

BitcoinTransfer: Syria-based Cryptocurrency Exchange Facilitating Terrorism Financing

With sanctions imposed on its ruling government and several militant jihadist groups active in the country since civil war began in 2011, Syria is known to be a [risky jurisdiction](#) for terrorism financing. As such, money services businesses (MSBs) active in the country must come under increased scrutiny from financial intelligence units (FIUs) in both the public and private sector, as these businesses can be exploited for or even complicit in terrorism financing schemes. This scrutiny must also extend to cryptocurrency businesses, as our [research shows](#) that terror groups are scaling up their usage of this technology to transfer funds for operational purposes.

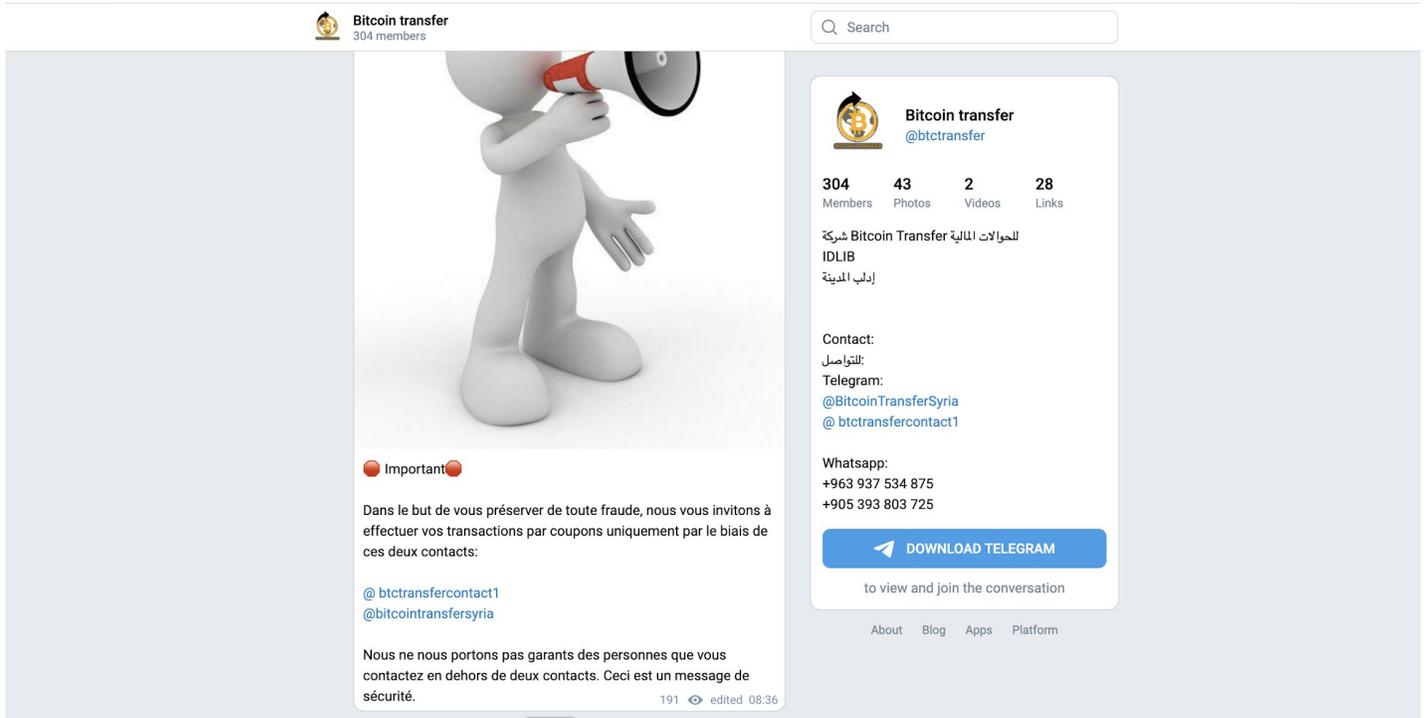
One example: BitcoinTransfer, a Syria-based cryptocurrency exchange that has facilitated significant terrorism financing. In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the disruption of a terrorism financing donation and money laundering operation carried out by al-Qaeda and several affiliated terror groups. Multiple groups ran their own individual donation pushes for the campaign, but then used multi-layered transactions to obfuscate their movements of funds collected to a central hub, from which the funds were then redistributed back to the individual groups. BitcoinTransfer acted as that central hub.

In this report, we break down BitcoinTransfer's operations and Bitcoin transaction history to show how the exchange facilitated donation campaigns to Syria-based terrorist groups. We hope this report encourages financial institutions and cryptocurrency businesses to investigate any exposure they may have to BitcoinTransfer (as well as other organizations mentioned in this report), and more generally can act as a learning resource for those investigating cryptocurrency-based terrorism financing.

BitcoinTransfer overview: Active social channels cater to western users

BitcoinTransfer (BT) is a cryptocurrency exchange and MSB that claims to be headquartered in Idlib, Syria, and has been [publicly cited](#) as being promoted and run by jihadists.

BT maintains an active presence on chat-based communications channels such as Telegram and WhatsApp. It frequently publishes user testimonials and detailed instructions on how to use its services, as well as provides contact information for users who need help.



Pictured above: BT's Telegram channel home. The pinned message is written in French, and translates to: "In order to protect you from any fraud, we invite you to make your coupon transactions only through these two contacts: @btctransfercontact1 @bitcointransfersyria We do not guarantee the people you contact apart from two contacts. This is a security message."

BT appears especially focused on users outside of Syria. Its Telegram channel, for instance, shares messages in several western languages in addition to Arabic, including French, German, Russian, and others. Its messages and advertisements often emphasize security and anonymity, as well as its ability to facilitate transfers from European countries without submitting identification documents or "exposing your friend or family to danger..."

Below, we see a Telegram post from BT with a screenshot of a message from a Russian user praising the service and points to a potential terror-related transaction.



The message in the screenshot translates to:

Peace, mercy and blessings of God be upon you. I've repeatedly used the services of the brothers to receive money through BitcoinTransfer, money came quickly and without problems, the ratio is meager. I advise them.

The screenshot also includes a Bitcoin transaction hash:

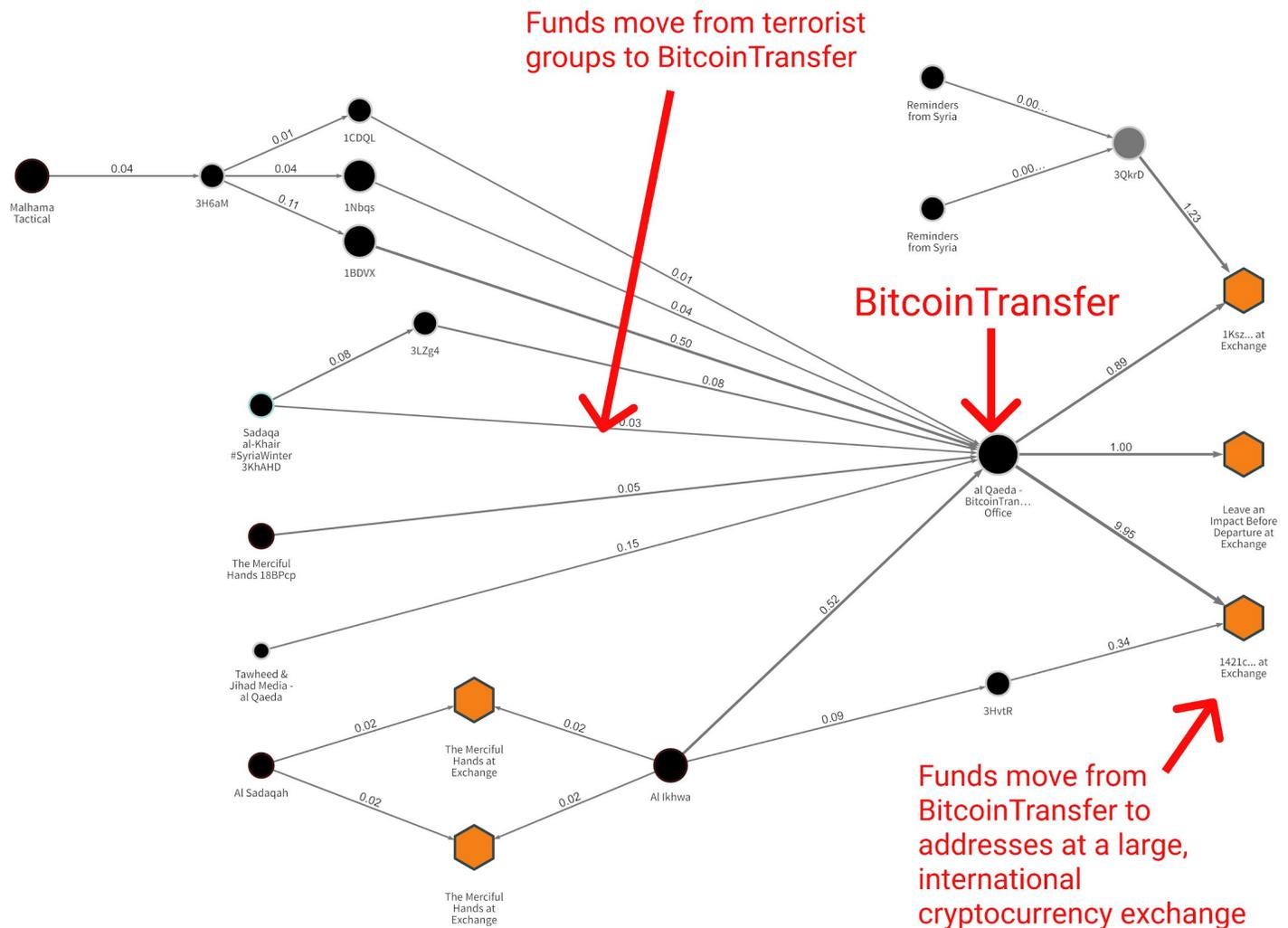
f37eee0294fe4a8dec876affc5ef4be76efde19671c818166c631103fc59286e.

That transaction appears related to a movement of funds to BT from an address controlled by Malhama Tactical, as we will explore further below.

Even before reviewing its transactions, BT would still present cause for concern given its jurisdiction of operation and implied ability to facilitate transfers from western countries to Syria without attracting government scrutiny.

What we see on the blockchain: BitcoinTransfer's transaction history

BT's on-chain activity suggests it's a relatively small exchange. It hosts 158 Bitcoin addresses, which together have received and sent just over 36 BTC across 679 transfers since the service became active in December 2018. These transactions include significant exposure to regulated cryptocurrency exchanges with global audiences.



BT has also received funds from organizations suspected of or known to facilitate terrorism financing in Syria, which we show on the left-hand side of the above Chainalysis Reactor graph, and will elaborate on further below. Many of these organizations present themselves as charities while concealing their links to militant organizations, a practice [expert observers have noted](#) is common.

Below is a summary of the suspected terrorism financing organizations that have sent funds to Bitcoin Transfer:

Organization name	Amount sent to Bitcoin Transfer	Notes
Malhama Tactical	0.172 BTC (indirect)	Malhama Tactical is a private military contractor who has fought alongside terror groups such as Al Qaeda and Tahrir al-Sham, and provided training to terrorist groups. Malhama Tactical is led by Belarus-born Abu Salman Belarus and known to have many Russian-speaking members. Malhama Tactical has sent funds to BT indirectly, with funds first passing through two intermediary wallets. The transfer between those two intermediary wallets preceding the transfer to BT is the transfer whose hash we see in the Russian testimonial message BT posted on its Telegram page (TX: f37eee0294fe4a8dec876affc5ef4be76efde19671c818166c631103fc59286e)
The Merciful Hands	0.05 BTC	The Merciful Hands (TMH) purports to be a charity group that supports foreign fighters in Syria, as well as their families. TMH is active on Telegram and was at one point active on Facebook. TMH outwardly claims not to fund militants, but is widely recognized as funding terrorism by Western authorities.
Sadaqa al-Khair / #SyriaWinter	0.03 BTC	Sadaqa al-Khair purports to be a Syrian charity group and has been connected to terrorism financing.
Al Ikhwa	0.52 BTC	Al Ikhwa purports to be a Syrian charity group and has been connected to terrorism financing. Al Ikhwa is active on Telegram and claims it only facilitates humanitarian aid, but has been linked to terrorist groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham .
Tawheed & Jihad Media	0.15 BTC	Tawheed & Jihad Media operated a Telegram group that raised donations that it explicitly stated were meant to "finance bullets and rockets for the mujahideen." It frequently posted watermarked photos of jihadist group Ansar al-Tawheed and pro-Al-Qaeda collective Wa Haredh al-Moemeneen.
Reminders for Syria (RFS)	Sent 1.23 BTC to address exchange-hosted address to which al-Qaeda BT users also send funds to convert to cash. Has not sent to BT cluster.	RFS purports to be a charity but has made posts indicating it will use donated funds to purchase weapons for militants. RFS and Al Ikhwa frequently promote each other's content on Telegram.



Want to learn more?

If you'd like to learn more about cryptocurrency-based terrorism financing and see how governments around the world use Chainalysis to investigate such cases, you can [contact us here](#).