SPOTLIGHT

Al-Qa'ida's Recent Calls to Conduct Attacks in the US Highlights Its Enduring Threat to Public Safety

This Spotlight was provided by the Joint CT Assessment Team (JCAT). JCAT's mission is to improve information sharing and enhance public safety for federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector (FSLTTP) partners. For more information on JCAT, please visit this link.

SCOPE: This product is intended to inform federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government, law enforcement and first responders of al-Qa'ida's recent calls for attacks against the United States.

Al-Qa'ida's resurgence of calls for attacks in the homeland highlights its persistent and enduring threat to the country, US officials, and public safety. Al-Qa'ida and its Yemen-based affiliate, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—the only affiliate to have successfully enabled an attack in the homeland—are likely seeking to leverage their media publications and global conflicts, particularly where there is US support or military involvement, to inspire potential attackers.

- In mid-July 2025, AQAP released the 10th edition of its English-language *Inspire Guide*—the second issue within a month—celebrating recent attacks in the US and calling on its supporters in the homeland to conduct attacks, using simple attack methods, such as firearms, explosives, knives, vehicle-rammings, or Molotov cocktails. The publication highlighted that proper targets were individuals or organizations that support Israel, as well as law enforcement and the government—almost certainly a reference that includes the USG—and that large protests or civil disturbances could be good opportunities to commit an act of terrorism.

- In June, AQAP leader, Sa'd Atif al-Aulaqi, released a video—titled *Inciting the Believers*—calling for attacks against the US President, Vice President, Secretaries of Defense and State, members of Congress, their families, and at least one private US citizen. In his speech, Atif urged revenge, that "reciprocity is legitimate," and said there was no distinction between civilian and military targets.

- In June, AQAP published the 9th edition of its *Inspire Guide*, "A Message Beyond Bullets: Attack on the Jewish Capital Museum in Washington, D.C." The article focused on inciting lone actor attacks against the US and called for Muslims in America to take action, likely an attempt to capitalize on the killing of two Israeli Embassy employees in front of the Jewish Capital Museum in May.

Many of the suggested target themes in recent al-Qa'ida threats are consistent with the group's post 9/11 attack plots in the homeland, which focused on aviation, symbolic or economic targets, US military or government employees and facilities, and the US public. Since al-Qa'ida's propaganda and media often revisit these themes, they may indicate potential targets that authorities, first responders, and public safety officials should closely monitor.

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Target Theme	Year	Historical Plot or Threat
Aviation	2010	AQAP attempted to ship two packages, containing explosives hidden in printer cartridges on separate commercial cargo aircraft destined for Chicago, Illinois. The timers on the explosives would have taken down both aircraft while they were over the eastern coast of the US had the plot not been thwarted.
	2009	A trained AQAP operative—who was personally directed by now-deceased US citizen and AQAP operations leader Anwar al-Aulaki—attempted to detonate a bomb hidden in his underwear on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit. The operative was so inspired by al-Aulaki's online lectures, he left graduate school to join al-Aulaki—in Yemen—and was committed to conducting a suicide operation.
	2006	A UK-based al-Qa'ida cell planned to bomb at least seven US- and Canada-bound passenger flights using liquid explosives. The operatives intended to smuggle explosive devices disguised as sports drinks onto the transatlantic airliners and detonate the bombs near-simultaneously midflight.
	2001	An al-Qa'ida operative—who trained at an al-Qa'ida camp in Afghanistan, where some of the 9/11 hijackers trained—attempted to ignite explosives hidden in his shoes while he was aboard a flight from Paris to Miami. He was subdued as he attempted to light a fuse in his shoes. Authorities believe that had the explosives detonated, it would have blown a hole in the side of the aircraft.
	2001	9/11, al-Qa'ida operatives hijacked four commercial planes, killing approximately 3,000 people.
Symbolic Economic Targets	2013	Two brothers inspired by al-Qa'ida's ideology carried out a terrorist attack by detonating pressure cooker IEDs during the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring over 260. The attack was not directly affiliated with al-Qa'ida, but the brothers had watched al-Qa'ida videos—some by now-deceased Anwar al-Aulaki—and learned how to make their bombs from al-Qa'ida's *Inspire* magazine. The brothers had considered launching attacks on 4 July festivities in Boston, Massachusetts or against police stations in the city, but decided to target the marathon because they were able to make the bombs in time for the marathon.
	2009	In a disrupted plot, an al-Qa'ida operative and his two co-conspirators planned to bomb the New York City (NYC) subway system during Ramadan at the direction of al-Qa'ida. The plotters received weapons and explosives training at an al-Qa'ida camp in Pakistan and acquired all of the necessary materiel to build the IEDs after returning to the US in 2009. US authorities arrested all three and all were convicted on terrorism charges.
	2001	9/11, al-Qa'ida operatives crashed planes into the World Trade Center (WTC) in NYC. Al-Qa'ida targeted the WTC because it considered the WTC a prominent symbol of American economic power and Western capitalism.

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US Military and Government Targets	2025	AQAP threatened the US President, Vice President, Secretaries of Defense and State, members of Congress, their families, and at least one private US citizen.
	2019	AQAP enabled a Saudi Air Force trainee's attack at a naval air station in Pensacola, Florida, which resulted in the deaths of three US military members and injuring at least eight more. The trainee was radicalized as early as 2015—well before arriving to the US for training—and had maintained regular contact with AQAP members, sharing his plans and tactics for the attack.
	2015	A gunman inspired by al-Qa'ida's ideology killed four US Marines at two military installations in Tennessee. Although the attack was not directly linked to al-Qa'ida, the gunman was inspired by now-deceased Anwar al-Aulaki's writings and the attacker had watched Aulaki's videos in the days before the attack.
	2010	Documents written by now-deceased former al-Qa'ida leader, Usama bin Laden, criticized former President Obama's policies and mentioned him alongside other US leaders as targets. Now-deceased and then AQAP leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, released a video threatening Obama and called for attacks against the US.
	2009	A US military officer inspired by al-Qa'ida's ideology shot and killed 13 people—and injured 32 others—at Fort Hood army base in Texas. Prior to the attack, he had exchanged emails with now-deceased Anwar al-Aulaki, who he admired, though they did not discuss his attack plans.
	2004	Usama bin Laden threatened former President George W. Bush.
	2001	9/11, al-Qa'ida operatives crashed plane into the Pentagon in Northern Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C.

Sa'd Atif al-Aulaqi assumed leadership of AQAP in 2024 and has since publicly incited attacks against the US and its allies. During Atif's previous role as an AQAP regional leader in Yemen, he orchestrated attacks against US interests and engaged in the kidnapping of American citizens in Yemen. In July 2025, the US Department of State's Rewards for Justice program announced an increase in its reward offer, from $6 million to $10 million, for information leading to the identification or location of Atif.

First Responder Perspective:

Aviation: Violent extremists have sought to attack aviation targets due to their symbolic and economic value and media attention. Public safety responsible for responding to confined spaces on aircraft may consider having access to functional specialized equipment, such as personal protective equipment.

Additionally, hoax threats, like swatting, may be used as a low-cost, low-risk tactic to instill fear, disrupt operations, and divert resources. Potential mitigation measures include:

- Assess for inconsistent noises in the background or the caller's demeanor.
- Review the threat for vagueness, inconsistencies, or implausibility.
- Confirm the call was made through voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) services.

For more information refer to First Responder's Toolboxes "Complex Operating Environment–Airports" (March 2018) and "Evaluating and Responding to Violent Extremist Hoax Threats" (November 2024).

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Symbolic Economic Targets: Violent extremists often seek to attack or conduct online messaging campaigns against targets that draw large crowds, incite fear, praise from FTO supporters, and threaten economic interests. Historically some of these targets include sporting and music events, high-profile special events, or symbolic locations which often have unrestricted, open access. Regardless of the event size, venue, or location, event planners and public safety can think about some of the following factors when preparing for special events or public gatherings in their jurisdiction:

- Security: Integrate a visible law enforcement presence using roving interagency law enforcement teams to identify possible threats.
- Information Sharing: Conduct pre-event briefings to share new information about safety and security or medical plans, policies, and procedures.
- Threat Reporting: Conduct site visits leading up to the event to understand typical patterns of human movement, which will help public safety officials identify suspicious activity.

For more information refer to First Responder's Toolbox, "Large Public Gatherings Attractive Targets for Violent Extremists" (May 2025).

Government and Public Officials: Violent extremists may justify or incite violence against targets that represent or are linked to perceived grievances or alleged ideological opponents to foment chaos, fear, or political instability. It is critical to maintain awareness of current TTPs that may be used by lone offenders or small group attackers and enhance digital literacy to better protect online activity, patterns of life, and personal security, including:

- Alter daily routines to avoid surveillance.
- Avoid posting or publicly sharing details about work-related activities, travel plans, schedules, or locations.
- Remove badges or other forms of identification when outside of work.

For more information refer to First Responder's Toolboxes "Responses to Overseas Conflicts May Impact Public Safety Agencies in the Homeland" (January 2024) and "Protection Considerations for Violent Extremist Threats to Public Officials" (February 2022).

US NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER (NCTC)

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