



June 14, 2021

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

Al Qaeda (AQ) is a transnational Islamist terrorist organization and network of affiliates that the U.S. intelligence community describes as one of “the greatest Sunni terrorist threats to U.S. interests overseas” and a potential source of inspiration to domestic violent extremists. Sustained counterterrorism (CT) pressure appears to have weakened the group since it perpetrated the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks. In April 2021, the U.S. intelligence community told Congress that Al Qaeda’s senior leadership “has suffered severe losses in the past few years” but they expect that remaining leaders will continue to plot attacks and seek to exploit conflicts in different regions. In recent years, U.S. officials have characterized the AQ threat as stemming mainly from its affiliates, which have generally focused on local issues in their respective areas of operation, where they threaten local U.S. personnel, interests, and partners.

Background

In 1988, Osama bin Laden established Al Qaeda from a network of Arab and other foreign veterans of the 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 the decision by Saudi Arabia to host U.S. troops, the group set on the United States as its primary target. Bin Laden left his native Saudi Arabia that year and relocated to Sudan, until the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996 and offered refuge to AQ members and other armed Islamists.

Al Qaeda conducted a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. and allied targets, 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 the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched military operations to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan and redoubled its CT efforts worldwide. AQ leadership 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

AQ’s leader, or *emir*, is Ayman al Zawahiri, an Egyptian who succeeded Bin Laden. Some attribute purported AQ struggles (including its failure to strike inside the United States) to what they describe as al Zawahiri’s understated leadership, as compared to Bin Laden’s charisma. Others argue that Zawahiri’s more restrained approach is an asset that has created space for AQ affiliates to pursue regionally tailored strategies and make inroads into local communities and conflicts.

Periodic reports that Zawahiri (70) has been ill or died have raised questions about the group’s future leadership. Zawahiri’s former deputy, Abu Khayr al Masri, was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Syria in 2017; his successor was killed in Iran in August 2020, reportedly by Israeli agents. Their deaths, and that of Bin Laden’s son Hamza (whose killing in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region was announced by President Trump in 2019), leave Saif al Adl as Zawahiri’s likely successor. Al Adl is reported to reside in Iran, which for years has allowed AQ figures to operate on its territory despite occasional enmity between Sunni Al Qaeda and Iran’s Shia Islamic Republic government. AQ leaders may view Iran as relatively safe from U.S. counterterrorism operations, while Iran 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, a relatively small and geographically contained membership, and claimed to be the vanguard and global leader of Islamist terrorism. The attenuation of AQ core leadership, the growth of regional affiliates, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) have changed Al Qaeda greatly.

For years, analysts have debated how to characterize the shifting ties between AQ leaders and groups that have pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, and among these self-described affiliates. Some contend that Al Qaeda remains essentially a centrally governed organization, with the group’s leaders providing marching orders to its various affiliates; others describe a “hub and spoke” model in which leaders provide inspiration, strategic vision, and some financial support but little in the way of direct tactical supervision. Still others see the growth of affiliates as having undermined the status and importance of the core, with the affiliates’ respective local interests driving their actions more than any kind of centrally directed ideology or program. 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 spur changes in the focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts over time.

Status in Afghanistan

U.S. officials assess that many AQ core leaders are based in Afghanistan, where the group has been weakened but not eliminated. According to a December 2020 Department of Defense (DOD) report, “AQ’s remaining core leaders pose a limited threat to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan because they are focused primarily on survival.”

The Taliban committed to preventing Al Qaeda from using Afghan soil as part of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement under which U.S. troops are being withdrawn from Afghanistan. Still, Al Qaeda's decades-long ties with the Taliban appear strong. DOD stated in a report released in April 2021, "The Taliban have maintained mutually beneficial relations with AQ-related organizations and are unlikely to take substantive action against these groups." In May 2021, U.N. Afghanistan sanctions monitors reported that Al Qaeda "has minimized overt communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to 'lay low' and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position."

Affiliates

Regional developments, notably the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the post-2011 instability that engulfed some states after Arab Spring-inspired protests, created opportunities for AQ affiliates throughout the Middle East and Africa:

- In 2004, the Iraq-based Jordanian national Abu Musab al Zarqawi formed the first AQ affiliate, **Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)**. AQI was the first AQ affiliate to be designated as an FTO (in 2004). In 2006, AQI renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which in 2011 expanded to Syria and later declared a global caliphate as the Islamic State.
- U.S.-backed Saudi efforts dismantled a nascent 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.
- As its international reach grew with affiliates like AQI and AQAP, Al Qaeda also attracted interest from other like-minded groups. **Al Shabaab**, a Somali-origin group designated as an FTO in 2008 whose founders had ties to Al Qaeda, formally pledged allegiance in 2012. Al Shabaab, which took over territory in central and southern Somalia as an offshoot of a militant wing of Somalia's Council of Islamic Courts in the mid-2000s, has carried out attacks against domestic and international targets in Somalia, as well as in Uganda, Djibouti, and Kenya. In April 2021, DOD officials described Al Shabaab as "the largest, wealthiest, and most violent Al Qaeda-associated group in the world."
- **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**—Al Qaeda's oldest continually operating affiliate in Africa—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 its activity in North Africa has waned, some of those affiliates have strengthened. The most prominent is the **Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (or JNIM, in Arabic)**, which was formed in early 2017 as a merger of AQIM's Sahel branch and several AQIM-linked and offshoot groups. Designated as an FTO in 2018, JNIM is primarily active in Mali and

Burkina Faso, and U.S. officials have expressed concern that it may pose an escalating threat to coastal West African countries.

- As security conditions in Syria deteriorated in 2011, AQI/ISI began operations there as the **Nusra Front**. The Nusra Front did not initially acknowledge ties to ISI/AQI but was designated by the State Department as an alias of ISI/AQI in December 2012. The Nusra Front soon became one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria, and rejected ISI/AQI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's 2013 attempt to subsume the Nusra Front under his leadership as part of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL, later the Islamic State). In 2017, the Nusra Front merged with other Syrian factions to become **Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)**. In 2018, the U.S. government amended its FTO designation of the Nusra Front to include HTS. HTS leaders have distanced themselves from AQ. An HTS breakoff group, **Hurras al Din**, is seen as closer to AQ.

Relation to the Islamic State

Al Qaeda, through the diverse global network of affiliates outlined above, often interacts with other groups, most notably the Islamic State. While there are some ideological and tactical similarities between IS and AQ, their relationship is mostly adversarial and their affiliates have clashed. According to a February 2021 U.N. terrorism sanctions investigation report, "The fragile consensus between Al-Qaida and ISIL to fight a common enemy is over, as both groups are now involved in violent confrontations" against each other in numerous conflict zones.

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, and U.S. forces have engaged in ground combat against AQ in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen in recent years. Beyond direct military action, the United States seeks to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist threats "by, with, and through" local partners. AQ-linked groups are a leading threat to, and target of, countries to which the United States has provided millions of dollars in security assistance.

U.S. policymakers also seek to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups by addressing the drivers of terrorism through counter- and de-radicalization programs, by countering the financing of Al Qaeda and its affiliates, 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 and the authorization and appropriations of U.S. funds for counterterrorism activities. Ongoing deliberations in Congress about 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.

Clayton Thomas, Acting Section Research Manager

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.