# American Foreign Policy Council

# AL-QAEDA

*Al-Qaeda is the most notorious Islamic terrorist group in existence today. In the years since it orchestrated the devastating September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, its leaders, primarily Osama bin Laden and his second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have become internationally recognized figures and heroes to Islamists and aspiring jihadists the world over. Indeed, al-Qaeda has taken on a global reach in recent years to the point that groups that are actually affiliated with it are blurred with those that are simply inspired by it.*

## HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Though the attacks of September 11, 2001 are perhaps the most profound symbols of al-Qaeda's notoriety, the group's violent history stretches back well over two decades and finds its roots in another, more conventional, war.

Al-Qaeda is believed to have been formally created toward the later years of the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), sometime around 1988-1989. Various theories have been offered as to the etymology of "al-Qaeda"—which in Arabic literally means "the base"—including that it refers to a "database" of names of Arab-Afghan *mujahideen*, compiled by Osama bin Laden, and later mobilized for terrorist missions.[1] However, there is no reason to doubt bin Laden's own explanation, that *al-qaeda* was originally used as a generic phrase to denote the *mujahideen's* base of combat or operations.[2] This is borne out by the fact that al-Qaeda sometimes refers to itself as *qaedat al-jihad*, "base of *jihad*."[3]

Coming on the heels of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, when Islamist fervor reached a fever pitch internationally, the Soviet-Afghan theater lured many *mujahideen*, or *jihadists*, from around the Arab world. Among these was multi-millionaire Osama bin Laden, who, in conjunction with Palestinian *jihadist* theoretician Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, opened a "services bureau" (*maktabat al-khadamat*) in Peshawar, Pakistan, supporting the Afghan *jihad* logistically and materially.[4] Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician who would become al-Qaeda's second-in-command, also made periodic stops in Peshawar, lending his physician skills to wounded *mujahideen*.[5] Bin Laden himself reportedly entered into the field of combat against the Soviets and often recounts his spiritual, near-death experiences and feelings of spiritual tranquility in the midst of furious shelling.[6]

The victory of the *mujahideen* over the Soviets, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, led to a sense of invincibility across the Muslim world; it was viewed as a harbinger of even greater Muslim glory to come.[7] Ascribing their win to divine intervention, Islamists and *jihadists* around the world became more confident of their strength against better-equipped and technologically advanced foes. In short, it made Islamists more ambitious. It was in this atmosphere that al-Qaeda was born.

After returning to his homeland of Saudi Arabia, where he was hailed as a hero, Osama bin Laden found another opportunity to

test the mettle of his cadre of seasoned *mujahideen*, the "Afghan Arabs:" Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. This, along with neighboring Saudi Arabia's fears that it was next on Saddam's list of targets, furnished bin Laden with an ideal opportunity to muster the unemployed fighters, this time to defend not just a peripheral Muslim nation but also the sanctity of Arabia, home of Islam and its *haramin* (the Two Holy Mosques, or "sanctities," in Mecca and Medina). He petitioned Saudi Arabia's monarch at the time, King Fahd, to allow the Afghan Arabs to defend the country, only to be rebuffed; Fahd opted to take up the offers of the U.S. and other so-called "infidel" forces to deploy their troops on Arabian soil, which bin Laden would later refer to in his 1996 *fatwa* as the "latest and greatest aggression" from the West.[8] Meanwhile, the Saudi regime, according to bin Laden, "betrayed the *Ummah* and joined the *Kufr* [infidels], assisting and helping them against the Muslims."[9]

Because of bin Laden's opposition to the Saudi monarchy, the former Afghan war hero was ostracized and exiled from the Kingdom, fleeing to Sudan. Khartoum had just experienced its own Islamist *coup d'état* and was welcoming co-religionists from around the world—particularly millionaire investors such as bin Laden. During this time (1992-1996), Ayman al Zawahiri and his organization, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, also used Sudan as a base to launch operations against the Egyptian government. Inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb and, like others, radicalized by the outcome of the Six Day War, Zawahiri was transformed from a pious Muslim to an ardent *jihadist*. He was arrested in the aftermath of the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, but soon thereafter left for Pakistan to join the *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan. By 1991, Zawahiri rose to the leadership of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, eventually merging it with al-Qaeda and expanding the scope of its *jihad* well beyond Egypt's borders.[10]

Bin Laden's continuing criticisms of the Saudi king, along with Zawahiri's botched terrorist missions against the Mubarak regime (including failed assassination attempts on the Egyptian Prime Minister and President Mubarak himself),[11] created significant inter-

national pressure on the Sudanese government to evict al-Qaeda. (Interestingly, offers were made to the Clinton administration to hand over bin Laden, but President Clinton declined the offers. In one interview given after 9/11, Clinton argued that at the time, the U.S. did not have sufficient proof to hold bin Laden. A second proposal to the Clinton Administration was rebuffed allegedly because the President was distracted by the Monica Lewinsky scandal.[12]

In 1996, al-Qaeda's leadership returned to Afghanistan and found refuge with another Islamist regime, the Taliban. The Islamist militant faction made up of former students indoctrinated in the *madrassas* of Pakistan had risen out of the chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Pakistani-backed Taliban government in Kabul welcomed bin Laden and his Afghan Arabs and allowed them to set up militant bases and training camps. It is at this juncture that al-Qaeda began to crystallize into the organization it is known as today.

In 1998 Zawahiri, bin Laden, and others joined forces under the umbrella of *al-Jibha al-Islamiyya al-'Alamiyya* ("World Islamic Front"), and began their terrorist campaign against the West in earnest. In contrast to bin Laden's lengthy 1996 *fatwa*, in which he declared a vague global *jihad*, the group's 1998 *fatwa* succinctly and unequivocally called on all Muslims "to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military… to kill the Americans and seize their money wherever and whenever they [Muslims] find them."[13]

Al-Qaeda is described best as a Salafist organization. Salafism denotes the literal emulation of Muhammad and the early generations of Muslims, *al-salaf al-salah* (righteous forbears). The ultimate goal of Salafists the world over is to resurrect, and make supreme, a global Caliphate that enforces *sharia* law, in an attempt to recreate the perceived "golden age" of Islam (c. 632-656).

The Salafist worldview is not unique to al-Qaeda, however. Rather, it is the form of Islamism increasingly subscribed to by other Islamist activists, both militant and non-violent (e.g., the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks to revive the Caliphate).[14]  It should also be

noted that, whereas the Salafist approach ignores centuries of *sharia* development according to Islam's *madhahib* (four mainstream schools of thought) and *ijtihad* reasoning (wherein more contemporary issues unaddressed either by the Koran or the Sunnah are resolved and applied according to experts in *sharia* law), certain aspects of it most associated with al-Qaeda—such as the military component of *jihad* and the requirement to make *sharia* the supreme law of the land—do find consensus among Islam's mainstream *madhahib*.

Even the particularly ruthless character of al-Qaeda is rationalized by its adherents, such as Zawahiri, through *qiyas*, or the analogical interpretation of various Muslim doctrines. For instance, because infidel armies were on Muslim territory, defensive *jihad*, as stressed in the 1998 fatwa, is deemed obligatory (*fard ayn*) in Islam.[15] Based on this, and because of the unbalanced power relationship between the West and the Muslim world, several *rukhsa* (relaxations of religious law) based on the *sharia* principle that "the forbidden becomes permissible when necessary" are used to rationalize al-Qaeda's ostensibly nihilistic brand of terrorism.[16]

Al-Qaeda defends the attacks of September 11, 2001, during which nearly 3,000 civilians were killed, with the *sunna* (examples or acts from the Prophet Muhammad's life) which tells of Muhammad employing catapults during the siege of the town of Ta'if.[17] Similarly, al-Qaeda excuses the otherwise Koranically forbidden act of killing women and children by referring to reported permission to do so granted by the Prophet himself.[18] Al-Qaeda continues by quoting the early jurisprudent Al Awza'i (d. 774), who claimed that "it is compulsory that this [the possibility of hitting women, children, and Muslims] not dissuade the launching of an incursion against them [infidels], firing arrows and utilizing other [weapons]—even if one dreads hitting a Muslim."[19]

Al-Qaeda also supports "martyrdom operations," or suicide bombings, the number of which has risen noticeably in recent years. The group again refers to early Islamic history and Muhammad's assertions to uphold its views on suicide bombings.[20] For example, one

verse calls on believers to "kill and be killed" (Surah 9:111). Others simply call for violence, such as the famous "sword verse," "fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)."[21] Such warfare methods also receive justification from influential Muslim scholars, including Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Yusif al Qaradawi.[22]

Another *rukhsa* regularly used by al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups is the practice of *taqiyya*,[23] a doctrine that espouses deceit in the face of the enemy when the latter is in a dominant position or during war, two conditions that al-Qaeda believes apply today. In his lengthy treatise, "Loyalty and Enmity," Zawahiri dedicates an entire section to *taqiyya*, quoting various classical *ulema* (clerics) who believed that Muslims under the authority of non-Muslims should behave loyally while actually harboring feelings of hatred toward them.[24] In another treatise, Zawahiri quotes Muhammad's famous assertion that "war is deceit."[25]

While violence and terror are emblematic of al-Qaeda's strategy, the group has also mastered the use of propaganda and doublespeak, particularly when addressing its Western rivals. Primarily, it has and continues to send communiqués citing any number of grievances—Israel often topping the list, followed by objections to the stationing of so-called infidel troops on the Holy Land of Saudi Arabia, as well as the perceived U.S. policy of fragmenting Arab states, and crippling sanctions against Iraq following the Gulf War[26] —in order to justify terrorism, which is portrayed as "reciprocal treatment." By 2007, the organization was estimated to be producing and delivering such messages nearly every 72 hours.[27]

Bin Laden even posits the strikes of 9/11 as reciprocal responses to American-Israeli aggression against Muslims in Lebanon: "With Allah as my witness, I say to you that we had never considered striking the towers; however, after things became unbearable, and we witnessed the oppression and atrocities perpetrated against our people in Palestine and Lebanon by the American-Israeli coalition—it was then that I got the idea."[28] Following the July 2004 London

bombings, Zawahiri said, "I speak to you today about the blessed raid on London that... made it take a sip from the same glass from which it had long made the Muslims drink.... So taste some of what you have made us taste."[29]

When addressing Muslims in the Arabic tracts it disseminates, al-Qaeda makes perfectly clear that its animus to the West is first and foremost based on religious doctrine, which is one of the reasons that it has been well-received by many young and devout Muslims. One of Zawahiri's ultimate stated goals is making "Islam supreme in its [own] land and then spreading it around the world."[30] Bin Laden claims that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims should be one of "enmity, evidenced by fierce hostility, and an internal hate from the heart" based on his reading of Koranic verse 60:40.[31]

Al-Qaeda's propaganda largely has been successful including among Muslims long since frustrated by their governments which they view as either inattentive to society's needs, insufficiently Islamic, or simply corrupt. Westerners are not immune to the al-Qaeda vision, as demonstrated by mainstream Western acceptance that al-Qaeda's war is entirely fueled by grievances against the West—even when bin Laden himself asserts that the animosity between the West and the Muslim world is inherent. Even former CIA analysts such as Michael Scheuer[32] and Bruce Riedel[33] have accepted the al-Qaeda narrative of grievances and similarly cite the Arab-Israeli conflict as the source of all woes, despite al-Qaeda's broader position that Muslims should be intrinsically hostile to the West.

## GLOBAL REACH

The organization's core leadership, including bin Laden and Zawahiri, is believed to be based in the badlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the same area where bin Laden first opened a services bureau some 25 years earlier. Elsewhere, al-Qaeda has affiliate branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is based. Al-Qaeda maintains a strong presence in other Muslim countries as well, either by merging or allying with

existing Islamist groups. Thus, while the U.S. was once focused primarily on "al-Qaeda" proper, it must now also monitor and disrupt al-Qaeda affiliates, including al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (Algeria), al-Qaeda in Bilad al-Sham (Syria), and the al-Qaeda Organization in the Levant-Umar Brigade (Lebanon).

In order to expand the potential for *jihadist* operations, bin Laden's al-Qaeda, with its Afghan Arab veterans, formally merged in 1998 with a number of other *jihadist* groups including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, the Egyptian Islamic Group, and the Jihad Movement of Bangladesh.[34] Before that formal merger, a nascent al-Qaeda may have been involved in various attacks, beginning with the 1992 hotel bombings in Aden, Yemen. Bin Laden has asserted that al-Qaeda was responsible for the ambush of American forces in Mogadishu in 1993, the National Guard Training Center in Riyadh in 1995, and the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, but experts emphasize that "there is no evidence to substantiate these claims."[35] It is reasonable to assume, however, that bin Laden at least contributed financial support to those attacks. As opposed to later al-Qaeda targets, the aforementioned attacks were aimed at military targets, not civilian ones, and therefore are not deemed "terrorist attacks" by some Western analysts.[36]

After the formation of the World Islamic Front, al-Qaeda was clearly linked to spectacular terrorist strikes, increasingly against civilians. These include the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, where some 300 people were killed; the 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen, where 17 American servicemen were killed; and, most notoriously, the 9/11 attacks, where 2,669 American civilians were killed. In addition, in 2004, the Madrid train bombings killed 190 commuters. While certain aspects of the attack—including the fact that it occurred exactly 911 days after 9/11—allude to direct al-Qaeda involvement, official investigations determined that it was carried out by a cell inspired by al-Qaeda.[37] Similarly, there is dispute as to whether the London train bombings of 2005, which killed 52 people, are directly linked to al-Qaeda.[38] In late 2009, the Islamic State of Iraq, which evolved from the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda wing, killed some 300 people in

two separate attacks.[39]  The organization has since claimed responsibility for additional attacks in Baghdad in April, June, and August 2010, suggesting the group is experiencing a resurgence.

These terrorist strikes connote the truly global reach possessed by al-Qaeda.[40]  In today's shifting global environment, it is unclear whether such attacks are linked directly to al-Qaeda, or carried out by like-minded groups or individuals merely inspired by al-Qaeda and seeking public association with it. Even the various al-Qaeda wings, or "franchises," around the world are at their core Salafist groups that were often formed years before they became affiliated with the bin Laden network. For example, al-Qaeda's branch in North Africa, known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, was originally called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and only became an al-Qaeda franchise relatively recently, in 2006.[41]

Other al-Qaeda franchises—including in Libya, Turkey, and the Levant—are similarly in their adolescent phases. Al-Qaeda also appears to have meaningful connections among Palestinian groups operating within the Palestinian Authority; Hamas reportedly assisted an al-Qaeda cell in carrying out attacks on Western targets in Taba and Sharm Al Sheikh resorts,[42] and has otherwise been conflated with al-Qaeda.[43]

## RECENT ACTIVITY

With the invasion of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and the start of the U.S. War on Terror in late 2001, al-Qaeda's infrastructure and training camps in that country were destroyed or disrupted. Since then, the organization has claimed credit for other terrorist attacks, but these have tended to be smaller in scale, and it remains unclear whether or not the group is actually or directly responsible. Perhaps al-Qaeda's largest source of influence today is the power to inspire other Islamist groups to follow in its footsteps.

Those attacks have been frequent and numerous. In 2007, the Maghrebi wing of al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a bombing in the Algerian capital of Algiers that killed 30 people.[44]  And al-

Qaeda may have been responsible for the 2008 explosion outside of the Danish Embassy in Pakistan, which killed six people, following the republication of Danish cartoons originally printed in 2005 that were seen as insulting of the Muslim prophet Muhammad.[45] Most recently, al-Qaeda's Yemeni wing—known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—was behind the botched 2009 Christmas Day terrorist attempt on the U.S., having trained the young Nigerian Muslim, Abdul Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate a bomb aboard a passenger plane en route to Detroit.[46]

In many ways, the attempted Christmas Day attack is indicative of al-Qaeda's contemporary status and the natural culmination of its role. Abdulmutallab was radicalized before coming into direct contact with al-Qaeda, and, unlike the Afghan Arabs, is certainly not a product of the Afghan-Soviet war.[47] Rather, he, as well as virtually every other Islamist group, accepted the narrative espoused by al-Qaeda that the West is out to subdue the Islamic world and that it is up to individual Muslims to respond through *jihad*. In fact, while Operation Enduring Freedom may have disrupted al-Qaeda's ability to operate in the open, the organization manages to stay relevant and connected to its sympathizers thanks to its Internet presence. Exploiting a general lack of Internet security, the world's most hunted terrorist organization can still reach out to potential recruits and even offer remote training using chat rooms, various websites, and social media tools such as YouTube.[48]

Through the Internet, Abdulmutallab discovered an outlet for his Islamist convictions in Yemen, and moved there for a month to be trained by al-Qaeda operatives.[49] Yet it remains unclear whether these operatives are closely linked to the group's core leadership or whether they are simply like-minded Salafists. The matter is further clouded by the fact that bin Laden may exaggerate al-Qaeda's links to terror strikes in order to appear in charge of the wider global *jihad*; at least one senior U.S. official has opined that, despite bin Laden's attempts to claim responsibility for the Christmas Day bombing, he may not even have known about the plot.[50]

This phenomenon of independent Islamists taking up the mantle of

al-Qaeda, making the group's name almost synonymous with "radical Islam," was likewise evinced in the massacre in Fort Hood, Texas in October 2009, when an American Muslim soldier, Nidal Malik Hasan, opened fire on fellow soldiers, killing 13 people. Based on his actions and behavior, there is little doubt of Hasan's Islamist convictions—many of which have been stressed or rearticulated by al-Qaeda in their treatises.[51]  In turn al-Qaeda, through its American propagandist, Adam Gadahn, made a point to profusely praise his actions and stress that Muslims should emulate Hasan.[52]  Yet, even if Hasan was inspired by al-Qaeda's words and deeds, there is no evidence of a formal linkage between him and the terrorist organization.[53]

Still, al-Qaeda continues to pose both an intrinsic and instrumental threat to the West, as evidenced by an uptick in chatter regarding the group's future plots in the aftermath of Abdulmutallab's arrest. In and of itself, the organization has the experience, skills, and reach to terrorize foreign nations, probably more so than any other Islamic terrorist organization. The group consists of seasoned *jihadists* with decades of experience in plotting, executing, and inciting terrorism, and they are viewed by Islamists the world over as the natural leaders of the global *jihad*.[54]  It is this symbiotic relationship between al-Qaeda and sympathetic Salafists around the world that has magnified both its scope and reach. Perhaps al-Qaeda's greatest achievement to date is having spawned a network of radical Islamists who can function independently and can continue to thrive even without direction from the organization or its original leadership.

In May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in Abbotabad, Pakistan during a raid by U.S. commandos. Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was formally appointed as bin Laden's successor in June 2011.

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