

A frightening, far-reaching new world of terror threats since 9/11

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(CNN) -- Even as smoke rose from the World Trade Center, as people clawed through rubble at the Pentagon, there was one name -- and one name only -- synonymous with terror in the United States.

Al Qaeda.

Times have changed, and the terror landscape has changed with it.

Public Enemy No. 1, Osama bin Laden, is gone, killed by U.S. commandos in a 2011 Pakistan raid. The group he notoriously commanded no longer dominates. Sure, Ayman al-Zawahiri makes an occasional pronouncement, but other groups have garnered more than their share of chilling headlines for acts such as the failed underwear bomb plot on a Detroit-bound jetliner, the Westgate Mall siege in Kenya and the attack on a U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya.

In short, al Qaeda has a lot more competition these days -- including from groups it inspired, it partners with and that splintered from it.

Fifty-nine groups on the U.S. State Department's list of "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." Some of them stand out for what they've said and done in the 13 years since the September 11, 2001, attacks, as well as for how Washington and its allies in the West have reacted to those actions. Here's a look at some of those organizations:

ISIS



What is it?

How does a group show its hatred for its enemies, America included? How does it prove its willingness to do anything -- even the most heinous acts imaginable -- for its cause? How does it invoke terror, in the basest sense?

It acts like ISIS.

When it landed on the State Department list in 2004, the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi-led group was known as al Qaeda in Iraq and was known for attacking U.S. and allied forces, assassinating officials and beheading hostages. It suffered blows before being reborn as the Islamic State in Iraq, and later the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, names that signified its new mission: to create a far-reaching caliphate.

From 2006: Al-Zarqawi killed in U.S. bombing raid

This shift was accompanied by a fresh focus on things such as providing food, health care and other necessities. Yet its tactics in handling nonbelievers and its foes did not change much.

The first terror group to build an Islamic state?

What has it done?

ISIS has taken advantage of instability in Syria, where it's become one of the most feared groups trying to oust President Bashar al-Assad, and Iraq, where it has made inroads in opposition to Iraq's unsettled, Shiite-led government, to take over vast swaths of territory.

This success has something to do with its appeal to dissatisfied Sunni Muslims. At the same time, a lot of its success stems from its using a brazen, often brutal and heavy-handed approach to force its will. This is an organization, after all, that's been so ruthless even al Qaeda disowned it.

That savagery was on display in the recent beheadings of American captives James Foley and Steven Sotloff, journalists who had gone to the Middle East to chronicle war and ended up victims of it -- their gruesome deaths taped and posted online.

What's been done about ISIS?

In its first incarnation, the group that would become ISIS was a prime target for U.S. forces in Iraq. But after U.S. forces pulled out of Iraq, a power vacuum opened in Syria with the uprising against al-Assad. And when Iraq's military appeared overmatched, the group flexed its muscles yet again.

In Iraq, at least, ISIS earlier this summer got pushback from its old foe. U.S. President Barack Obama sent U.S. warplanes back in to punish ISIS fighters. To hear U.S. and Iraqi officials say it, these airstrikes have effectively halted and pushed back the ISIS onslaught. But that's only in Iraq. Obama is among many who have acknowledged the group still has a "safe haven" in Syria.

So what's next? On Wednesday night, Obama promised a stepped-up, U.S.-led military campaign to defeat ISIS in Syria as well as Iraq -- opening the door to more U.S. airstrikes, as well as authorizing more American troops to support the Iraqi military in its fight.

"Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy," Obama said.

Obama: 'No safe haven' for ISIS in Syria or anywhere else

AL-SHABAAB (2)

What is it?

Al-Shabaab, which translates as "The Youth" in Arabic, emerged in the 2000s as the upstart faction of a bin Laden-funded group called al-Ittihad al-Islami that sought to create an Islamist emirate in Somalia.

In 2006, this new group and its ally, the Islamic Courts Union, took over Mogadishu and stirred fears it would move into neighboring countries. That threat spurred Ethiopia to enter Somalia that year, ousting the ICU from power. Other international troops would follow, including from Kenya and the African Union.

All this put Al-Shabaab on its heels, but it never went away. In fact, it appeared to become more radicalized and international in scope. No longer was Al-Shabaab focused just on Somalia; rather, it has increasingly lashed out at other governments as well as civilians outside its native country.

What has it done?

Southern and central Somalia have been Al-Shabaab's hotbed for years, with the group exercising control there by "recruiting, sometimes forcibly, regional subclans and their militias, using guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics," the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center reports.

Yet, more and more, Al-Shabaab has looked beyond the East African country for friends and targets.

In 2012, the group's then-leader, Ahmed Godane, pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and announced his followers "will march with (al Qaeda) as loyal soldiers." By then, Al-Shabaab already had killed over 70 people in twin suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda, during the 2010 World Cup final. Afterward, Godane warned: "What happened in Kampala was just the beginning."

Ruthless leader aimed to extend reach, eyed West

Al-Shabaab has been true to his promise. That includes killing activists, aid workers, journalists and attacking places frequented by foreigners. The most high-profile attack occurred last fall, when its militants casually walked into the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, then began gunning down shoppers -- allegedly torturing some hostages before killing them. The four-day long siege ended with as many as 67 dead and parts

of the mall destroyed.

What's been done about it?

The United States hasn't been directly attacked by Al-Shabaab, but it has made it a priority. In 2011, then U.S. Africa Command head Gen. Carter Ham said "the greatest risks right now in East Africa are Al-Shabaab and the violent extremists that they represent."

Even if it hasn't deployed ground troops, Washington has used its military might against al-Shabaab. The latest instance came this month, when U.S. drones and commandos used "Hellfire missiles and laser-guided missiles" to kill Godane, a man who rose to power after a 2008 U.S. airstrike killed his predecessor.

The United States hasn't been doing it alone. Its allies include not only the Somali government but those in Ethiopia and Kenya, plus the African Union. According to the U.S. government, together these allies have made significant inroads in beating back the group.

Successor named to slain leader

AL QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP)



What is it?

Osama bin Laden was the son of a Yemeni man and grew up in Saudi Arabia. So it is noteworthy the organization he led has found some of its greatest strength, and successes, in the Arabian Peninsula.

Like its namesake, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP as it is widely known, consists of Sunni Muslim extremists who want to unseat local authorities and who are willing and able to strike out at the West, in the West.

The group has taken advantage of political instability in Yemen to gain a foothold there as a home base and place to carry out its plans since its creation in 2009, when Yemeni and Saudi extremists decided to join forces under the leadership of emir Nasir al-Wahishi. But it's also made a big splash internationally -- whether through its high-profile plots; its glossy, Western-style magazine and propaganda tool, Inspire; or the fact one of its most well-known members, Anwar al-Awlaki, was American.

What has it done?

While Yemen has been affiliated with al Qaeda for years (the deadly 2000 attack on the USS Cole), it became a focal point in 2009 because of two incidents:

The first, in November, was the shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, by U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Hasan, who had exchanged emails with al-Awlaki. Then, on Christmas Day, Umar Farouk AbdulMutallab -- who later acknowledged having traveled to Yemen and being "greatly inspired" by al-Awlaki "to avenge the killing of innocent Muslims" -- tried unsuccessfully to detonate explosives in his underwear on an Amsterdam-to-Detroit flight.

Underwear bomber sentenced to life

AQAP subsequently became a prime target for Yemeni and U.S. forces, forcing it to devote time and resources to defending itself rather than carrying out fresh attacks in the West.

Yet it never went away. Three or four members of AQAP participated in the 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, that killed four people -- among them Ambassador Chris Stevens -- according to several sources who have spoken to CNN. And concerns rose earlier this year that AQAP could launch a terror attack inside Yemen, Europe or the United States.

Sources: Al Qaeda operatives played part in Benghazi attack

Stream of al Qaeda threats has U.S. intelligence concerned

What's been done about it?

The United States hasn't stood idly by amid these attacks and threats, nor has the Yemeni government.

In addition to Afghanistan and Pakistan, American drones have frequently flown over and struck AQAP targets in Yemen, as with the 2011 killing of al-Awlaki.

There's been an intensive military campaign on the ground as well. Yemeni troops have fought on the ground, assisted at times by U.S. commandos and others, though no Americans have taken part in combat.

According to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, these offensives led al Qaeda fighters to withdraw "from their southern Yemen strongholds" in 2012. Still, the threat wasn't eliminated entirely, nor was its intent to target the West.

BOKO HARAM

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What is it?

Boko Haram's stance on the West is as clear as its name, which translates from the Hausa language as "Western education is forbidden." This isn't an education reform group, though, but one with a terrifying history of killings, bombings and mass abductions.

A bloody insurgency, a growing challenge

Twelve years ago, a charismatic cleric named Mohammed Yusuf formed Boko Haram to further his push for a pure Islamic state in Nigeria. Police killed him in 2009, and some say the resulting crackdown on his group did more to embolden Yusuf's followers than weaken them.

In 2010 statements soon after new leader Abubakar Shekau took over, he aligned his group with al Qaeda and threatened the West. True to his word, his group has killed at least 25 people in a suicide attack on a United Nations building, as well as killed and kidnapped Westerners elsewhere.

What makes Boko Haram different from some other groups, however, is that its anti-Western actions have been confined to Nigeria.

What has it done?

Kill. Burn. Kidnap. And, where it can, govern under its strict interpretation of Sharia law.

Boko Haram fighters have spent years battling Nigerian troops, mostly in the country's north and east. The group has also killed civilians -- including in Jos, Kano and the capital Abuja -- in bombings on crowded markets and attacks on otherwise peaceful villages.

The act for which Boko Haram is probably best known internationally is its abduction of over 230 schoolgirls earlier this year from the town of Chibok in northeastern Nigeria. A man claiming to be Shekau vowed later in a video that he'd sell the girls "in the market."

'I will sell them,' Boko Haram leader says

But to define what Boko Haram has done by this single act understates the amount of terror it's inflicted over the years, particularly in northeastern Nigeria. Its targets have been Christians, government officials and troops and Muslims who don't subscribe to its beliefs or way of doing things. Its approach has been to show no mercy, as its members rampage through villages, kidnap women and children, and assassinate politicians and religious leaders.

Boko Haram: The essence of terror

What's been done about it?

As the most destabilizing element in Africa's most populous nation -- a country of 175 million people, not to mention vast oil reserves -- Boko Haram cannot be easily ignored. The audacity of its tactics has stirred many worldwide, from Australia to Zambia, against it, as exemplified in the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign.

This widespread disdain notwithstanding, Boko Haram has not been subject to a large-scale, large-impact international military campaign.

Yes, the United States has put a \$7 million bounty on Shekau's head, given technical and financial support to Nigerian teams battling the insurgency and even flown unarmed surveillance aircraft over Nigeria looking for the missing schoolgirls. But it hasn't offered more direct support for a few reasons.

For one, there's a sense that Boko Haram may not pose a direct threat to U.S. security. And second, U.S. law restricts the country's ability to work with Nigeria's military that has been accused of war crimes and other abuses, a senior State Department official has said.

U.S. support to Nigeria beset by complications

AL QAEDA 

What is it?

Its name translates from Arabic to "The Base." In many ways, that's exactly what al Qaeda has been: the platform from which others have spun, associated with or been compared with as they strive to inject and project their brand of Sunni extremism.

Al Qaeda's first home was Afghanistan, where Arabs had gone to fight Soviet forces and the local government, and its founder, bin Laden, was from Saudi Arabia. Yet its goal extends beyond any one place or region. The movement seeks to create a far-reaching Islamic caliphate and defeat those in its way.

The United States became al Qaeda's chief enemy after the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, one year after the group's inception. This enmity was ignited in part by U.S. troops' arrival in Saudi Arabia and their subsequent invasion of Iraq.

In between a series of terror attacks, al Qaeda articulated its aims.

In 1996, bin Laden declared a holy war against U.S. forces. Two years later, he and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri endorsed a fatwa that stated Muslims should kill Americans, including civilians, anywhere in the world.

"The 9/11 attacks were a shock, but they should not have come as a surprise," the 9/11 Commission report said. "Islamist extremists had given plenty of warning that they meant to kill Americans indiscriminately and in large numbers."

What has it done?

One of the first high-profile attacks attributed to al Qaeda may have been its most prescient: the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

Six people died in that attack, a fraction of the nearly 3,000 killed eight years later in the 9/11 attacks when a pair of commercial airliners were flown into the Twin Towers in New York, another hit the Pentagon near D.C. and another crashed in Pennsylvania. Still, the 1993 attack was significant because it showed al Qaeda was willing and able to strike inside the United States.

Other attacks followed. The targets included U.S. troops, such as the USS Cole bombing and bombings at military bases in Saudi Arabia. More than 220 people died in twin 1998 truck bombings outside U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. And after 52 commuters died in two July 2005 attacks on London's transit system, al-Zawahiri threatened that "more (destruction) will come, God willing."

"Our message is clear -- what you saw in New York and Washington (in 2001) and what you are seeing in Afghanistan and Iraq, all these are nothing compared to what you will see next," al-Zawahiri said then.

From 2005: Al Qaeda threatens more UK, U.S. attacks

Since then, al Qaeda hasn't pulled off a direct attack on the West on the scale of 9/11 or the London bombings. But it hasn't been quiet either, even after the 2011 death of bin Laden. That includes various pronouncements -- such as the forming of an al Qaeda affiliate for India -- or partnering with or supporting other groups as they launch attacks of their own.

What's been done about it?

There were efforts to disrupt al Qaeda before 2001, yet none significantly hampered its momentum or its leadership. As the 9/11 Commission notes, the "CIA broke up some al Qaeda cells (but) the core of bin Laden's organization nevertheless remained intact."

September 11 changed everything.

Weeks later, NATO invoked Article 5 for the first time -- meaning everyone in the alliance was obliged to support the United States.

Soon, the United States and its allies had tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan going after al Qaeda fighters and the Taliban government sheltering them. U.S. troops are still there 13 years later, though Obama has said combat operations will end this year.

The U.S.-led coalition tried to foil al Qaeda in other ways as well, including cutting off its funding and gathering as much intelligence as it could. By many measures, they have been successful as al Qaeda hasn't been as active or as destructive as it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

But time and again, the world is reminded that it's not just about al Qaeda any more. Other groups have emerged from its shadow and followed its lead.

Some are as ruthless, if not more so. Some are as dangerous, if not more so. Some are as zealous in their beliefs, if not more so.

All are reminders that the terror threat has not gone away.

CNN's Chelsea J. Carter, Paul Cruikshank and Tim Lister contributed to this report.