

CRS Insights

Post-9/11 Evolution of the United States' Defining of the Terrorist Threat from Al Qaeda
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Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda-related entities have increased in number and become more diffuse; with these changes there has been an evolution in how the United States defines the terrorist threat. How the threat has evolved could influence consideration of new authorities and policies in the 114th Congress.

Evolution

After the 2001 passage of the Authorization for the Use of Military Force ([AUMF](#)), the United States launched attacks in Afghanistan on what now is known as Al Qaeda Core (AQC), with goals to "eliminate Al Qaeda leadership and forces," "terminate the rule of the Taliban and their leadership," and "end the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for terrorism." Al Qaeda leadership and members [fled Afghanistan](#) and, as early as 2002, the Bush Administration identified the war against Al Qaeda as a "[Global War](#)" on terrorism, employing a strategy of capturing operatives worldwide, and it began a policy of drone strikes, with one in Yemen in November 2002. On October 16, 2002, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq ([AUMF-I](#)), citing multiple factors for that invasion, including:

- "[M]embers of al Qaida ... are known to be in Iraq"; and
- "Iraq continues to aid and harbor other international terrorist organizations."

The beginning of the drone war and the AUMF-I expanded the war outside Afghanistan and expanded the targeting of Al Qaeda to other theaters of operation. While any links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were [discounted](#) after the invasion, the United States was confronted with an insurgency led by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) between [2003 and 2007](#), which became the first U.S. recognized AQC-affiliated group when it swore allegiance to AQC in 2004.

In 2007 and 2008, concerns arose about Al Qaeda's ability to inspire organizations in other regions. The Director of National Intelligence (DNI) noted Al Qaeda's determination to [exploit turmoil](#) in Somalia in 2007. [Al Shabaab expanded](#) significantly, and it formally became an [affiliate](#) of Al Qaeda in February 2012. The group's ability to [recruit](#) Western operatives is considered part of the organization's threat to U.S. global security interests; however, the Obama Administration considers only [elements](#) of al Shabaab to fall under the authority of the AUMF. **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** originally formed as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in the 1990s, with the primary objective to overthrow the Algerian government. Upon assuming new leadership in 2004, GSPC developed a closer relationship with Al Qaeda, and in 2005 U.S. authorities reported that one out of every four suicide bombers in Iraq was [Algerian](#). AQIM formally united with Al Qaeda in 2006. According to the 2013 DNI Annual Threat Assessment, AQIM's intentions are [focused](#) on local, U.S., and Western interests in North and West Africa.

When President Bush left office, the United States was engaged in wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and was conducting drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen. When President Obama entered office in 2009, then Assistant to the President for Counterterrorism John Brennan rejected the Bush Administration's notion of a "[Global War on Terror](#)" by stating that the policy was "play[ing] into the misleading and dangerous notion that the U.S. is somehow in conflict with the rest of the world." The Obama Administration reframed the conflict as one specifically focused on Al Qaeda and was supported by the 2009 DNI Annual [Threat Assessment](#), which noted the terrorist threat as primarily emanating from AQC and affiliates. Since the beginning of the Obama Administration, the use of drones and special operations forces to target suspected Al Qaeda terrorists has expanded to countries including [Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Syria](#).

After the attempted Christmas Day bombing of an airliner to Detroit in 2009, the Yemen-based **Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)** became the Administration's primary concern. The United States has a long history of [collaborating](#) with the Yemeni government on counterterrorism issues, as AQAP's predecessor, Al Qaeda in Yemen, conducted the terrorist attack on the [USS Cole](#) in 2000. The political [unrest](#) in Yemen that escalated in 2011 created conditions that allowed AQAP to take control of territory in the south. This [coincided](#) with a significant [increase](#) in U.S. drone strikes in Yemeni territory. Some analysts consider AQAP the [most lethal affiliate](#), pursuing both local and international objectives.

Since 2011, AQI has expanded into Syria and eventually split into two militant groups in that conflict, Jabhat al Nusra (the Nusra Front) and the Islamic State (IS). **The Nusra Front** emerged in Syria as a rebel force focused on overthrowing the Assad regime. It has not attacked the United States, but in January 2014 DNI Clapper [stated](#) that the group "does have aspirations on the homeland." The **Islamic State**, also known as ISIS or ISIL, was disavowed by Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in February 2014, who cited the group's [disobedience](#) and stated that AQC is not responsible for the group's extreme methods. Combined with IS's view of itself as a sovereign political entity, its disavowal by al Zawahiri presents an obstacle to considering it an affiliate. Zawahiri sided with the Nusra Front during its rift with IS; however, [reports](#) conflict about the groups' unity or [continued](#) public animosity. While there is [debate](#) about the severity of the threat each entity poses to U.S. global interests, both groups are of concern to policy makers due to their ability to attract foreign fighters, including Americans.

Considerations for Policymaking

Since 2001 and 2002, U.S. Administrations have relied on existing use of force authorizations and presidential authority to engage entities inspired by AQC in numerous countries. However, some Members of Congress as well as President Obama have supported the idea of a new authorization targeting non-AQC entities. Questions policy makers may wish to consider include:

- Are current authorities sufficient to address the evolution of entities inspired by, but not affiliated with, Al Qaeda?
- What is the U.S. intelligence and policy process for determining that an entity has an affiliation with AQC?
- How might the threat from Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups continue to evolve and what are the prospective implications for U.S. counterterrorism policies?