia; significantly, premises in the entire African continent were omitted. The US Embassy in Nairobi was in a particularly delicate location, and the US ambassador sent an urgent signal to the US State Department on 27 December 1997 about its vulnerability, and later, in April 1998 wrote a letter direct to US Secretary of State Albright stating the same concerns.

Arguably, the embassy bombings were part of a series of terrorist attacks in Africa in the 1990s which constituted a dual watershed in the development of terrorism, and as such were important developments that predated 9/11. Firstly the attacks on US forces in Somalia opened up a new front in Islamic extremist militancy, but the overlooking of the perpetrators’ links to al Qaeda, together with the comparatively low death toll, caused the full significance of the attacks to be missed. The 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania were indeed recognised by international strategic intelligence, if for no other reason than their sheer impact. However, what remained unrecognised was that these and the Somali attacks, marked a movement of the security threat in the region in


\textsuperscript{18} Representative of USAID, interview with author, March 2007.

that it was the ‘interaction of domestic and transnational expressions of militant Islam’.  

Meanwhile, in the wake of the furious United States reaction to the two embassy bombings, Hassan al Turabi started making alliances that would have a future impact. Within days of the embassy bombings, al Turabi made swift moves to form alliances with various other East African terrorist groups. He contacted representatives of the Oromo Liberation Front in Ethiopia and God’s Army in Uganda, suggesting that US authorities would be narrowly focused on the investigations, and would have less will or resources to pursue a forward policy in the region, and that now was the time for developing and strengthening some form of pan-Islamic alliance. A total of 13 militant Islamist organisations in East Africa and the Horn region were contacted and representatives formed a consultative group within al Turabi’s sponsored National Islamic Front. This group was to grow to include representatives of 43 different terrorist organisations. Rudimentary clandestine training camps in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Uganda had already been sponsored by al Turabi in the early 1990s; these were now enhanced and more Islamic volunteers recruited.  

The Oromo Liberation Front established permanent liaison with the Somalid Ethiopian branches of the Islamic front, and all three organisations took over the clandestine bases of the Islamic Union in southern Somalia, setting up new secret bases in the border triangle between Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Uganda Islamic militant groups launched several attacks against the United States embassy building in Kampala, and other selected targets in Uganda. Ugandan police arrested 20 suspects. All of these attacks were unsuccessful, but the Ugandan government was somewhat alarmed, to the extent that they drastically reduced the clandestine aid they were sending to rebel separatist forces in southern Sudan, as a goodwill gesture to Khartoum, which promptly reined in the Islamic groups in Uganda and the attempted attacks ceased.

Somalia and the region in the 1990s gave rise to an extremely complex situation in the 2000s, with various interventionist forces and war being

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waged by proxy by differing countries in the region. The conducive factors which resulted in this situation in the 2000s were generated by al Turabi’s activities in the 1990s whilst the US was preoccupied by the cataclysmic attacks on its embassies in East Africa.

In mid-1996 the Sudanese authorities, led by General Bashir, succumbed to pressure from Saudi Arabia, and ordered the expulsion of Bin Laden and his followers from the country. Saudi pressure had been increasingly part of multinational pressure, accompanied by financial inducements. Both pressure and economic inducements had become so strong that even al Turabi concurred with the expulsion. Also Bin Laden had lately proved himself a contentious guest, objecting to the use of ‘Islamic’ assets – his own followers and the economic investments he had made into the Sudanese economy – being deployed by the Sudanese government in their struggles against the separatist civil war factions and liberation movements. Bin Laden attempted to insist that such assets should be reserved and used for future international attacks. However, it was not a robust expulsion, despite the Sudanese government’s studied alacrity to comply with Saudi wishes. Bin Laden was flown from Khartoum international airport to a provincial airport, and then placed in comfortable confinement before being moved again to the western region of Darfur. A period of several weeks elapsed, during which his followers, equipment and other logistical consignments were organised, then moved in phases to Afghanistan. However, Bin Laden’s expulsion, together with his followers, from Sudan in 1996 was not the end of al Qaeda’s influence and activity in the country, nor of terrorism in East Africa. The operational base in Khartoum ended, but al Qaeda’s influence in Sudan, and al Qaeda cells throughout East Africa remained. Nor, as became infamously apparent, were the 1998 embassy bombings in African capitals the end of Bin Laden’s attacks. Three years later the sovereign territory of the United States was targeted by the simultaneous 9/11 attacks.

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