

# Al Qaeda in 2014

Al Qaeda, once the most effective terrorist organization in the world, has been severely weakened since 9/11. The U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan and covert operations around the world have left what remains of their command hierarchy strained, making it harder for senior leadership to plan attacks. Nevertheless, al Qaeda and affiliated groups remain dangerous.

The Arab Spring was a rejection of al Qaeda, but the post-revolution security environment creates new opportunities for instability that al Qaeda is already using to its advantage. We must work with our partners to ensure terrorists cannot secure new footholds in areas of instability around the world.



**If you read only one thing**

**Al Qaeda is Weakened, but Remains a Threat to the U.S. and our Allies**

- Al Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East, Africa, & East Asia still seek to attack the U.S. and our partners.
- Instability and failed states in those regions risk becoming al Qaeda footholds.
- We must enable partners to build their own security capacity and address shared challenges
- Efforts to minimize civilian casualties in our counterterrorism operations are essential to fighting al Qaeda.

# Key Issues

**Al Qaeda Central has been decimated by the war in Afghanistan and the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in Pakistan.** Of the 30 top leaders of al Qaeda, 22 are dead. Osama bin Laden has been killed, and the remaining senior leaders of al Qaeda Central are on the run and far less effective than before. UAVs focused on targeted killings have played an important role – but civilian deaths also fuel al Qaeda recruitment, and thus these killings are a risky strategy in the long-term.

See also: Afghanistan Chapter  
See also: Pakistan Chapter

**American success at fighting al Qaeda’s central leadership has led to greater fragmentation of an already diffuse organization.** Though they lack the discipline and resources of al Qaeda Central ten years ago, these al Qaeda “affiliates” remain a threat to American security and to the regional stability of the areas in which they operate, and in some cases even aspire to function as governments in the areas they inhabit. (See the “Countries and Affiliates” section below for more.) Al Qaeda does not have a strict hierarchy; instead al Qaeda Central and its “affiliates” tend to espouse a common ideology, adopt similar tactics, share resources when possible and maintain overlapping (organizational/human/social) networks.

**Al Qaeda affiliates use local grievances and security vacuums to spread rapidly.** In Syria, al Qaeda-aligned militants have proven effective at fighting government forces, allowing them in some cases to win the



Al Qaeda has splintered under pressure from U.S. attacks. Today they’re more focused on local grievances than directly attacking Americans.



Ensuring weak states don’t become failed states is essential to denying al Qaeda a safe haven. That’s where development funding comes in.

support even of non-radical Syrians, who are desperate for assistance in their resistance against Assad's murderous regime. Al Qaeda's effort to hijack the rebellion against Assad could prolong regional strife for years to come.

In Mali, on the other hand, where existing national divisions fall chiefly along ethnic lines, al Qaeda has adopted the trappings of an ethnic nationalist movement, affiliating itself with members of the Taureg ethnicity, a population of Muslim Berbers who live in Northern Mali. By joining a regional conflict, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) hopes to secure the friendship of Taureg political and military leaders, which would allow AQIM to operate with impunity in Northern Mali.

In Yemen, al Qaeda took advantage of anti-government sentiment in rural areas and ineffective security forces to gain influence in the south and east of the country. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) will likely continue to maintain their safe haven in Yemen until the government finalizes political reforms, secures basic economic growth, expands inclusive institutions and improves security force capacity.

**Al Qaeda's ideology also continues to inspire "lone wolves" in the West.** Often driven by a sense of dishonor, individuals continue to be drawn to al Qaeda's violent ideology. They are recruited to the cause largely through websites. These sites are hard to shut down because of the diffuse nature of the internet and difficulty in tracking the volume of new sites.

**Al Qaeda's brand has been badly damaged in Muslim-majority countries.** Al Qaeda's ideology failed to win support in Muslim-majority

countries because of their choice to kill other Muslims, starting with their terror against Iraqis during the Iraq war.

Polling shows that in every Muslim-majority country, the number of people with positive feelings towards Osama bin Laden plummeted after 2003, falling in Jordan from 56% to 24% in three years. In Turkey, support fell from 15% to 3% during the same period. Thus, while much of the region rejected the Global War on Terror, there was also, in large part, a rejection of violent Islamic extremism, and of al Qaeda especially. Even in Pakistan, al Qaeda is not popular: in 2012, only 13% of Pakistanis had a favorable view of al Qaeda, compared to 55% with an unfavorable view.

**However, al Qaeda is still able to gain a foothold by filling a security vacuum in failed states and places where corruption fuels deeply unequal societies.** The states in which al Qaeda affiliates have gained traction include Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and parts of Mali – all with weak central governments that lack the capacity to control and provide services to many regions of their own countries. The absence of a national military or police presence allows al Qaeda to operate unimpeded, while the poverty and violence generated by regional conflicts make these areas ideal for al Qaeda to recruit and promote their radical ideology. They do this in part by providing training, manpower, and weapons to local armed militias and support to civilians filling gaps left by the absent state, like the provision of food, water, education, and other basic needs.

In Yemen, for instance, where the state was absent from many rural areas, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) won support by offering some basic services and providing school teachers. Naturally, they taught their own radical form of Islam and used their power to recruit young Yemeni men to commit acts of terrorism. As in previous cases, AQAP's radical



Al Qaeda's ability to launch occasional, smaller attacks should not be confused with the resurrection of al Qaeda as a strong terrorist organization.

beliefs and oppressive system of governance alienated locals, allowing the government to drive out al Qaeda after a brief military campaign in 2011 and early 2012. But adequate government services might have prevented the infiltration of al Qaeda agents in the first place.

Within these countries, a sense of dishonor or injustice and knowing someone who has joined the cause tends to fuel recruitment. People who have lost family members to state-sponsored violence, including drone strikes, are also extremely susceptible to al Qaeda recruitment.

In the cases in which individuals or communities have been receptive to al Qaeda's radical messages, it has usually been because violence has continued for so long that the community is willing to turn to any strong force to stop the fighting, as with Somalia or Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion. A deep sense of government injustice, often due to corruption, can also fuel support for extremist leaders, who are sometimes seen as less corruptible than secular forces. For this reason, it is clear that international efforts at creating clean and able governments will be critical to the defeat of al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda has taken advantage of the Syrian conflict to strengthen its foothold in Syria and further destabilize Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has long used the remote regions of eastern Syria and the Anbar province of Iraq as a base of operations from which to fight coalition forces and the Iraqi government, but since the uprising in 2011 they have taken an active role in fighting Syrian government forces as well. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), a radical jihadi group that emerged from AQI, has since publicly split with al Qaeda Central's senior leadership over theological and practical differences. The infighting between ISIL and other Islamist groups in Syria should not be taken as a sign of weakness,

however. ISIL remains one of the most potent fighting forces in northeast Syria and presents a real risk of spreading the conflict into Iraq.

See also: Syria Chapter

## The Policy Landscape & Recommendations

**Al Qaeda remains a threat even with Osama Bin Laden dead, but it is the more diffuse, localized affiliates that are able to exploit conditions in fragile or failing states.** The United States now has the opportunity to degrade al Qaeda to the point that it is a low-level and manageable threat. U.S. national security and law enforcement agencies have improved dramatically since 9/11, but more can be done to ensure an effective, principled approach.

**“Military-only” (i.e. kinetic) strategies are expensive and can ultimately be counter-productive.** “Large footprint” expeditionary military operations against violent non-state actors are no longer as feasible in a time of budgetary restraint. But more importantly, these operations can easily be counter-productive by driving “neutrals” into the arms of extremist organizations. By making locals feel dishonored, we increase al Qaeda recruitment. Large footprint operations also reduce our ability to respond nimbly to a moving threat.

**Security sector assistance should help partner nations build sustainable capacity to defeat our common enemy.** Al Qaeda is a security challenge we share with other nations. In places like Yemen and Mali, partner nation forces will be the ones to deliver final defeat to al Qaeda. Effective security assistance requires multi-year investments, close cooperation with partners, and a focus on building security institutions over the long term. Our assistance must also prioritize the development of good governance, rule of law, respect for human rights and civilian oversight in tandem with security force capacity, or we risk creating the very forces that catalyze the growth of insurgencies.

**Development and Diplomacy need more support in the U.S. government.** Our military operations and security assistance will never be sustainable in nations with weak civilian governments lacking inclusive institutions and economic growth. Supporting stronger civil societies, development assistance, and investing in partnerships with allies is crucial to fighting al Qaeda by countering the conditions that breed extremism. The aim should be to deny militants a pool of recruits instead of targeting people once they already pose a threat to the U.S. or our allies.

See also: National Security Budget Chapter

**A robust legal framework should guide the use of targeted UAV strikes.** Targeted killings can be effective – but the civilian deaths they often cause also drive terrorist recruitment. Moreover, targeted strikes might be used against the U.S. at some point, as the technology becomes easier to obtain. Therefore, we need strengthened congressional oversight of these programs, expanded to include all committees with appropriate jurisdiction. This is particularly true in situations where American citizens

may have joined militant organizations. President Obama announced in May 2013 that armed drones would be under the purview of our military through the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) instead of the CIA. These changes are useful to ensure greater oversight; now they must be fully implemented. Guided by a strong system of checks and balances, targeted strikes by UAVs should be nested in a larger regional strategy for countering violent extremism that also incorporates diplomacy, development, and security cooperation.

## Key People

**Osama Bin Laden.** Bin Laden was the head of al Qaeda and was killed in a U.S. military raid in May 2011 on a home in a Pakistani town where he was believed to be hiding for years. Bin Laden, a Saudi national, was a highly revered figure in the movement who got his start supporting the Afghan mujahedeen during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s.

**Ayman al Zawahiri (Eye-man Al Za-Wa-Here-EE).** al Zawahiri is the current head of al Qaeda. This longtime associate of bin Laden is a medical doctor from Egypt, where he headed the once-deadly militant organization, al Jihad. He lacks the symbolic power of his predecessor. There is also a sense that with bin Laden dead, approval and guidance from al Qaeda Central is less important than it once was for regional affiliates. Nevertheless, Zawahiri remains a powerful and dangerous individual. He is believed to be in hiding in Pakistan.

**Nasir al Wuhayshi (NasEEr al wa-HEE-SHEE).** al Wuhayshi is the

leader al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and was named chief deputy of al Qaeda Central in August 2013, becoming the first known al Qaeda Central senior leader to be located outside of Pakistan. Wuhayshi was Osama bin Laden's close associate and top lieutenant in Afghanistan before the American invasion in 2001. Wuhayshi founded AQAP by merging al Qaeda groups in Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 2009.

**'Abd al-Malik Drukdal (Ab-Dal Mal-Ek Drook-Daal).** al-Malik Drukdal is the leader of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is the al Qaeda affiliate organization in North Africa and the Sahel region, and a State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

**Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ab-OO BA-ker al-bag-DAD-ee).** al-Baghdadi is the leader of the Syrian jihadist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, and is a former leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, both of which are designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. State Department.

## Countries & Affiliates

**Al Qaeda Central.** Despite the death of bin Laden in 2011, Pakistan has remained the primary base for the central leadership of al Qaeda since their ouster from Afghanistan in 2001. This relatively small cell includes most of al Qaeda's founding members – including the current leader, Zawahiri – but its relevance has been challenged by intense pressure from the U.S. and the growing autonomy of its affiliates. Al Qaeda Central works closely with the Islamist insurgent groups in that

region, including the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, and others. Pakistan's relationship with violent non-state proxies like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the group responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, complicates the US-Pakistani counterterrorism relationship.

**Syria.** Jabhat al Nusra had developed into one of the most effective opposition groups fighting against Syria's Assad regime and is said to receive support from Gulf donors. The group has thousands of fighters, some of them AQI veterans. Al Nusra has been designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Their prominence in the armed opposition has complicated U.S. efforts to support the Syrian opposition.

In recent months Jabhat al Nusra has fought with another Islamist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, though the exact nature of relations between these groups remains unclear. ISIL has alienated the civilian population even more than other Islamist militias due to their brutal reprisals against civilian resistance and their inflexible interpretations of Sharia law. Nevertheless, they remain one of the more powerful Islamist groups in Northeast Syria.

**Iraq.** Al Qaeda in Iraq, forged during the U.S. intervention and occupation, remains a major obstacle to peace in Iraq. While the group lost significant native Sunni support during the 2006-7 "surge" and the Anbar Awakening movement, the group still routinely launches deadly bombings across Iraq. These attacks, however, are less likely to be "front page news" now that American troops are no longer in Iraq. Many fighters from AQI have crossed the border into Syria and are now supporting radical Sunni groups fighting there, like al Nusra and ISIL.

**Yemen.** U.S. officials refer to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, locally known as Ansar al Sharia, as the most dangerous affiliate. AQAP dispatched the “underwear bomber” on a Detroit-bound flight in 2009 and plotted to blow up a U.S. bound airliner in 2012. AQAP has also conducted multiple spectacular attacks against the Yemen government, carried out multiple kidnapping of Westerners, and continues to threaten U.S. citizens working in Yemen. Capitalizing on instability surrounding the Arab Spring in 2011, AQAP seized a few towns in southern Yemen. Yemeni security forces, working closely with the U.S., decimated AQAP, pushing them back to their rural safe havens. Despite these gains, Yemen’s government continues to struggle to maintain security. Targeted strikes by American UAVs have played an important role in fighting al Qaeda in Yemen, and though controversial, such strikes are less uniformly opposed in Yemen than in Pakistan.

**Somalia.** Somalia has long been a failed state and a home to violent groups. The now-infamous Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 witnessed the Black Hawk Down incident. Islamists have since controlled significant portions of southern Somalia, with al Shabaab emerging as the chief group among them in 2006. It was added to the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations in 2008. In early 2012, they formally declared allegiance to al Qaeda, though actual coordination between the groups appears to be more symbolic than substantive. Though the new government of Somalia has had some success at consolidating its hold of the capital, Mogadishu, and the surrounding areas, al Shabaab remains the most powerful group and de facto government in much of southern Somalia. In September 2013, terrorists tied to al Shabaab stormed the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing dozens of civilians as a response to Kenya’s contribution to the African Union force fighting against al Shabaab in Somalia.

**North Africa.** Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is based in Algeria with a presence throughout the Sahel region in western Africa. Through its involvement in an ongoing civil war in Mali and a week-long hostage crisis at an Algerian energy facility, the group has dramatically boosted its international credibility and strength in the last year. Significantly, the latter event exposed tensions between the Algerian security forces and their Western counterparts.

The ongoing civil war in Mali led to a French-led intervention in January 2013, with logistics and intelligence support from the U.S. military and intelligence community. The key factions fighting the central government are tied to al Qaeda, including AQIM and its splinter faction, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). As with Yemen, the conflict goes far beyond al Qaeda. Members of the Tuareg ethnic group via the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) are also a major part of the conflict. Ansar Deen is a violent Islamist group comprised of both Tuaregs and Arabs with ties to AQIM.

**Caucasus.** Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, IK) grew from the 1990s Chechen rebellion against the Russian Federation, but also considers United States, Britain and Israel to be enemies. Russian security operations in the North Caucasus decimated the group's leadership; however, heavy-handed tactics have simultaneously engendered support for IK amongst parts of the local population. Al Qaeda Central officially recognized IK as an affiliate in 2008, followed by US State Department designation as a terrorist organization in 2011. The group has sent fighters to join the Syrian civil war in support of Jabhat al Nusra. Most IK attacks target the Russian government in the north Caucasus, but also civilians in Moscow, including the 2010 subway bombing.

# Background

**Al Qaeda formed from the Mujahedeen who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.** Many of bin Laden's original followers had fought alongside him in the Afghan war in the 1980s. In reaction to the first Gulf War, Osama bin Laden recruited those who felt dishonored by a Western presence in holy places such as Saudi Arabia. That sense of dishonor felt when Westerners desecrate Islamic objects, or are perceived to be disrespecting Islam, remains a powerful recruiting tool.

**In 2001, al Qaeda had an extensive network in Afghanistan and friendly relations with the ruling Taliban government.** Al Qaeda had moved to Sudan and eventually to Afghanistan, where local practice was closest to its radical interpretations of Islam, and the Taliban government of the time was welcoming. In Afghanistan, they trained and prepared for terrorist attacks with impunity, and on September 11th they used that capacity to commit the worst acts of terrorism in American history. Our winter military campaign ousted the Taliban, and scattered al Qaeda, forcing them into hiding in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan and Northwestern Pakistan.

**We successfully fought al Qaeda Central in Afghanistan.** Our troops hunted al Qaeda members across Afghanistan and successfully drove them from their camps and bases. Since then, a combination of direct military action, covert action, and targeted strikes, chiefly by UAVs, have killed many of their top commanders and ideological leaders, including 22 of al Qaeda's top 30 leaders.

**The invasion of Iraq led al Qaeda to change its tactics.** The al Qaeda affiliate al Qaeda in Iraq formed and began targeting not only U.S. servicemembers, but Iraqis whom they believed to be complicit in our Iraqi operations. Despite the unpopularity of the Iraq War in much of the Arab world, AQI's tactics were even more unpopular, as they led inevitably to the killing of large numbers of civilians.

**The killing of Osama bin Laden dealt a major blow to al Qaeda Central, but his death has stopped neither local insurgencies from affiliating, nor lone-wolf recruitment.** Though no longer in charge of al Qaeda's day-to-day operations, bin Laden had remained the spiritual leader of the organization and an influential figure within the international jihadist community. For many in the U.S. and around the world, bin Laden's longevity represented a major symbolic and practical failure of the American mission in Afghanistan and the war on al Qaeda. President Obama made killing bin Laden a top priority and, through the hard work of our intelligence community and military, we accomplished that goal in 2011.

Bin Laden's death sent a powerful message that anyone who targets civilians in terrorist attacks can eventually be found and brought to justice. It has not, however, stopped the fragmentation of al Qaeda into local affiliates that remain dangerous; it has also not curbed the appeal of violent extremism for many lone wolf terrorists.