

Al-Qa'ida



OVERVIEW

AS OF MAY 2026

Al-Qa'ida is a Salafi terrorist group that has evolved from its pre-9/11 base in Afghanistan and Pakistan into a dispersed, global network of affiliates and supporters. Although al-Qa'ida's central leadership cadre has been weakened and most of its original leaders removed, the group still seeks to attack the United States and US interests abroad, even as counterterrorism pressure, international cooperation, and enhanced security measures have decreased its ability to do so.

Al-Qa'ida's affiliates operate across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. These entities include al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its Sahel branch, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM); al-Shabaab; and al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Hurras al-Din, al-Qa'ida's affiliate in Syria since 2018, publicly announced its dissolution in early 2025, although its former members still operate there. These groups and their attacks are detailed in separate entries on this website.

Operating Areas

Al-Qa'ida's affiliates plan and carry out most of the global network's operational activity. AQAP is based in Yemen; AQIM and JNIM are based in Mali; al-Shabaab is based in Somalia; and AQIS is based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Before its public dissolution, Hurras al-Din was based in Syria. Some senior leaders and lower level members reside in Iran.

Tactics And Targets

Al-Qa'ida exploits under-governed areas, regional conflicts, and local grievances to recruit new members and gather resources. Its affiliates are committed to attacking the United States and US interests abroad but have varying degrees of operational capability and access to these targets. The affiliates use a variety of tactics, including conventional assaults, improvised explosive devices, suicide operations, and kidnappings. Al-Qa'ida also encourages its worldwide adherents to conduct operations in their own countries using readily available weapons.

Terrorist Group Designation

The US State Department designated al-Qa'ida as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in October 1999. Several al-Qa'ida leaders are Specially Designated Global Terrorists.



Al-Qa'ida *(continued)*

KEY LEADERS

**Sayf al-Adl**

a.k.a. Mohammed Salih al-Din al-Halim Zaydan

Iran-based senior leader; indicted for his role in the East Africa US Embassy bombings in August 1998; was labeled a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in September 2001

**'Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi**

a.k.a. Muhammad Abbatay

Iran-based senior leader; longtime director of al-Qa'ida's media arm, al-Sahab; former senior adviser to Zawahiri; was labeled a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2021

**Usama Bin Ladin [DECEASED]**

Deceased former amir who led the group from its founding in 1988 until his death in 2011

**Ayman al-Zawahiri [DECEASED]**

Replaced Bin Ladin in June 2011; served as amir until his death in July 2022

NOTABLE ATTACKS

7 July 2005

London, England

British suicide operatives detonate homemade bombs concealed in backpacks aboard trains in London's Underground and on a public bus, killing 52 people and injuring almost 800.

11 September 2001

New York City; Washington, DC; Shanksville, Pennsylvania

Nineteen suicide attackers hijack and crash four US commercial jets—two into the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon near Washington, DC, and one into a field in Shanksville—killing nearly 3,000 people.



Al-Qa'ida *(continued)*

NOTABLE ATTACKS *(continued)*

12 October 2000

Aden, Yemen

Using a small, explosives-laden vessel, operatives attack the USS Cole in the port of Aden, killing 17 US sailors and injuring 39.

7 August 1998

Nairobi, Kenya; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Operatives conduct near-simultaneous attacks using truck bombs against the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, killing 224 people and injuring more than 5,000.

