American Foreign Policy Council

Al-Qaeda

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa

Numerical Strength (Members): Exact numbers unknown

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.

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

(Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism)

Al-Qaeda remains 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 former leader, Osama bin Laden, and its current chief, 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 truly global reach, boasting such an array of groups affiliated with it and others that are simply stirred by its ideology to the point that it is often difficult to discern between the two.

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 in 1988.[1] 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 Palestinian *jihadist* theoretician Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, and later mobilized for terrorist

missions.[2] 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.[3] This is borne out by the fact that al-Qaeda sometimes refers to itself as *qaedat al-jihad*, "base of *jihad*."[4]

Coming on the heels of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Islamist fervor had reached a fever pitch internationally, the Soviet-Afghan theater lured many *jihadists* from around the Arab world. Among these was Saudi multi-millionaire Osama bin Laden, who, in conjunction with Azzam, opened a "services bureau" (*maktabat al-khadamat*) in Peshawar, Pakistan, supporting the Afghan *jihad* logistically and materially.[5] 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 the care of wounded *mujahideen*.[6] Bin Laden himself reportedly entered into combat against the Soviets, and often recounted his spiritual, near-death experiences and feelings of spiritual tranquility in the midst of furious shelling.[7]

The victory of the *mujahideen* over the Soviets, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, created a sense of invincibility across the Muslim world. It was viewed as a harbinger of even greater Muslim glory to come.[8] Ascribing their win to divine intervention, Islamists and *jihadists* around the world became more confident of their strength against better-equipped and technologically more-advanced foes. In short, it made Islamists more ambitious and laid the groundwork for the emergence of al-Qaeda.

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*, colloquially known as the "Afghan Arabs" or "Afghan alumni." That test was 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 rally his now-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.[9] Meanwhile, the Saudi regime, according to bin Laden, "betrayed the *Ummah* and joined the *Kufr* [infidels], assisting and helping them against the Muslims."[10]

Because of bin Laden's opposition to the Saudi monarchy, the former Afghan

war hero was ostracized and exiled from the Kingdom and forced to flee to Sudan. Khartoum had just experienced its own Islamist *coup d'état* and was welcoming co-religionists from around the world—particularly millionaire investors like 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 had been 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 had risen 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.[11]

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),[12] created significant international pressure on the Sudanese government to evict al-Qaeda.[13] They eventually did so, and 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* (the "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."[14] Most of al-Qaeda's ideological material presents *jihad* as an obligation on behalf of Islam to attack those who oppose Islamic law, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.[15]

Al-Qaeda is best described 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 also seeks to revive the Caliphate).[16] It should also be noted that 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 Salafism 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.[17] 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 "necessity makes forbidden things permissible" are used to rationalize al-Qaeda's ostensibly nihilistic brand of terrorism.

Al-Qaeda defends the attacks of September 11, 2001, during which nearly 3,000 American 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.[18] 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.[19] 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."[20]

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.[21] 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)."[22]

Similar warfare methods, such as those allowing Muslims to break certain religious obligations if those obligations restrict the execution of *jihad*, also receive justification from influential Muslim scholars, including Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Yusif al Qaradawi.[23]

Another *rukhsa* regularly used by al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups is the practice of *taqiyya*,[24] 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.[25] In another treatise, Zawahiri quotes Muhammad's famous assertion that "war is deceit."[26]

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[27]—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,[28] although that pace has diminished in the intervening years.

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."[29] Bin Laden also claimed 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 60:4.[30]

Al-Qaeda's propaganda largely has been successful including among Muslims frustrated by their governments' perceived failures to attend to society's needs, insufficiently Islamic bearing/orientation, or corruption. 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 asserted that the animos-

ity between the West and the Muslim world is inherent. Even former CIA analysts such as Michael Scheuer[31] and Bruce Riedel[32] 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 years since the start of the U.S.-led War on Terror have witnessed a major metamorphosis on the part of the bin Laden network. The organization has significantly eroded in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Coalition operations have succeeded in whittling away at the core group of militants that made up what can be called al-Qaeda "central." In the summer of 2010, then-CIA Director Leon Panetta estimated there were 50-100 al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan, the group's country of origin.[33] A similar number was reported by a Coalition general in 2013.[34]

However, the decline of al-Qaeda's core has been mirrored by the rise of its various affiliates and franchises—and by a diffusion and expansion of its ideology. As one U.S. counterterrorism official put it in 2010, "while (core) Al Qaeda is now struggling in some areas the threat it poses is becoming more widely distributed, more geographically diverse. The rise of affiliated groups such as Al Qaeda the Arabian Peninsula and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is a new and important development and is also a troubling development."[35] This shift, experts say, "is enhanced by *jihadis*' inability to coordinate closely, which likely limits their ability to achieve ultimate policy goals, but also complicates the processes to combat the movement writ large."[36]

Al-Qaeda, in short, has transformed from a unitary, hierarchical terrorist organization to a network of affiliated organizations operating from North Africa to Southeast Asia. These franchises have proven capable of striking throughout their respective communities, into Europe, and the United States. Furthermore, by promoting ideas in cyberspace, al-Qaeda affiliates have been able to recruit citizens of Western countries to carry out attacks against its enemies. This growth has been affected by regional characteristics and the political climate of respective countries.

AQAP

Currently, the organizational affiliate of greatest capability is thought to be al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The group is a relatively new creation—the result of a merger of al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni franchises that took place in January of 2009. Like the larger bin Laden network, AQAP is committed to the elimination of "apostate" governments and their replacement with righteous fundamentalist Islamic regimes. In practice, however,

AQAP has exhibited a persistent local focus, and has emerged as a major threat to the stability of the Yemeni government.

In 2010, Yemen's government was estimating the group strength to be just 200 to 300 members.*37* (Unofficial estimates at the same time put the number at somewhat higher: between 500 and 600 militants.[38]) Despite the efforts of the Yemeni government, AQAP has grown in both size and scope since; according to the State Department's most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the group now "is estimated to have close to one thousand members."[39] The organization, which boasts a rather loose structure and informal chain of command,[40] is funded primarily "from robberies and kidnap for ransom operations, and to a lesser degree donations from like-minded supporters."[41]

Aside from several strikes on Western diplomats at its inception, AQAP has mostly devoted its efforts to local objectives. The group has become a major threat to the Yemeni government, waging a persistent struggle against authorities in Sana'a, with considerable success. For example, an AQAP suicide attack aimed at the Yemeni military in May 2012 killed more than 90 soldiers during a parade through the capital city of Sana'a.[42] In 2011-2012, AQAP succeeded in gaining control of large swathes of territory in southern Yemen. This prompted a major response from the Yemeni government, forcing the organization to beat a "strategic retreat" from Abyan Province.[43] Nevertheless, the group remains resilient and entrenched in various parts of the Yemeni state. More significantly, according to experts, it appears to have "reverted to its pre-2011 strategy, which privileged operations space over any aspiration of governance."[44]

AQIM

Likewise prominent among al-Qaeda's regional franchises is al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM. AQIM was formed in September 2006, when Algeria's radical Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) joined forces with al-Qaeda. With the merger, the organization's focus—which, as the GSPC, had been dedicated to the overthrow of the Bouteflika regime in Algeria—became broader and regional in scope. The organization now "has aspirations of overthrowing "apostate" African regimes and creating an Islamic Caliphate," according to the U.S. Department of State.[45] The organization is currently headed by Abdelmalek Droukdel, its founder and a veteran of the *jihad* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

While an accurate estimate is difficult to ascertain, as of 2010 it was estimated that the group possessed roughly 300-400 members.[46] Currently, AQIM operates in Niger and Mauritania, and is strongly suspected of having influence in Libya.[47] In Mali, it has assumed a significant role in the bolstering of aligned Islamist groups, such as Ansar Dine and MUJWA, in their efforts to establish a new, Islamist-leaning government in Bamako.[48] It main-

tains activities, albeit of a more limited scope than its predecessor, the GSPC, in Algeria.[49] Instead, AQIM's focus has shifted southward, toward the continent's largely lawless Sahel region.[50]

The group has also demonstrated both the ability and the willingness to collaborate as needed with other regional radical forces, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, Somalia's al-Shabaab and assorted Malian Islamists.[51] In recent years, AQIM has grown to global notoriety for its high-profile kidnappings of European hostages. While AQIM is not currently thought to pose a major threat to the U.S. homeland, it is a real danger to European nations, and suspected AQIM activists have been arrested in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Britain.[52] Droukdel has declared France to be the organization's main target in this regard.[53]

AQI

After having suffered significant setbacks during the course of the Iraq War, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is now experiencing a resurgence of both activity and influence. The group's previous iteration, commonly known as the Islamic State of Iraq, suffered a catastrophic collapse in popular support as a result of the brutal policies of its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Against al-Qaeda's instructions,[54] Zarqawi made a policy of targeting local Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq deemed to be at variance with his exclusionary interpretation of Islam. The backlashed helped to form and sustain the so-called Sunni "Awakening" that served as a critical compliment to the Bush administration's successful "surge" of forces into Iraq in 2007.

Today, AQI remains significant. With between 1,000 and 2,000 members, it is "the largest Sunni extremist group in Iraq," according to U.S. government assessments.[55] It also has found new relevance on two fronts. At home, the organization carried out a coordinated series of bombings, attacks and jailbreaks beginning in mid-2012, spearheading an uptick in violence and instability in post-Saddam, post-Coalition Iraq.[56] Meanwhile, next door in Syria, AQI has assumed a significant role as part of the constellation of opposition forces arrayed against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. This has involved close coordination with the al-Qaeda affiliated group *Jabhat al-Nusra* in Syria—so close, in fact, that as of April 2013 the two organizations were rumored to have merged into one unitary entity, known as al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shams (Syria), or AQIS. However, internal infighting over leadership prompted al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri to demand a tactical divorce between the two organizations shortly thereafter.[57] Nevertheless, the two groups remain in close contact, collaborating on operations and even sharing political leadership.[58]

Ideologically, meanwhile, al-Qaeda's organizational transformation has been mirrored by a shift in strategic thinking. Setbacks for the organization over

the past decade in both Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted the emergence of a new generation of *jihadist* thinkers. The most prominent among these has been Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian-born Islamist whose manifesto, *Call to Global Islamic Jihad*, published online in 2005, entailed the first significant reconception of al-Qaeda strategy following the attacks of September 11th. In it, al-Suri counseled, *inter alia*, the abandonment of large-scale strategic attacks in favor of "individual *jihad*" by lone wolf terrorists and small atomized cells whose thinking and operations are in line with al-Qaeda's vision.[59] To a large extent, al-Suri's ideas have helped to animate the strategy of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in recent years.[60]

At the same time, the organization and its branches have attempted to adapt tactically in the face of U.S. and allied operations. Along these lines, one of the most interesting revelations contained in the 2013 disclosures of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden has been the fact that al-Qaeda engineers are reportedly attempting to hack, coopt or neutralize the unmanned aerial vehicles that have become one of the weapons of choice in recent U.S. counterterrorism operations.[61]

RECENT ACTIVITY

Al-Qaeda operations in its respective spheres of influence have been affected by developments following the "Arab Spring" uprisings and the departure of American military forces from Iraq. After the May 2011 death of Osama bin Laden, the respective divisions of al-Qaeda have maintained a strong geographic presence in their core regions (e.g., North Africa, the Persian Gulf) and now attempt to capitalize on geopolitical events.

One such trigger was the withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces from Iraq. Shortly after the American withdrawal in December 2011, violent attacks increased significantly,[62] leading U.S. military officials to conclude that al-Qaeda was "returning" to the Iraqi battlefield.[63] The reason can be traced back to the summer 2012 launch of a campaign devised by the current leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, called "Breaking of the Walls." This effort—entailing some two dozen vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks and eight coordinated prison breaks—was aimed at freeing prisoners captured fighting for an Islamic state in Iraq, and restoring the organization's lost dynamism.[64] The resulting surge in violence and the freeing of hundreds of militants, most notably from prisons in Abu Ghraib and Taji,[65] dealt a blow to the reputation of the Iraqi security forces and may have boosted the confidence of AQI combatants. The new members now stand to reinforce AQI activities by expanding its ranks and capabilities.

To the west, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has succeeded in wresting control of territories in northeastern Syria from the Assad government, reinforced by the influx of thousands of *jihadis* from various countries.[66] The combination of al-Qaeda affiliate *Jabhat al Nusra* and AQI in Syria has stoked fears among Western powers that the fall of the Assad government could lead to an unstable political environment in which al-Qaeda could become a leading benefactor and an increasingly prominent regional force.[67]

Al-Qaeda's Gulf franchise, AQAP, likewise remains a potent and destabilizing force. Since the overthrow of long-serving president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, the transitional government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi has exhibited greater willingness to engage in counterterrorism cooperation with the United States, and it has stepped up its campaign against AQAP militants.[68] However, in August 2013, the Obama administration ordered the temporary closure of 19 diplomatic outposts across the Middle East and North Africa in response to intercepted communications between al-Zawahiri and AQAP, indicating the level at which western powers still perceive a threat.[69]

Other "Arab Spring" uprisings in North Africa similarly may present al-Qaeda with opportunities to gain a foothold in the region. Most notably, Libya has emerged as a significant flashpoint, with America's ambassador to the country, Christopher Stephens, dying at the hands of al-Qaeda-linked militants on the 2012 anniversary of September 11th. Since then, experts have testified to an alarming upsurge of *jihadist* and al-Qaeda affiliated activity in the country—as well as its export to other parts of the Greater Middle East.[70]

In sum, al-Qaeda remains a significant threat and ideological challenge to the West. The network birthed by Osama bin Laden has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in recent years, rebounding from post-9/11 setbacks in both Afghanistan and Iraq to present a sustained challenge to the United States and its allies. Though now more diffuse in nature, the threat posed by the organization remains real. Its franchises have exhibited significant capability to carry out local and regional operations (in the Gulf, North Africa and elsewhere). Moreover, the organization as a whole remains opportunistic, and can be expected to exploit and attack points of vulnerability in those countries allied with America as they arise.

ENDNOTES

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