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Context of '1988: 'Al-Qaeda' Possibly the Name of a Computer Database'

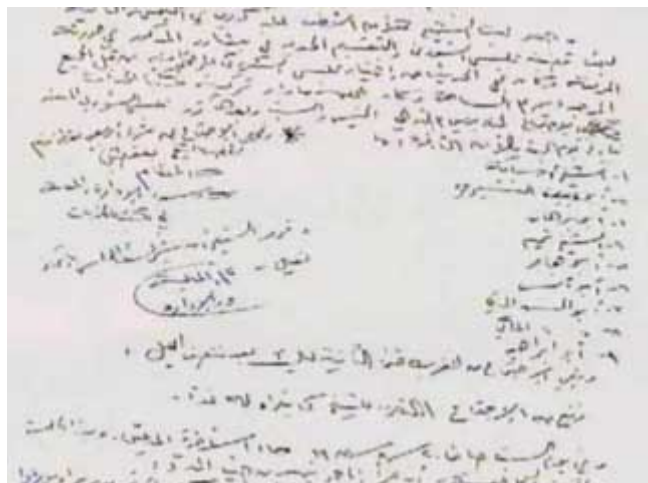
This is a scalable context timeline. It contains events related to the event **1988: 'Al-Qaeda' Possibly the Name of a Computer Database**. You can narrow or broaden the context of this timeline by adjusting the zoom level. The lower the scale, the more relevant the items on average will be, while the higher the scale, the less relevant the items, on average, will be.

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1988: 'Al-Qaeda' Possibly the Name of a Computer Database

Robin Cook, British Foreign Secretary from 1997 to 2003, will later say that “al-Qaeda” was originally the name of a database. In a 2005 article, Cook will write that bin Laden was “a product of a monumental miscalculation by western security agencies. Throughout the ‘80s he was armed by the CIA and funded by the Saudis to wage jihad against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda, literally ‘the database,’ was originally the computer file of the thousands of mujaheddin who were recruited and trained with help from the CIA to defeat the Russians.” Cook will give no explanation as to how he might know this. (Cook 7/8/2005) Al-Qaeda the organization will be founded in 1988 (see August 11-20, 1988).

August 11-20, 1988: Bin Laden Forms Al-Qaeda



The notes from al-Qaeda’s formation meeting. The short lines on the right side are the list of attendees. [Source: CNN]

Bin Laden conducts two meetings to discuss “the establishment of a new military group,” according to notes that are found later. Notes reveal the group is initially called al-Qaeda al-Askariya, which roughly translates to “the military base.” But the name soon shortens to just al-Qaeda, meaning “the base” or “the foundation.” (Solomon 2/19/2003; Wright 2006, pp. 131-134) With the Soviets in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan, it is proposed to create the new group to keep military jihad, or holy war, alive after the Soviets are gone. The notes don’t specify what the group will do exactly, but it concludes, “Initial estimate, within six months of al-Qaeda (founding), 314 brothers will be trained and ready.” In fact, al-Qaeda will remain smaller than that for years to come. Fifteen people attend these two initial meetings. (Wright 2006, pp. 131-134) In addition to bin Laden, other attendees include:

- Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the head of the Egyptian militant group Islamic Jihad. (Wright 9/9/2002)
- Mohammed Atef, a.k.a. Abu Hafs.
- Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, a.k.a. Abu Hajer.
- Jamal al-Fadl.
- Wael Hamza Julaidan.
- Mohammed Loay Bayazid, a US citizen, who is notetaker for the meetings. (Wright 2006, pp. 131-134) Al-Fadl will reveal details about the meetings to US investigators in 1996 (see June 1996-April 1997). Notes to the meeting will be found in Bosnia in early 2002. (Wright 9/9/2002) It will take US intelligence years even to realize a group named al-Qaeda exists; the first known incidence of US intelligence being told the name will come in 1993 (see May 1993).

November 24, 1989: Bin Laden’s Mentor Assassinated

Bin Laden's mentor Sheikh Abdullah Azzam is killed by a car bomb in Afghanistan. The killing is never solved. Azzam has no shortage of enemies. Suspects include the Mossad, CIA, Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the ISI, and bin Laden. The reason bin Laden is suspected is because he and Azzam were increasingly at odds over what approach to take since the Soviet Union had been driven from Afghanistan earlier in the year (see February 15, 1989). (Suellentrop 4/16/2002; Coll 2004, pp. 204) In 1998, Mohammed Sadiq Odeh will be arrested and later convicted for a role in the 1998 African embassy bombings. He reportedly will tell US interrogators that bin Laden "personally ordered the killing of Azzam because he suspected his former mentor had ties with the CIA." However, it is not known if Odeh was just passing on a rumor. (Gunaratna 2003, pp. 32) Regardless, in the wake of Azzam's death, bin Laden takes control of Azzam's recruiting and support network, Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK)/Al-Kifah, and merges it with al-Qaeda, which was formed the year before (see August 11-20, 1988). (Suellentrop 4/16/2002; Coll 2004, pp. 204)



Sheikh Abdullah Azzam. [Source: CNN]

May 1993: Ali Mohamed Gives FBI First Glimpse of Al-Qaeda


In the wake of his detention in Canada (see June 16, 1993), double agent Ali Mohamed is interviewed by the FBI and volunteers the earliest publicly known insider description of al-Qaeda. Mohamed is working as an FBI informant on smugglers moving illegal immigrants from Mexico to the US. FBI agent John Zent, Mohamed's handler, interviews him in the FBI San Francisco office after having helped release him from Canadian custody. (Risen 10/31/1998; Lance 2006, pp. 125, 130) Mohamed says that bin Laden is running a group called "al-Qaeda." Apparently, this is the first known instance of the FBI being told of that name, though it appears the CIA was aware of the name since at least 1991 (see February 1991). Mohamed claims to have met bin Laden and says bin Laden is "building an army" that could be used to overthrow the Saudi Arabian government. He admits that he has trained radical militants at bin Laden's training camps in Sudan and Afghanistan. He says he taught them intelligence and anti-hijacking techniques. Mohamed apparently is given a polygraph test for the first time, and fails it (see 1992). However, he denies links to any criminal group or act. An FBI investigator later will say, "We always took him seriously. It's just he only gave us 25 percent of what was out there." In addition to his Canadian detention, the FBI is also interested in Mohamed because his name had surfaced in connection with the Al-Kifah Refugee Center as part of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing investigation. (Weiser and Risen 12/1/1998; Williams and McCormick 11/4/2001; Waldman 11/26/2001; Martin and Berens 12/11/2001) By the time this interview takes place, investigators looking into the World Trade Center bombing earlier in the year have already determined that top secret US military training manuals found in the possession of assassin El-Sayyid Nosair (see November 5, 1990) must have been stolen by Mohamed from the US army base where he had been stationed (see Spring 1993). Yet Mohamed is not arrested, though he is monitored (see Autumn 1993). New Yorker magazine will later note, "inexplicably, [the contents of the FBI's] interview never found its way to the FBI investigators in New York." (Wright 9/9/2002)

December 16, 1994: Al-Qaeda Founding Member Arrested in US but Let Go



Benevolence International Foundation logo. [Source: Benevolence International Foundation]

One of the founders of al-Qaeda is arrested in the US and then let go. Mohammed Loay Bayazid is arrested in Morgan Hills, California, together with Mohammed Jamal Khalifa (see December 16, 1994-May 1995), Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law and a known terrorism financier, and Salem bin Laden, one of Osama's brothers (see December 16, 1994). Bayazid was born in Syria but moved to the US with his parents as a teenager and became a US citizen. In the mid-1980s he went to fight in Afghanistan and befriended bin Laden. He was one of the original members of al-Qaeda and took the notes during the group's founding meeting in 1988 (see August 11-20, 1988). Bayazid moved with bin Laden to Sudan in the early 1990s and has been called bin Laden's main business adviser there. In 1993, it is believed he was involved in an al-Qaeda effort to purchase nuclear material. By 1994, Bayazid moved back to the US and became the president of the Chicago-based Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), a charity suspected of links to al-Qaeda. (Rizzo 9/9/2006) The driver's license he shows for identification when arrested gives the Chicago

office of BIF as his residence. (USA v. Benevolence International Foundation and Enaam M. Arnaut 4/29/2002, pp. 16-17 ) But surprisingly given Bayazid's history, he is released not long after his arrest in California. Lorenzo Vidino, an expert on Islamic militants, will later investigate Bayazid but is never able to determine when he was released, why, or where he went after that. (Rizzo 9/9/2006) There is evidence he stays in the US until April 1998, and then moves to Turkey. Bayazid will eventually reappear in Susan, where he will be interviewed by the FBI shortly after 9/11 (see November 2001). He apparently still operates several businesses there. He denies ever having any connection to terrorism. (Herrmann 5/1/2002; Rizzo 9/9/2006)

1995-1998: Al-Qaeda Leader Based in Philippines

Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, one of the founders and top leaders of al-Qaeda (see August 11-20, 1988), periodically lives in the Philippines during these years. Philippine officials will later note that their country makes a good place for Islamic militants to hide out due to lax immigration and "places of refuge" in the southern Philippines where a number of Islamic groups are fighting the government. (Burgos 10/1/2001; Abuza 12/1/2002) In addition, Salim is believed to have visited Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) in 1994 while they were working on the Bojinka plot in the Philippines. It is thought that he already had close ties to KSM by that time. (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 139) Salim will be arrested in Germany in late 1998 (see September 16, 1998) and charged with helping to plan the 1998 US embassy bombings (see 10:35-10:39 a.m., August 7, 1998). Between 1994 and his 1998 arrest, it is believed he traveled to more than 20 countries, including Russia and Canada. (Bonner 12/5/1998)

June 1996-April 1997: Highly Trusted Informant Exposes Al-Qaeda Secrets to US



Jamal al-Fadl testifying in a courtroom. Because his identity has been kept secret, his face has been blocked out. [Source: CNN]

Jamal al-Fadl, an al-Qaeda operative from al-Qaeda's first meeting in the late 1980s until 1995, tells the US everything he knows about al-Qaeda. Before al-Fadl's debriefings, US intelligence had amassed thick files on bin Laden and his associates and contacts. However, they had had no idea how the many pieces fit together. But an official says. "After al-Fadl, everything fell into place." (Miller, Stone, and Mitchell 2002, pp. 154-65) The New Yorker will later call al-Fadl "arguably the United States' most valuable informant on al-Qaeda." FBI agent Dan Coleman will later say on al-Fadl, "He's been very, very important to us. When it comes to understanding al-Qaeda, he's the Rosetta Stone." FBI agent Mike Anticev will similarly say, "He spoke to us in great detail, and everything that he told us panned out." CIA officials debrief al-Fadl for a month and a half. Then the CIA hands him, and transcripts of all their interviews with him,

over to the FBI. (Mayer 9/11/2006) Coleman and US prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald interrogate al-Fadl at a US military base in Germany for months. (Lance 2006, pp. 261) Roughly between November 1996 and April 1997, al-Fadl tells the FBI about:

- The historical background of al-Qaeda. Al-Fadl was one of al-Qaeda's founding members (see August 11-20, 1988).
- The structure of al-Qaeda and its leadership composition.
- Al-Qaeda's objectives and direction.
- Its financial infrastructure and networks. Al-Fadl has extensive knowledge of this because he worked as an al-Qaeda financial officer (see December 1996-January 1997).
- Its connections and collaboration with other terrorist groups and supporters.
- Its activities against US soldiers in Somalia (see October 3-4, 1993).
- Its activities in Bosnia. Al-Fadl was sent there on several missions (see Autumn 1992 and Autumn 1992).
- The Al-Kifah Refugee Center, al-Qaeda's most important charity front in the US. Al-Fadl worked there in the 1980s (see 1986-1993).
- Bin Laden's efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Al-Fadl was personally involved in an effort to buy uranium for al-Qaeda (see Late 1993). (9/11 Commission 7/24/2004, pp. 479)
- Bin Laden's plans to attack either inside the US or US embassies (see Late 1996).


Al-Fadl continues to help US intelligence until current day. For instance, in 2000, he will help US officials

capture his brother-in-law, Mohammed Suliman al-Nalfi, who is said to be close to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Nalfi will eventually be sentenced to ten years in prison in the US. Al-Fadl will have no knowledge of the 9/11 plot, but he will continue to identify captured al-Qaeda operatives after 9/11. (Mayer 9/11/2006) Interestingly, al-Fadl, a Sudanese citizen, will later claim that he worked with the Sudanese intelligence agency with the direct approval of bin Laden. (Day 2. United States of America v. Usama bin Laden, et al. 2/6/2001)

November 1996-September 1998: Al-Qaeda Front Company in Istanbul Facilitates Travel and Money Transfers

Senior al-Qaeda operatives establish a front company called Maram in Istanbul, Turkey, as a travel agency and import-export business. Investigators will later say they suspect that the company may be involved in efforts to obtain material for nuclear weapons and that it provides money and other assistance to radicals traveling between Europe and training camps in Afghanistan. Turkish intelligence and several foreign agencies are aware that militants transit Turkey at this time and some of them are under surveillance (see 1996, 1995-2000, and Mid-1996), but it is unclear whether Maram itself is monitored. The company, which receives a donation of US\$ 1.25 million from Saudi businessman Yassin al-Qadi (see January-August 1998), is established by Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, one of al-Qaeda's founding members (see August 11-20, 1988), who is said to have a history of moving money and shopping for weapons for the organization. A few months later he transfers shares in the company to two other men. One is Wael Hamza Julaidan, a Saudi businessman also said to be a founder of al-Qaeda; the US will officially designate Julaidan a financial supporter of al-Qaeda in 2002 (see September 6, 2002). The other transferee is Mohammed Bayazid, another founder of al-Qaeda and a US citizen who was arrested in the US in 1994 and then let go (see December 16, 1994). (Frantz 9/19/2002) For a time before November 1998, toll records for the Illinois office of the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) show telephone contact with a number in Turkey associated with Bayazid. Phone records indicate Bayazid moves to Turkey around April 1998. (USA v. Benevolence International Foundation and Enaam M. Arnaout 4/29/2002, pp. 16-17 ) US intelligence has been interested in BIF's ties to al-Qaeda since at least 1993 (see 1993 and 1998), but apparently misses its links to Maram while the company is still open. After Salim is arrested in Germany in 1998 (see September 16, 1998), the company clears out its offices. A neighbor says, "I just came one morning and saw the office was empty. Nobody knows what happen[ed]." (Frantz 9/19/2002)

September 16, 1998: Important Al-Qaeda Leader Arrested in Germany

Mamdouh Mahmud Salim (a.k.a. Abu Hajer), an al-Qaeda operative from the United Arab Emirates connected to the 1998 East African embassy bombings (see 10:35-10:39 a.m., August 7, 1998), is arrested at a used car dealership near Munich, Germany. He is arrested by a special commando unit of German police, with CIA agents directing them nearby. The German government has no idea who Salim is, and the US only notified Germany about the planned arrest five hours in advance. (PBS 9/30/1998; Cziesche et al. 12/12/2005) The 9/11 Congressional Inquiry will later say that Salim was Osama bin Laden's "right hand man," and "head of bin Laden's computer operations and weapons procurement." He is also "the most senior-level bin Laden operative arrested" up until this time. (Tagliabue and Bonner 9/29/2001; US Congress 7/24/2003, pp. 51 ) Author Lawrence Wright will later note that bin Laden and Salim worked together in Afghanistan in the 1980s, "forging such powerful bonds that no one could get between them." Salim was also one of the founding members of al-Qaeda (see August 11-20, 1988) and bin Laden's personal imam (i.e., preacher). (Wright 2006, pp. 131, 170) Starting in 1995, Salim had been making frequent visits to Germany. Mamoun Darkazanli, who lives in Hamburg and associates with Mohamed Atta's al-Qaeda cell, had signing powers over Salim's bank account. Both men attended Al-Quds mosque, the same Hamburg mosque as future 9/11 hijackers Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi attend. (Rose 1/2002) The FBI learns much from Salim about al-Qaeda, and this information could be useful to the US embassy bombings investigation. However, the FBI is unwilling to brief its German counterparts on what it knows about Salim and al-Qaeda. (Tagliabue and Bonner 9/29/2001)



Mamdouh Mahmud Salim. [Source: FBI]

Shortly After September 16, 1998: Captured Al-Qaeda Leader Is Linked to Al-Qaeda Hamburg Cell Member Zammar

The arrest of al-Qaeda leader Mamdouh Mahmud Salim (a.k.a. Abu Hajer) points US and German investigators to Mohammed Haydar Zammar, a member of the al-Qaeda cell in Hamburg, Germany, with a few of the future 9/11 hijackers. Salim is arrested on September 16, 1998, in Munich, Germany (see September 16, 1998). He is believed to be al-Qaeda's financial chief, and is one of al-Qaeda's founding members (see August 11-20, 1988). After Salim's arrest, both German and US intelligence investigate his contacts in Germany and discover a link to Zammar. Zammar is already being investigated and monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), Germany's domestic intelligence service (see March 1997-Early 2000). (Cziesche et al. 12/12/2005) Presumably, the link between Zammar and Salim should increase the urgency of the German investigation. It is unknown when US intelligence begins monitoring Zammar, but the US will discover important links between Zammar and al-Qaeda in the summer of 1999 (see Summer 1999). US and German investigators also discover a link between Salim and Mamoun Darkazanli, a Hamburg associate of Zammar's, and they monitor him as well (see Late 1998).

June 2001: Al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad Complete Merger

Two major terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda and the Egypt-based Islamic Jihad, formally merged into one. This completes a merging process that had been going on for years (see August 11-20, 1988, December 1, 1996-June 1997, and February 22, 1998). The technical name of the new entity is Qaeda al-Jihad, though it is widely called al-Qaeda. Bin Laden remains in charge, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Islamic Jihad, remains second in command. (Wright 9/9/2002)

November 2001: FBI Interviews Al-Qaeda Operatives in Sudan; Hussein-Bin Laden Link Is Dismissed

FBI agent Jack Cloonan arrives in Sudan with several other FBI agents and is given permission by the Sudanese government to interview some al-Qaeda operatives living there. The interviews were conducted at safe houses arranged by Sudanese intelligence. Cloonan interviews Mubarak al Duri, an Iraqi. He lived in Tuscon, Arizona, in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was al-Qaeda's chief agent attempting to purchase weapons of mass destruction (see 1986). Cloonan will later claim that al Duri and a second Iraqi al-Qaeda operative laughed when asked about possible bin Laden ties to Saddam Hussein's government. "They said bin Laden hated Saddam." Bin Laden considered Hussein "a Scotch-drinking, woman-chasing apostate." Cloonan also interviews Mohammed Loay Bayazid, an American citizen and founding member of al-Qaeda (see August 11-20, 1988), who ran an al-Qaeda charity front in the US (see December 16, 1994). (Silverstein 4/29/2005) The CIA will interview them in 2002, but they apparently remain free in Sudan (see Mid-2002).

December 4, 2001: Stratcom Report Says US Backed Some Forerunners of Al-Qaeda

The United States Strategic Command (Stratcom) produces a document mentioning that the US backed some of al-Qaeda's forerunners. The document, an after-action report for Stratcom's Global Guardian exercise in 2001, contains summaries about terrorist groups from around the world. Its section on al-Qaeda states: "The group was originally brought together from elements of various insurgent military groups which have fought continuously in the Middle East since the 1980s. Some of these groups had US backing in the past." Al-Qaeda was formed in 1988 (see August 11-20, 1988) by Arabs who had fought for the US-sponsored mujaheddin in the Soviet-Afghan war (see 1985-1986 and 1986-1992). (US Strategic Command 12/4/2011)

September 6, 2002: Al-Qaeda Figure with Ties to Rich Saudis Is Declared Terrorist Financier, but to Little Effect

The US and United Nations designate Wael Hamza Julaidan a terrorist financier and freezes the funds of the Rabita Trust. Julaidan worked with bin Laden's mentor Abdullah Azzam in the Muslim World League in Pakistan in the 1980s and was one of the founders of al-Qaeda in 1988 (see August 11-20, 1988). (Kaplan, Ekman, and Latif 12/15/2003) Julaidan's name was on the "Golden Chain" list of early al-Qaeda funders (see 1988-1989), serving as an intermediary between bin Laden and Saudi multimillionaires. Beginning in 2000, he became director general of the Rabita Trust, a Pakistani charity which the UN determined has been funding al-Qaeda. The US froze the bank accounts of the Rabita Trust shortly after 9/11 due to suspected terrorist links, but the organization changed its name and continued to operate (see Mid-September-October 12, 2001). Julaidan is considered highly connected in Saudi Arabia and even though the



Wael Hamza Julaidan. [Source: Public domain, via Evan Kohlmann]

Saudi government officially goes along with the terrorist designations of Julaidan and the Rabita Trust, some top Saudi officials publicly defend him. For instance, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nawaf bin Abdul Aziz publicly suggests that Julaidan is innocent. Julaidan is not arrested and the Saudi government offers no proof that they seized any of his or Rabita's bank accounts. In December 2003, the Washington Post will report that US and UN officials believe Julaidan continues to work with charity fronts and handles large sums of money. (Farah 12/14/2003; Burr and Collins 2006, pp. 100-101)

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