

# Country Report on Terrorism 2021 - Chapter 5 - Al-Qa'ida (AQ)

**Aka** al-Qa'eda; al Qaida, al Qaeda, Islamic Army; Islamic Salvation Foundation; the Base; the Group for the Preservation of the Holy Sites; the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places; the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders; Usama Bin Laden Network; Usama Bin Laden Organization; al-Jihad; the Jihad Group; Egyptian al-Jihad; Egyptian Islamic Jihad; New Jihad; International Front for Fighting Jews and Crusades; Islamic Army for the Liberation of Holy Sites

**Description:** Al-Qa'ida (AQ) was designated as an FTO on October 8, 1999. Established in 1988 the group helped finance, recruit, transport, and train fighters for the Afghan resistance against the former Soviet Union. AQ strives to eliminate western influence from the Muslim world, topple “apostate” governments of Muslim countries, and establish a pan-Islamic caliphate governed by its own interpretation of Sharia that would ultimately be at the center of a new international order. These goals remain essentially unchanged since the group’s 1996 public declaration of war against the United States. AQ leaders issued a statement in 1998 under the banner of “The World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders,” saying it was the duty of all Muslims to kill U.S. citizens — civilian and military — and their allies everywhere. AQ merged with al-Jihad (Egyptian Islamic Jihad) in 2001. While numerous AQ leaders have been killed in recent years, including Usama bin Laden in 2011, AQ’s current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remains at large.

**Activities:** AQ conducted three bombings targeting U.S. troops in Aden, Yemen, in 1992 and claimed responsibility for shooting down U.S. helicopters and killing U.S. soldiers in Somalia in 1993. AQ also carried out the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing up to 300 people and injuring more than 5,000. In 2000, AQ conducted a suicide attack on the USS *Cole* in the port of Aden with an explosive-laden boat, killing 17 U.S. Navy sailors and injuring 39 others.

On September 11, 2001, 19 AQ members hijacked and crashed four U.S. commercial jets — two into the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon, and the last into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 civilians, police, and first responders were killed. The dead included U.S. and foreign citizens from at least 77 countries.

In a 2011 video, al-Zawahiri claimed AQ was behind the kidnapping of U.S. aid worker Warren Weinstein in Pakistan. Weinstein was held captive until his death in 2015.

In 2015, five senior AQ leaders were released from Iranian custody in exchange for an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Yemen. Of the five, Saif al Adel and Abu Mohammed al Masri are wanted for the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

In 2016, al-Zawahiri publicly released two audio messages and one seven-page statement, condemning the Government of Saudi Arabia and its role in the Syrian conflict, encouraging AQ activity in Southeast Asia — especially Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines — and acknowledging support for its affiliate in Syria, al-Nusrah Front.

In 2017 a U.S. citizen was convicted in New York of charges related to abetting AQ’s 2009 attack on a U.S. military base in Afghanistan using two truck bombs. The following month, al-Zawahiri released a video calling for jihadists around the world to conduct attacks against the United States. Al-Zawahiri released multiple recordings and videos in 2018 in which he continued to call for jihad against the United States after the U.S. Embassy in Israel moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

In 2019 a man from Cleveland, Ohio, was arrested for allegedly making plans for an AQ-inspired bomb attack on the city’s downtown Independence Day parade. Also in 2019, Zawahiri called for

extremists in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir to attack Indian forces and appealed to Muslims to attack U.S., European, Israeli, and Russian military targets in a video recording.

While AQ did not claim responsibility for any attacks, it remained active in 2021.

**Strength:** In South Asia, AQ's core has been seriously degraded. The death or arrest of dozens of mid- and senior-level AQ operatives, including Usama bin Laden, has disrupted communication, financial support, facilitation nodes, and several terrorist plots. AQ leaders oversee a network of affiliated groups. Among them are al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Nusrah Front, al-Shabaab, al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and other terrorist groups, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union, Lashkar i Jhangvi, Harakat ul-Mujahideen, and Jemaah Islamiya. Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and the Haqqani Network also have ties to AQ. In addition, supporters and associates worldwide who are motivated by the group's ideology may operate without direction from AQ central leadership.

**Location/Area of Operation:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and North Africa

**Funding and External Aid:** AQ primarily depends on donations from likeminded supporters, and from individuals who believe that their money is supporting a humanitarian cause. Some funds are diverted from Islamic charitable organizations.