**Al-Qaeda**

**Osama bin Laden's Network of Terror**

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| **by Laura Hayes, Borgna Brunner, and Beth Rowen**  **Related Links**   * [Remembering September 11](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/sept11features.html) * [International Terrorist Organizations](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0908746) * [Suspected al-Qaeda Terrorist Acts](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0884893.html) * [Terrorist Attacks](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0001454.html) * U.S. State Department: [Country Reports on Terrorism](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/) |
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After the terrorist attacks of [September 11, 2001](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/sept11features.html), al-Qaeda (or al-Qa'ida, pronounced al-KYE-da) surpassed the IRA, [Hamas](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0822500.html), and [Hezbollah](http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0475418.html) as the world's most infamous [terrorist organization](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0908746.html). Al-Qaeda—"the base" in Arabic—is the network of extremists organized by [Osama bin Laden](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/osamabinladen.html) The death of bin Laden, who was killed in a joint operation by U.S. troops and CIA operatives in May 2011, complicated the future of al-Qaeda. Some speculated that the group will be emboldened and seek retaliation, while others wondered if it might founder without its supreme leader. In June, U.S. officials announced that after pouring through the documents and computer files taken from bin Laden's compound, they confirmed their assumption that al-Qaedain Afghanistan and Pakistan has been seriously weakened as a result of U.S. counterterrorism operations undertaken in Pakistan.

More than a month after bin Laden's death al-Qaeda named Dr. [Ayman al-Zawahiri](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0886167), al-Qaeda's theological leader, as its leader.

Bin Laden's death was followed in June by the demise of another powerful, top-ranking al-Qaeda leader, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed. He was the leader of al-Qaeda in East Africa and organized the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. He was killed during a shootout at a security checkpoint in Mogadishu, Somalia.

**The Mujahideen**

Al-Qaeda has its origins in the uprising against the [Soviet occupation of Afghanistan](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0802662). Thousands of volunteers from around the Middle East came to Afghanistan as *mujahideen*, warriors fighting to defend fellow Muslims. In the mid-1980s, Osama bin Laden became the prime financier for an organization that recruited Muslims from mosques around the world. These "Afghan Arab" *mujahideen*, which numbered in the thousands, were crucial in defeating Soviet forces.

After the Soviets withdrew from [Afghanistan](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0107264), bin Laden returned to his native [Saudi Arabia](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0107947.html). He founded an organization to help veterans of the Afghan war, many of whom went on to fight elsewhere (including [Bosnia](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0107349.html)) and comprise the basis of al-Qaeda.

Bin Laden also studied with radical Islamic thinkers and may have already been organizing al-Qaeda when [Iraq invaded Kuwait](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0838511) in 1990. Bin Laden was outraged when the government allowed U.S. troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. In 1991 he was expelled from Saudi Arabia for anti-government activities.

**The Rise of al-Qaeda**

After his expulsion from Saudi Arabia, bin Laden established headquarters for al-Qaeda in Khartoum, [Sudan](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0107996). The first actions of al-Qaeda against American interests were attacks on U.S. servicemen in [Somalia](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0107979.html). A string of terrorist actions suspected to have been orchestrated by al-Qaeda followed **(see sidebar)**, and in August 1996 bin Laden issued a "Declaration of War" against the U.S.

Al-Qaeda also worked to forge alliances with other radical groups. In February 1998, bin Laden announced an alliance of terrorist organizations—the "International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders"—that included the Egyptian al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Harakat ul-Ansar, and other groups.

In 1994 Sudan—under pressure from Saudi Arabia and the U.S.—expelled bin Laden, who moved his base of operations to Afghanistan. Bin Laden was the "guest" of the [Taliban](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/taliban.html) until the U.S. drove them from power in Nov. 2001. Al-Qaeda set up terrorist training camps in the war-torn nation, as it had in Sudan.

**Leadership and Structure**

Although al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden have become virtually synonymous, bin Laden did not run the organization single-handedly. His top advisor was [al-Zawahiri](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0886167), bin Laden's successor. Al-Zawahiri is an Egyptian surgeon from an upper-class family. He joined the country's Islamist movement in the late 1970s. He served three years in prison on charges connected to the assassination of [Anwar Sadat](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0842905.html), during which time he was tortured. After his release he went to Afghanistan, where he met bin Laden and became his personal physician and advisor. He was likely instrumental in bin Laden's political evolution.

Al-Zawahiri is suspected of helping organize the 1997 massacre of 67 foreign tourists in the Egyptian town of [Luxor](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0830679) and was indicted in connection with the bombing of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. In 1998, he was one of five Islamic leaders to sign on to bin Laden's declaration calling for attacks against U.S. citizens. He is wanted by the FBI and has been sentenced to death by Egypt in absentia. In March 2004 the Pakistani military began an assault on al-Qaeda troops along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. These troops were believed to be defending al-Zawahiri, who managed to escape.

Al-Qaeda's leadership oversees a loosely organized network of cells. It can recruit members from thousands of "Arab Afghan" veterans and radicals around the world. Its infrastructure is small, mobile, and decentralized—each cell operates independently with its members not knowing the identity of other cells. Local operatives rarely know anyone higher up in the organization's hierarchy.  
  
Al-Qaeda differs significantly from more traditional terrorist organizations. It does not depend on the sponsorship of a political state, and, unlike the PLO or the IRA, it is not defined by a particular conflict. Instead, al-Qaeda operates as a franchise. It provides financial and logistical support, as well as name recognition, to terrorist groups operating in such diverse places as the [Philippines](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0107887), [Algeria](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0107272.html), [Eritrea](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0107497.html), Afghanistan, [Chechnya](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/chechnya1.html), [Tajikistan](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0108024.html), Somalia, Yemen, and [Kashmir](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/kashmir.html). Furthermore, local groups may act in the name of al-Qaeda in order to bolster their own reputation—even if they are not receiving support from the organization.

**Ideology and Goals**

The principal stated aims of al-Qaeda are to drive Americans and American influence out of all Muslim nations, especially Saudi Arabia; destroy Israel; and topple pro-Western dictatorships around the Middle East. Bin Laden also said that he wishes to unite all Muslims and establish, by force if necessary, an Islamic nation adhering to the rule of the first Caliphs.

According to bin Laden's 1998 [*fatwa*](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0436301) (religious decree), it is the duty of Muslims around the world to wage holy war on the U.S., American citizens, and Jews. Muslims who do not heed this call are declared apostates (people who have forsaken their faith).

Al-Qaeda's ideology, often referred to as "jihadism," is marked by a willingness to kill "apostate" —and Shiite—Muslims and an emphasis on [*jihad*](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0500331). Although "jihadism" is at odds with nearly all Islamic religious thought, it has its roots in the work of two modern [Sunni](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0847245.html) Islamic thinkers: Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb.

Al-Wahhab was an 18th-century reformer who claimed that Islam had been corrupted a generation or so after the death of [Mohammed](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0001468). He denounced any theology or customs developed after that as non-Islamic, including more than 1,000 years of religious scholarship. He and his supporters took over what is now Saudi Arabia, where [Wahhabism](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0851259.html) remains the dominant school of religious thought.

Sayyid Qutb, a radical Egyptian scholar of the mid-20th century, declared Western civilization the enemy of Islam, denounced leaders of Muslim nations for not following Islam closely enough, and taught that *jihad* should be undertaken not just to defend Islam, but to purify it.

**The War on Terrorism**

In response to the [September 11, 2001](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/sept112001.html), attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 to [dismantle al-Qaeda and the Taliban](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/taliban-time.html#2001). Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in the country was destroyed and their military commander, [Muhammed Atef](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0886166), was killed. [Abu Zubaydah](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0900557.html), another top operative, was captured in Pakistan. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, however, escaped. They have released audio and video messages to the Arab media from time to time.

In March 2003 the U.S. widened the war on terrorism by invading Iraq and deposing Saddam Hussein and his Baath party (see [Iraq profile](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107644.html)). The decision to encompass Iraq in "the war on terror" was highly controversial. Although President Bush asserted that there was a working relationship between Hussein and al-Qaeda, no solid proof of collaboration between them—specifically on the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, or on any other terrorist activities—emerged.

**2004—The Madrid Bombing**

On March 11, 2004, Spain's most horrific terrorist attack occurred: 202 people were killed and 1,400 were injured in bombings at Madrid's railway station. Evidence soon emerged that al-Qaeda was responsible. By April, a dozen suspects, most of them Moroccan, were arrested for the bombings. On April 4, several suspects blew themselves up during a police raid to avoid capture. Many Spaniards blamed their prime minister's staunch support of the U.S. and the war in Iraq for making Spain an al-Qaeda target. [More on the [Madrid bombing](http://www.infoplease.com/cgi-bin/id/A0922754.html).]

**2005—The London Bombing**

On July 7, 2005, London suffered a terrorist bombing, its worst attack since World War II. Four bombs exploded in three subway stations and on one double-decker bus during the morning rush hour, killing at least 52 and wounding more than 700. A group calling itself the Secret Organization of al-Qaeda in Europe claimed responsibility on a Web site, asserting that the attacks were a retaliation for Britain's involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A year after the bombing, British investigators concluded that the links between the bombers and al-Qaeda were marginal. The four bombers, all born in Britain, had all visited Pakistan, but there was no evidence of any direct support from al-Qaeda.

**Al-Qaeda in Iraq**

As the Iraqi insurgency has continued, however, suspected al-Qaeda terrorists have moved into the country and are likely responsible for kidnappings and a string of suicide-bomb attacks. In February 2004, U.S. forces intercepted a letter believed to have been written by [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](http://www.infoplease.com/biography/var/abumusabalzarqawi.html), a Jordanian radical. The letter outlined plans to destabilize Iraq by igniting sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Al-Zarqawi is thought to have been the mastermind behind the 1,000 to 3,000 foreign insurgents fighting in Iraq. For a time, al-Zarqawi appeared to position himself as a rival to bin Laden, but in Oct. 2004 he officially declared allegiance to al-Qaeda, changing the name of his organization from Unification and Jihad to al-Qaeda in Iraq. In an audiotape a few months later bin Laden declared that "the dear mujahed brother Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is the prince of al-Qaeda in Iraq," and announced that "we, in al-Qaeda organization, welcome him joining forces with us."

Despite the U.S. "war on terror," al-Qaeda continues to be a threat worldwide. There have been continued attacks by al-Qaeda terrorists since September 11, 2001. Until his death, Osama bin Laden played an important role in shaping the group's mission, and al-Zawahiri still does. In April, 2004, bin Laden offered a truce to Europe, saying that al-Qaeda would not attack any country, with the exception of the U.S., that withdrew its troops from the Islamic world within three months. European leaders quickly rejected the offer.

In December 2007, Gen. Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the multinational force in Iraq, reported that al-Qaeda in Iraq posed the greatest threat to Iraq's security. Indeed, in January 2008, the U.S. military reported that in 2007, al-Qaeda in Iraq was responsible for some 4,500 attacks against civilians that killed 3,870 people and wounded almost 18,000. By September 2008, however, al-Qaeda in Iraq had been sharply weakened, if not diminished entirely. The success in routing out the terrorist group has been attributed to Sunni Awakening Councils, former tribal leaders and insurgents who turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq as it became increasingly sectarian, and sided with the U.S.

**Zarqawi Killed**

[Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](http://www.infoplease.com/biography/var/abumusabalzarqawi.html), the most-wanted terrorist in Iraq (see above), was killed in June 2006 when U.S. warplanes dropped 500-lb. bombs on his safe house. Zarqawi's death is considered America’s single biggest victory in nearly five years of fighting Islamist terror. Zarqawi was responsible for many of the most brutal and horrific attacks in Iraqi.

**The Splintering and Proliferation of Al-Qaeda**

In recent years, many of the most horrific bombings attributed to al-Qaeda—most notably Bali, Madrid, London, and Algeria—are believed to have been carried out by terrorist groups linked more in spirit than in substance to al-Qaeda. Al-Zarqawi, the most active terrorist in recent years, for example, only officially joined al-Qaeda in the years after he initiated his reign of terror in Iraq. Al-Qaeda has been more than happy to take credit for the various bombings, but it is thought that it has offered philosophical motivation more than a direct support for the atrocities committed by these splinter groups. While al-Qaeda encourages its reputation as a vast global network, many experts believe that at this stage al-Qaeda itself has just a small core of adherents, but serves as the virulent inspiration to countless violent Islamic extremists.

While the war on terror has cost the United States some $1 trillion, al-Qeada remains a global threat. In fact, in August 2008, Ted Gistaro, the U.S. government's senior terrorism analyst, said in a report that by forging closer ties to Pakistani militants, al-Qaeda is more capable of launching an attack in the United States than it was in 2007. The Pakistani militants have given al-Qaeda leaders safe haven in remote areas to train recruits.

John Brennan, President Barack Obama's senior adviser on counterterrorism and homeland security, said in August 2009 that although al-Qaeda "has been seriously damaged and forced to replace many of its top-tier leadership with less experienced and less capable individuals," the terrorist group remains the country's No. 1 threat.

In the wake of bin Laden's death, analysts expressed concern that al-Qaeda may seek retaliation. U.S. embassies throughout the world were put on high alert, and the U.S. State Department issued a warning for travelers visiting dangerous countries, instructing them "to limit their travel outside of their homes and hotels and avoid mass gatherings and demonstrations." Some Afghan officials expressed concern that bin Laden's death might be seen as a reason for the U.S. to withdraw from Afghanistan, saying terrorism continues to plague the country and the region.

**Al-Qaeda After bin Laden**

Over the summer of 2012, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar Dine, another radical Islamist group, took advantage of the instability and an increasingly weak military in Mali and captured Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao, cities in the north. They implemented and brutally enforced Shariah, or Islamic law. They also destroyed many ancient books and manuscripts and vandalized tombs, saying that worshipping saints violates the tenets of Islam. The Islamists continued to stretch their area of control into the fall, prompting concern that legions of Islamists would gather and train in northern Mali and threaten large swaths of Africa. Meanwhile in September 2012, militants armed with antiaircraft weapons and rocket-propelled grenades fired upon the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya, killing U.S. ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens and three other embassy officials. U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton said the U.S. believed that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a group closely linked to al-Qaeda, orchestrated the attack.

In January 2013, militants pushed into the southern part of Mali, crossing into the area controlled by the government. France sent about 2,150 troops to Mali to push them back. By the end of January, French troops pushed the militants out of Gao and Timbuktu, forcing them back to northern Mali. Soldiers from other African nations were also deployed to Mali to aid in the effort and would take a more active role in both combat and training Malian troops once France withdraws from Mali. On January 16, 2013, Islamic militants entered neighboring Algeria from Mali and took dozens of foreign hostages at the BP-controlled In Amenas gas field. Algerian officials said the militants were members of an offshoot of al-Qaeda called Al Mulathameen and were acting in retaliation for France's intervention in Mali. On Jan. 17, Algerian troops stormed the complex and attacked the kidnappers. By the end of the standoff on Jan. 20, 29 militants and 37 hostages were killed. Three Americans were among the dead.

Read more: [Al-Qaeda | Infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/al-qaeda-terrorism.html#ixzz2wLuPw9iW) <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/al-qaeda-terrorism.html#ixzz2wLuPw9iW>