

THE BIG QUESTION How dangerous is al Qaeda?

One year after the death of Osama bin Laden, the world's most notorious terrorist organisation is divided. But the scattered branches of al Qaeda are quietly beginning to gain new ground.



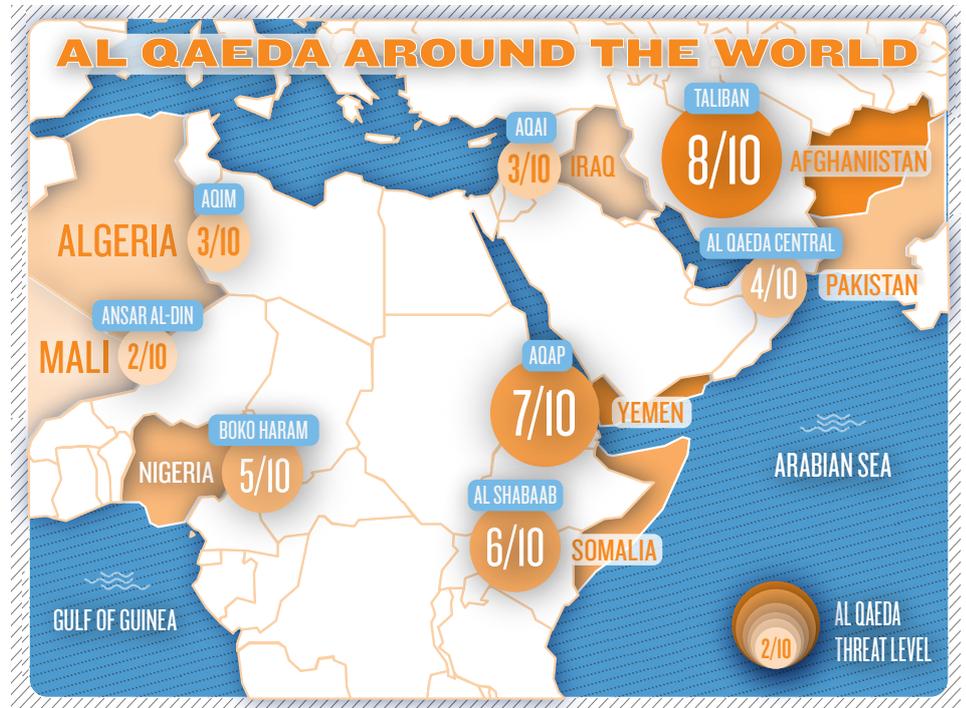
HISTORY & POLITICS

Exactly one year ago, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was shot and killed by Navy SEALs in a fortified compound in Pakistan, his body dumped into the Indian Ocean. It was a huge victory for the United States – revenge for the 9/11 terrorist attacks which left 3,000 dead.

But does bin Laden's death mean the terrorist threat is over for good? How dangerous is al Qaeda today?

Osama bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan, but al Qaeda has branches all over Africa and the Middle East. Those branches are only loosely in contact with each other and have very different agendas and methods. What they share is:

1. A belief that the West is the enemy of Islam and should be fought through *jihād*, or holy war.
2. An extremist interpretation of Islamic law.
3. The ambition to – one day – establish a new caliphate: a global Islamic state.



How many different branches are there?

Analysts usually count around seven or eight major armed groups as having strong ties to al Qaeda. They can be divided into two groups:

1. The localists. Groups like the Afghan Taliban, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQAI), or Boko Haram in Nigeria, are very dangerous, but (so far) have shown little interest in attacking targets beyond their country's borders.
2. The internationalists. New al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri still hopes to launch attacks against the West, and his Pakistani allies have had devastating successes in India. Somalia's al Shabaab is also considering cross-border strikes. But the biggest threat comes from Yemen. Several failed attacks have been traced back to the lawless country, where a skilled bomb maker is known to be in hiding.

So some al Qaeda allies still want to attack the West. But do they have the capacity to launch a successful strike?

others – brought dramatic change to the Middle East. But the situation in most of these countries is very volatile.

Q How will the uprisings affect al Qaeda?

A Some hope that the growth of democracy in the Middle East will persuade young people that politics, not violence, is the best way forward. But others fear political instability will allow terrorist groups

The answer is probably yes. Al Qaeda allies still have working bases and access to weapons and explosives. And, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western countries have put their own troops in the firing line.

Most of all, al Qaeda's extremist ideology is still capable of inspiring young men anywhere in the world to carry out acts of violence. The London Bombings of 2005, for example, were carried out by men from Yorkshire, not Yemen.

What does all this add up to?

The death of Osama bin Laden was a severe blow to al Qaeda, but not a fatal one. The organisation does not depend on centralised leadership, and independent branches, scattered around the world, could still launch a deadly strike.

On the other hand: some al Qaeda groups have been decimated by US attacks, and others are distracted by local politics. The chances of another really spectacular attack like 9/11 are fairly slim.

Q & A

Q So things are looking up?

A It's difficult to predict how the situation will develop over the next few years. The big unknown is the Arab Spring.

Q How so?

A The uprisings last year in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Bahrain – among

the space they need to operate. The old autocratic regimes were – at least – strong partners in the 'War on Terror.'



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Killing Osama bin Laden made no difference to anything.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► THE BIG QUESTION: How dangerous is al Qaeda?

WORD WATCH

Navy SEALs – The US Navy’s Sea Air and Land teams (SEALs for short) are among the most feared special forces operators in the world. SEAL Team 6 used stealth helicopters to fly deep inside Pakistani territory before fighting their way into bin Laden’s compound. The terrorist leader was killed by a shot to the head.

Jihad – The word *jihad*, often translated as ‘holy war’, really means just ‘struggle’. For many Muslims *jihad* is the sacred struggle to live, as fully as possible, a good and pure life as defined by the Koran. Al Qaeda leaders, however, interpret the call for ‘struggle’ as an encouragement to military action.

Devastating successes – In 2008, the Indian city of Mumbai suffered a coordinated series of bomb and shooting attacks,

carried out by extremists from the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba organisation, which has al Qaeda ties. More than 160 people were killed.

Working bases – Al Qaeda has effective control of whole towns in Somalia, Mali and Yemen, and is attempting to provide basic services and security to inhabitants, creating a network of al Qaeda ‘proto-states.’ This is a relatively recent development, which has some analysts alarmed.

YOU DECIDE

1. Has the ‘War on Terror’ been a success?
2. Why do you think al Qaeda leaders want to attack other countries?

ACTIVITIES

1. In pairs, make a list of five major threats your country faces, and compare your list with others in the class. Where does terrorism feature on your list, if at all?
2. Choose one organisation with ties to al Qaeda, then create an intelligence report on their activities, for the attention of the government. How big a threat do you think your chosen group is to national security?

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 **NOTES**

