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al-Qaeda (a.k.a. al-Qaida, al-Qa'ida)

Updated: July 7, 2005

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What is al-Qaeda?

Al-Qaeda is an international terrorist network led by [Osama bin Laden](#). It seeks to rid Muslim countries of what it sees as the profane influence of the West and replace their governments with fundamentalist Islamic regimes. After al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks on America, the United States launched a war in [Afghanistan](#) to destroy al-Qaeda's bases there and overthrow the [Taliban](#), the country's Muslim fundamentalist rulers who harbored bin Laden and his followers. "Al-Qaeda" is Arabic for "the base."

What are al-Qaeda's origins?

Al-Qaeda grew out of the Services Office, a clearinghouse for the international Muslim brigade opposed to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the Services Office—run by bin Laden and the Palestinian religious scholar Abdullah Azzam—recruited, trained, and financed thousands of foreign *mujahadeen*, or holy warriors, from more than fifty countries. Bin Laden wanted these fighters to continue the "holy war" beyond Afghanistan. He formed al-Qaeda around 1988.

Who are al-Qaeda's leaders?

According to a 1998 federal indictment, al-Qaeda is administered by a council that "discussed and approved major undertakings, including terrorist operations." At the top is bin Laden. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, is thought to be bin Laden's top lieutenant and al-Qaeda's ideological adviser. The Jordanian radical Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has directed a series of deadly terror attacks in Iraq—including the beheadings of kidnapped foreigners—is also associated with al-Qaeda. Zarqawi pledged his allegiance to bin Laden in October 2004, and bin Laden has praised Zarqawi as "the prince of al Qaeda in Iraq." At least one senior al-Qaeda commander, Muhammad Atef, died in the U.S. air strikes in Afghanistan, and another top lieutenant, Abu Zubaydah, was captured in Pakistan in March 2002. In March 2003, the alleged mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and al-Qaeda's treasurer, Mustafa Ahmed al-Hawsawi, were also captured in Pakistan.

Where does al-Qaeda operate?

There is no single headquarters. From 1991 to 1996, al-Qaeda worked out of [Pakistan](#) along the Afghan border, or inside Pakistani cities. Al-Qaeda has autonomous underground cells in some 100 countries, including the United States, officials say. Law enforcement has broken up al-Qaeda cells in the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, France, Spain, Germany, Albania, Uganda, and elsewhere.

How big is al-Qaeda?

It's impossible to say precisely, because al-Qaeda is decentralized. Estimates range from several hundred to several thousand members.

Is al-Qaeda connected to other terrorist organizations?

Yes. Among them:

- [Egyptian Islamic Jihad](#)
- The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group
- Islamic Army of Aden (Yemen)
- Jama'at al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Iraq)
- [Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad \(Kashmir\)](#)
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Salafist Group for Call and Combat and the [Armed Islamic Group](#) (Algeria)
- [Abu Sayyaf Group](#) (Malaysia, Philippines)
- [Jemaah Islamiya](#) (Southeast Asia)

These groups share al-Qaeda's Sunni Muslim fundamentalist views. Some terror experts theorize that al-Qaeda, after the loss of its Afghanistan base, may be increasingly reliant on sympathetic affiliates to carry out its agenda. Intelligence officials and terrorism

experts also say that al-Qaeda has stepped up its cooperation on logistics and training with [Hezbollah](#), a radical, [Iran](#)-backed Lebanese militia drawn from the minority Shiite strain of Islam.

What major attacks has al-Qaeda been responsible for?

The group has targeted American and other Western interests as well as Jewish targets and Muslim governments it sees as corrupt or impious—above all, the Saudi monarchy. Al-Qaeda linked attacks include:

- The March 2004 bomb attacks on Madrid commuter trains, which killed nearly 200 people and left more than 1,800 injured.
- The May 2003 car bomb attacks on three residential compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- The November 2002 car bomb attack and a failed attempt to shoot down an Israeli jetliner with shoulder-fired missiles, both in Mombasa, Kenya.
- The October 2002 attack on a French tanker off the coast of Yemen.
- Several spring 2002 bombings in Pakistan.
- The April 2002 explosion of a fuel tanker outside a synagogue in Tunisia.
- The September 11, 2001, hijacking attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.
- The October 2000 *U.S.S. Cole* bombing.
- The August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Al-Qaeda is suspected of carrying out or directing sympathetic groups to carry out the May 2003 suicide attacks on Western interests in Casablanca, Morocco; the October 2002 nightclub bombing in Bali, Indonesia; and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Plots linked to al-Qaeda that were disrupted or prevented include: a 2001 attempt by Richard Reid to explode a shoe bomb on a transatlantic flight; a 1999 plot to set off a bomb at Los Angeles International Airport; a 1995 plan to blow up 12 transpacific flights of U.S. commercial airliners; a 1995 plan to kill President Bill Clinton on a visit to the Philippines; and a 1994 plot to kill Pope John Paul II during a visit to Manila.

How is al-Qaeda connected to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing?

There are strong links. Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the militant cleric convicted in the 1993 plot, once led an Egyptian group now affiliated with al-Qaeda; two of his sons are senior al-Qaeda officials. And Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who was convicted of masterminding the 1993 attack, planned al-Qaeda's foiled attack on American airliners over the Pacific Ocean. He is also the nephew of the former senior al-Qaeda terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is now in U.S. custody.

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