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

Al Qaeda (AQ) is a transnational Sunni Islamist terrorist organization and network of affiliates that the U.S. intelligence community described as of early 2022 as one of the groups that “probably pose the greatest threat to U.S. persons and interests abroad” and a potential source of inspiration to domestic violent extremists. Sustained counterterrorism (CT) pressure has weakened the group since it perpetrated the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks. In its March 2022 annual public threat assessment, the U.S. intelligence community stated that Al Qaeda “is constrained in its efforts to lead a unified global movement” but will try to “capitalize on permissive operating environments.” U.S. officials characterize 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 made the United States 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 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 the 9/11 attacks, 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

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 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.

Widespread reports that Zawahiri (70) has been ill 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; Al Masri’s 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 has allowed some AQ figures to operate in its territory despite historic enmity between Sunni Al Qaeda and Iran’s Shia Islamic Republic government. AQ leaders may view Iran as relatively safe from U.S. counterterrorism pressure, 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 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. In 2022, the analytical consensus appears to view AQ as having “devolved operational responsibility to regional affiliates as it has shifted away from centrally directed plotting,” per the 2022 annual threat assessment. 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

The Taliban’s August 2021 return to power in Afghanistan gave Al Qaeda a “significant boost,” per United Nations sanctions monitors, and traditional AQ allies (such as figures linked to the Haqqani Network) have prominent roles in the Taliban government. Since congratulating the Taliban in August 2021, AQ “has maintained a strategic silence, likely an effort not to compromise Taliban efforts to gain international recognition and legitimacy,” in light of

counterterrorism commitments made by the Taliban to secure the withdrawal of U.S. forces. While AQ currently lacks an operational capability in Afghanistan, U.S. officials assess that AQ has the intention to reconstitute the ability to conduct external attacks and could do so in one to two years in the absence of CT pressure. The U.S. intelligence community assesses that AQ “will gauge its ability operate in Afghanistan under Taliban restrictions” as the two groups recalibrate their relationship and activities.

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 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)**. 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 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, but as of 2022 is “suffering setbacks caused by both internal divisions and military offensives,” per U.N. sanctions monitors.
- As its international reach grew with affiliates like AQI and AQAP, Al Qaeda also attracted interest from other 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, which took over territory in central and southern Somalia in the mid-2000s as an offshoot of Somalia’s Council of Islamic Courts, has carried out attacks against domestic and international targets in Somalia, as well as in Uganda, Djibouti, and Kenya. In March 2022, a DOD official described Al Shabaab as “the largest, wealthiest, and most lethal Al Qaeda affiliate in the world today,” having grown “due to a lack of effective governance and counter-terrorism pressure.”
- **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 and several Mali-based groups.

Designated as an FTO in 2018, JNIM is most active in Mali and Burkina Faso, where it has expanded despite a nearly decade-long U.S.-backed French CT mission; France announced plans in February 2022 to withdraw its forces from Mali. JNIM has also made inroads into coastal West Africa. A Nigeria-based group known as Ansaru has also pledged allegiance to AQIM.

- 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 AQI/ISI but was designated by the State Department as an alias of AQI/ISI in 2012. The Nusra Front soon became one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria, and rejected AQI/ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi’s 2013 attempt to subsume it 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)**. HTS leaders, who control most of the northeastern Syrian province of Idlib, have distanced themselves from AQ. An HTS breakoff group, **Hurras al Din**, is seen as closer to AQ but weaker than HTS.

Relation to the Islamic State

While there are some ideological and tactical similarities between IS and AQ, their relationship is mostly adversarial. AQ and IS affiliates operate in many of the same conflict zones (such as in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sahel) where they appear to compete for resources and recruits, and often clash militarily.

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, though the United States in 2021 removed military forces from Afghanistan and repositioned military forces from Somalia, where they were supporting counterterrorism operations, to neighboring countries. Beyond direct military action, 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 and/or advisory support.

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 and the authorization and appropriation 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.

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