Al-Qaeda: The History of the World's Most Notorious Terrorist Organization

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures
*Includes quotes by bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders about the group's history and ideology
*Explains the formation, influences, ideology, and goals of the group
*Includes footnotes and a bibliography for further reading

Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, the world has struggled to define al-Qaeda, an amorphous, growing, and seemingly inexhaustible organization. Once a relatively organized group based in one country with a defined hierarchy and clear leadership, al-Qaeda has transformed into a transnational phenomenon over the last few decades, with branches and affiliates operating in dozens of countries across the world. Many call al-Qaeda an enemy, while some define it as an ideology, and others analyze it as a network. Of course, a small minority takes it up as their cause and an extension of their religion.

To that end, what is perhaps most clear about al-Qaeda is that there is no single definition that can comprehensively and precisely identify just what it is. Who can be described as an al-Qaeda terrorist? What is the exact makeup of al-Qaeda? These are all questions that are fairly straightforward and seem like they should be simple to answer – as they are with most other terrorist organizations – but in the case of al-Qaeda, there is no commonly accepted understanding. Bruce Hoffman, former director of RAND and a specialist in terrorism and counterterrorism affairs, wrote in 2003, "It is remarkable that more than a decade after its founding…al-Qaeda remains such a poorly understood phenomenon." He further noted, "Is [al-Qaeda] a monolithic, international terrorist organization with an identifiable command and control apparatus or is it a broader, more amorphous movement tenuously held together by a loosely networked transnational constituency?...Is al-Qaeda a concept or a virus? An army or an ideology? A populist transnational movement or a vast international criminal enterprise? All of the above? None of the above? Or, some of the above?"

The difficulty of defining al-Qaeda is reflected by the various ways the Arabic word qaeda can be translated. The most common translation is "base" or "foundation," but the word can also be used more ambiguously to mean "method," "principle," or "formula." Some maintain that the early founders of al-Qaeda were envisioning the name in the latter sense, while others believe that the name was applied to the group by outside powers. Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda, stated in a February 2002 interview that the name al-Qaeda was "established a long time ago by mere chance," and that the group's training camp was called al-Qaeda ("the base"), a name that came to represent his entire organization.

Even greater frustration arises when attempting to physically identify what group or groups constitute al-Qaeda. Are all groups that pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda considered part of the franchise? Is there a difference between the "al-Qaeda core" based in Pakistan and the various affiliates and associates scattered across the world. If so, what is the relationship between them? While both groups have sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda's core leadership, is al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen fighting for the same cause as al-Shabaab in Somalia or ISIS in Iraq and Syria?

Al-Qaeda: The History of the World's Most Notorious Terrorist Organization chronicles the birth and growth of al-Qaeda, including the key figures and events that impacted its formation, as well as the ideology

of al-Qaeda and the historical context and environment that strengthened it. This book also looks at the various tactics and strategies al-Qaeda has employed to achieve its goals and further its ideology, especially its notorious terrorist attacks across the globe, and the various branches that have grown out of the core. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about al-Qaeda like never before.

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