**Al-Qaeda**

Al Qaeda is a terrorist network of Islamic extremists created by[Osama bin Laden](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/osama_bin_laden/index.html), the Saudi-born mastermind behind the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011, [in a firefight](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/asia/osama-bin-laden-is-killed.html?hp=&pagewanted=print)with United States forces in Pakistan. The next month, an online statement announced that [Ayman al-Zawahri](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/z/ayman_al_zawahiri/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the group’s longtime No. 2, [was taking command](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/asia/17qaeda.html?hp=&pagewanted=print) of the international terrorist organization.

Independent specialists [largely agree that Mr. Zawahri is not an inspiring model for young militants](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/asia/17qaeda.html?scp=2&sq=ayman%20al%20zawahiri&st=cse), noting his lack of combat experience, his long history of ideological squabbles and his abrasive manner and pedantic speeches.

He inherited a central Qaeda organization that is under intense pressure, even as its ideology has spread and spawned dangerous affiliates in Yemen, North Africa, Somalia and elsewhere. In fact,[the affiliates have gained in stature](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/world/asia/30qaeda.html?scp=2&sq=Al%20Qaeda&st=cse" \o "Al Qaeda Affiliates Growing Independent) at the expense of the core Al Qaeda leadership of perhaps a dozen operatives, many of whom served for years as Bin Laden’s closest confidants. Intelligence experts say Bin Laden’s death accelerated this trend.

Perhaps most significantly, the pro-democracy uprisings of the Arab Spring have left Al Qaeda’s leader as a bystander to history. The ouster of Egypt’s former president, Hosni Mubarak, a central goal of Mr. Zawahri’s career, was carried out without him and by methods he had long denounced.

**Background**

Osama Bin Laden, the 17th of 51 children of a wealthy Yemeni builder, used his inheritance — an estimated $300 million — to create Al Qaeda, whose name is Arabic for “the base.” Initially the group brought together Islamic fighters dedicated to driving the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. After the Soviet pullout, the group eventually found a wider goal: creating a “caliphate’' of Islamic states.

In 1996, Bin Laden issued a “declaration of war’' against the United States, vowing to drive it from [Saudi Arabia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/saudiarabia/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=Saudi%20Arabia&st=cse) and other Muslim countries. In the years before Sept. 11, he had already become America’s most wanted terrorism suspect, with a $5 million reward on his head for his alleged role in the August 1998 truck bombings of two American embassies in East Africa that killed more than 200 people, as well as a string of other terrorist attacks. The F.B.I. also named the leader of Al Qaeda as a prime suspect in the suicide bombing of the American destroyer Cole, which was attacked in Aden harbor, on Oct. 12, 2000, with the loss of 17 sailors’ lives.

**America’s Secret War**

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, the United States military forces engaged Al Qaeda in the mountains of [Afghanistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/afghanistan/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=Afghanistan&st=cse), killing and capturing some of its leaders and driving it from its havens there. They had a mandate to bring in Bin Laden “dead or alive,” in the words of President Bush.

Bin Laden and his network successfully relocated to [Pakistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/pakistan/index.html?inline=nyt-geo)‘s tribal areas, where Al Qaeda rebuilt much of its ability to attack from the region and broadcast its messages to militants across the world. But as pressure from Pakistani forces increased, a growing number of Qaeda members relocated to other countries, especially Yemen and Somalia, two chronically unstable countries.

The Obama administration [expanded a secret war against Al Qaeda,](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/world/15shadowwar.html)a war built around using “the scalpel’' instead of “the hammer,’' in the words of John O. Brennan, the administration’s chief counterterrorism advisor. In roughly a dozen countries — from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet republics crippled by ethnic and religious strife — the United States significantly increased military and intelligence operations, pursuing the enemy using robotic [drone aircraft](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/u/unmanned_aerial_vehicles/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) and commando teams, paying contractors to spy and training local operatives to chase terrorists.

**Taliban**

The Taliban, a Sunni Islamist group, ruled [Afghanistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/afghanistan/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) between 1996 and 2001 until they were ousted by the American-led invasion after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Based in the Pashtun region in the country’s southeast, the group grew out of a student movement dedicated to purifying Afghanistan. Their rise was initially greeted with relief by many Afghans weary of the corruption and brutality of the warlords who had fought for control in the years after the end of Soviet occupation. During their time in power, the Taliban sheltered[Osama bin Laden](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/b/osama_bin_laden/index.html) and outlawed the education of women.

Since 2004, the predominantly Pashtun movement re-emerged and mounted an effective insurgency against Western forces and the Afghan government. The Taliban’s influence spread in the often lawless territories of northwestern [Pakistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/pakistan/index.html) to the point where they challenged that government’s hold over cities as well as the countryside.

Militarily, the Taliban have been under stress since American forces doubled their presence in southern Afghanistan in 2010 and greatly increased the number of special forces raids aimed at hunting down Taliban commanders.  The hope was to wear down the Taliban military to the point where it would be willing to consider negotiations.

Even so, the Taliban [found new and more subtle ways of asserting themselves](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/asia/taliban-using-modern-means-to-add-to-sway.html), using tactics like controlling the hours of cellphone use, more selective attacks and new flexibility on matters like education, even as [NATO](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/n/north_atlantic_treaty_organization/index.html?inline=nyt-org) generals portray the insurgents as a diminished force less able to hold ground.

In 2012, American officials were working to find some way of reaching an agreement with the Taliban before the drawdown of forces  underway was complete.

**Trying to Keep the Taliban Contained**

For many years, Pakistan’s military intelligence agency has offered money, supplies and guidance to the Taliban forces in Afghanistan as a proxy to help shape a friendly government there once American forces leave. It offered significant resistance to efforts to take on the Taliban as the movement began to threaten Pakistan itself.

Over more than a year of fighting, the Taliban moved into the Swat valley of northwestern Pakistan. Finally, the military agreed to a truce in February 2009 that all but ceded Swat to the Taliban and allowed the insurgents to impose Islamic law, or Shariah. Taliban militants, most of them under the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah, continued usurping and attacking the government anyway. Soon after, the Taliban took over Buner, an adjoining district only 60 miles from Islamabad.

The deepening Taliban advance startled Pakistanis, and it finally spurred military and political leaders to take on a full-scale military operation to push the Taliban back, under strong American pressure. The campaign was waged fiercely in what appeared to be a change of heart in the Pakistani Army. The reaction from the Taliban was swift.

The United States pressed the army to move ahead with the campaign in South Waziristan, arguing that it was vital for Pakistan to show resolve against the Qaeda-fortified Pakistani Taliban, who embrace a vast and dedicated network of militant groups arrayed against the nuclear-armed state. The groups include some nurtured by Pakistan to fight India.