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Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy

Al Qaeda (AQ, alt. Al Qaida or Al Qa'eda) is a transnational Sunni Islamist terrorist organization with a network of affiliates. The group rose to global prominence after perpetrating the September 11, 2001 attacks (9/11) in the United States. Since then, sustained counterterrorism (CT) efforts by the United States and its partners have weakened the group, particularly in its historic base in Afghanistan. For several years, U.S. officials and international observers have characterized the AQ threat as stemming mainly from the group's affiliates in Yemen and Africa. The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the U.S. Intelligence Community described Africa as the "center of gravity in the Sunni global jihad," although it did not characterize affiliates there as posing a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. U.S. policy efforts, as directed and overseen by Congress, to counter Al Qaeda have included military action, foreign partnerships, sanctions, and law enforcement activities.

Background

In 1988, Osama bin Laden established Al Qaeda from a network of Arab and other foreign veterans of the U.S.-backed Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Union, with the aim of supporting Islamist causes in conflicts around the world. After the 1991 Gulf War, citing opposition to Saudi Arabia's decision to host U.S. troops and other grievances, the group made the United States its primary target. Bin Laden left his native Saudi Arabia that year for Sudan, until the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996 and offered refuge to AQ members and other armed Islamists.

Al Qaeda conducted terrorist attacks against U.S. and allied targets prior to 9/11, including the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (after which the United States launched airstrikes against targets in Afghanistan and Sudan) and the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen. The United States designated Al Qaeda as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1999. After 9/11, the United States launched military operations to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan and expanded its CT efforts worldwide. Some AQ leaders fled to Pakistan, where U.S. forces killed Bin Laden in 2011. AQ attacks against U.S. and Western targets worldwide continued in the years after 9/11, but the group has not successfully carried out a major attack inside the United States since then.

Leadership

After Bin Laden's death, Ayman al Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy for over a decade, served as AQ's leader. Some observers attributed purported AQ struggles (including its failure to strike inside the United States) under Zawahiri to what they described as his understated leadership, as compared to Bin Laden's charisma. Others argued that Zawahiri's more restrained approach was an asset that

created space for AQ affiliates to pursue regionally tailored strategies and make inroads into local communities. On July 31, 2022, Zawahiri was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan, though neither AQ nor the Taliban formally acknowledged his death. Al Qaeda has also not announced Zawahiri's successor, though United Nations sanctions monitors and others assess that the de facto leader of the group is Sayf al Adl. Al Adl reportedly resides in Iran; Iran's government has allowed some AQ figures to operate in its territory despite historic enmity between Sunni Al Qaeda and Iran's Shia Islamic Republic. AQ leaders may view Iran as relatively safe from U.S. counterterrorism pressure, while Iranian leaders may view AQ's presence as leverage against the United States, as well as an opportunity to support another U.S. adversary.

Structure

Al Qaeda once had a hierarchical organization and a relatively small and geographically contained membership. The attenuation of AQ core leadership, the growth of regional affiliates, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014 (which challenged AQ claims to be the global leader of Islamist terrorism) have changed the organization.

Analysts have long debated how to characterize the shifting ties between AQ leadership and groups that have pledged allegiance to it, as well as the relationships among these self-described affiliates. AQ appears to have "devolved operational responsibility to regional affiliates as it has shifted away from centrally directed plotting," per the 2022 ATA. The traditional power dynamic may even have reversed, with the affiliates now providing resources and legitimacy to the group's core leadership; the 2024 ATA assessed that AQ affiliates "on the African continent and Yemen will sustain the global network as the group maintains its strategic intent to target the United States and U.S. citizens." Al Qaeda may persist as a group that inspires ideologically motivated terrorism against U.S. interests around the world *and* opportunistically enters (or secures the allegiance of participants in) local conflicts. Changes in the relative balance of these elements of the group's identity and structure may in turn prompt changes in the focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts over time.

Status in Afghanistan

The Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan has had a mixed impact on Al Qaeda. The two are long-time allies, and U.N. sanctions monitors reported in early 2024 that their "relationship remains strong," despite Taliban efforts to "constrain some [AQ] activities." U.N. sanctions monitors also conveyed an assessment from regional governments that Al Qaeda "continues to pose a threat in the region, and potentially beyond," while also stating that "the group cannot at present project sophisticated attacks at long range." That latter assessment largely aligns with U.S.

government appraisals that Al Qaeda is at an “operational nadir” and maintaining a “low profile” in Afghanistan to comply with Taliban “directives against conducting external operations and recruitment.”

Select Global Affiliates

Regional developments, notably the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the post-2011 instability that engulfed some states after Arab Spring protests, created opportunities for AQ affiliates throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Affiliates have also exploited local conflicts and political crises in Somalia and the Sahel region.

- In 2004, the Iraq-based Jordanian national Abu Musab al Zarqawi formed the first AQ affiliate, **Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)**. In 2006, AQI renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). As security conditions in Syria deteriorated in 2011, AQI/ISI began operations there as the **Nusra Front**. The Nusra Front soon became one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria. In 2013, AQI/ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi attempted to subsume the Nusra Front under his leadership as part of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (see CRS In Focus IF10328, *The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy*), an action Nusra and Al Qaeda rejected. In 2017, the Nusra Front merged with other Syrian factions to become **Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)**. HTS leaders, who control most of the northeastern Syrian province of Idlib, have apparently sought to distance themselves from AQ and have targeted some Islamic State personnel in areas under their control. An HTS breakoff group and rival, **Hurras al Din**, is seen as closer to AQ but weaker than HTS.
- U.S.-backed Saudi efforts dismantled an AQ branch in the country by 2005, leaving only scattered cells remaining. In 2009, these cells united with Yemeni AQ operatives to form **Al Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula (AQAP)**, designated as an FTO that year. AQAP grew rapidly in the context of Yemen’s post-2011 instability and civil war. AQAP has attempted, perhaps more than any other AQ affiliate, to carry out and inspire attacks in the United States and Europe. While “in decline” due to continued CT pressure and internal frictions, the group “remains the most effective terrorist group in Yemen with intent to conduct operations in the region and beyond.” Sayf al Adl’s son reportedly resides in Yemen and “is close to AQAP leadership.”
- As its international reach grew with affiliates like AQAP, Al Qaeda attracted interest from likeminded groups. **Al Shabaab**, a Somali group designated as an FTO in 2008 whose founders had ties to Al Qaeda, formally pledged allegiance to AQ in 2012. Al Shabaab took over territory in central and southern Somalia in the mid-2000s and has carried out attacks against domestic and international targets in Somalia and neighboring countries. U.S. officials have described the group as Al Qaeda’s largest and wealthiest affiliate. With an estimated 7,000-12,000 fighters, it reportedly generates “over \$100 million” in annual revenue. In August 2023, the Somali government launched an offensive against Al Shabaab that has since “stalled.”

- **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** first emerged as a faction in Algeria’s 1990s civil conflict. It pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and rebranded itself as AQIM in 2006-2007. AQIM’s center of gravity moved southward and eastward after 2011, spawning a number of splinter factions and local affiliates. Even as AQIM activity in North Africa has waned, some of those offshoots have strengthened. The most prominent is the **Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (or JNIM, in Arabic)**, which was formed in 2017 as a merger of AQIM’s Sahel branch, an offshoot known as Al Murabitoun, and two Mali-based groups. Designated as an FTO in 2018, JNIM is most active in Mali and Burkina Faso, where military juntas have seized power, expelled French counterterrorism forces, and strengthened security ties with Russia. JNIM has alternated between a “localized détente” and direct combat with the regional IS affiliate. JNIM has also expanded into parts of coastal West African countries.

U.S. Policy Responses

The U.S. campaign against Al Qaeda, now in its third decade, spans a wide array of policy areas. The United States has conducted airstrikes on AQ targets in at least seven countries since 2012. In 2021, the United States removed military forces from Afghanistan and initiated Operation Enduring Sentinel as the U.S. mission to conduct “over the horizon” CT operations from outside Afghanistan against threats emanating from within the country. Earlier that year, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia; President Biden ordered their redeployment in 2022. Over 1,000 U.S. forces in Niger conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and security cooperation until a 2023 coup; in April 2024, U.S. officials stated plans to withdraw troops after the ruling junta rescinded the U.S. status of forces agreement.

The United States seeks to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist threats “by, with, and through” local partners, including through the provision of security assistance and, in some cases, logistical, intelligence, and/or advisory support. Some observers have argued that such efforts require U.S. military presence to be successful. The United States also works to bolster partner states’ civilian law enforcement capabilities and strengthen governance.

U.S. policymakers also seek to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups by addressing the drivers of extremist recruitment, by blocking the financing of Al Qaeda and its affiliates through sanctions and other tools, and by prosecuting individuals in the United States for providing support to the group and its affiliates. Congress has addressed the enduring presence of AQ affiliates through the oversight of executive branch counterterrorism policies and practices, as well as the authorization and appropriation of U.S. funds for counterterrorism activities. Periodic deliberations in Congress about the repeal or revision of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40) may also have implications for U.S. efforts against Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

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