MIDDLE EAST

What Awaits Al-Qaeda and Jihadist Networks after Al-Zawahiri?

NOVEMBER 2, 2022

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda and a key plotter of the 9/11 attacks, was killed in his residence in Kabul by a U.S. drone strike on July 30th. Four experts on terrorism reflect on the significance of al-Zawahiri's death for al-Qaeda and other jihadist networks, as well as the US relationship with the Taliban.

How has Zawahiri's decapitation affected Al-Qaeda and its networks and affiliates?

Suleyman Ozeren: Although Zawahiri had been the leader of al-Qaeda since Bin Ladin's death in 2011, he had not had the charisma and visionary leadership to invigorate members of al-Qaeda's core and affiliates. His lack of leadership lessens the significance of his death for al-Qaeda or its affiliated organizations. The al-Qaeda core is still seen as a unifying name for jihadist ideology. However, the brand has become a symbol or a shared identity rather than an operational entity for its followers—particularly since bin Ladin's death.

Colin P. Clarke: I think Zawahiri's decapitation was a major shock to al-Qaeda and its global network of affiliates and franchise groups worldwide. To begin with, just by traveling to Kabul, where he was killed, Zawahiri was showing a sense of brazenness and a confident attitude that he could move safely and still take care of his operational security. But al-Qaeda is still suffering to react and still has not named a new Emir, even though the organization should have been preparing for this possibility for a long time. It was far more than just a symbolic strike; this will cause real havoc for al-Qaeda worldwide.

Sara Harmouch: At first glance, Zawahiri's death can appear to have negatively affected al-Qaeda since the group has yet to announce his successor, but al-Qaeda's silence proves nothing besides that the organization is unpredictable. Al-Qaeda might be forthright in pre-

emptively disclosing its future leadership, and we can only guess how it will move forward. In addition, Zawahiri did not play as much of an important role. He was a caretaker who continued the mission, vision, and tactics established by bin Laden. When al-Qaeda first emerged, Bin Laden established the formal structures and institutions of the group. Bin Laden recognized the al-Qaeda affiliates and invested in developing vertical and horizontal ties between the affiliates. He delegated roles and enabled their communication and cooperation. Zawahiri just continued what bin Laden had built. He was not a tactical or operational leader. Zawahiri's death might reinvigorate the operational and tactical side of the group and provoke attacks against the United States.

Ismail Onat: It is very important that the killing took place in Afghanistan, the origin country of al-Qaeda. However, the local dynamics of the other branches would be more determinant in how the group will run its business. Although its leader is no longer alive, the branding of al-Qaeda is what the other branches and affiliates may need.

What will the future of al-Qaeda look like after Zawahiri?

Suleyman Ozeren: The future of al-Qaeda has two potential dimensions. First, al-Qaeda's core could still be the center for the affiliates if a new leader could envision a change that could *wanna be* jihadists to notice. Given the potential candidates, however, it will be less likely to see a breakthrough. The current regional and international dynamics are not convenient for al-Qaeda core to emerge as the leader of the jihadist groups. However, if a young and charismatic figure becomes the new leader, that might change the prospect of the al-Qaeda core.

While al-Qaeda's core has been losing its central role, affiliated organizations like al-Shabaab have gained momentum in recent years. The driving force for the latter is that instead of focusing on the *'far enemy,'* al-Qaeda affiliates have concentrated on local issues and goals and prioritized the achievement of these goals, such as defeating the near enemies. However, suppose the new leadership of al-Qaeda core will rejuvenate or mobilize al-Qaeda supporters worldwide. In that case, al-Qaeda affiliates could attract recruits not only from the locals but also from foreign fighters in other countries. Al-Shabaab could potentially be the next

‘attraction zone’ for another influx of foreign fighters into the Horn of Africa, given al-Shabaab’s recent increasing attacks in Somalia.

Colin P. Clarke: Al-Qaeda is at an inflection point, and the selection of its next emir will be incredibly important. If Saif al-Adl is chosen, a longtime al-Qaeda veteran believed to be living in Iran, it will show continuity and a connection to the old guard. But al-Qaeda may benefit more from choosing a younger, more charismatic leader, perhaps a jihadist with combat experience fighting in Syria.

I think now that Zawahiri is dead, al-Qaeda is likely to grow even more decentralized. Affiliates like JNIM and al-Shabaab are more likely to pursue local agendas and focus on grievances in sub-Saharan Africa, thus downplaying the narrative of the global jihad. This will have a negative impact on al-Qaeda’s global brand, particularly as it continues to compete with ISIS and its branches.

Ismail Onat: Generally, the impact of decapitation is closely related to the size and age of terrorist groups. Therefore, Zawahiri`s decapitation may have an impact in the short run on its leadership, but its activities may not be influenced by Zawahiri’s killing in the future. I see two potential scenarios here. First, it is likely that Zawahiri`s death may cause rivalry among the members of its leadership because even when Zawahiri took over al-Qaeda`s leadership, there was an internal debate that Saif-al-Adel must have succeeded Usama bin Laden. But there are also other candidates, such as Yezid Mebarek or Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi. And the rivalry can weaken al-Qaeda. The second scenario is that the new leadership can adopt a different strategy that could be more offensive.

What impact can Zawahiri’s killing have on jihadist groups, specifically ISIS and its networks?

Sara Harmouch: The impact of Zawahiri’s death will only unfold with his successor. The Islamic State always disliked Zawahiri because he strayed away from bin Laden’s operational goal of attacking the West. Immediately after Zawahiri’s death, the Islamic State celebrated with messages on their social media channels. The Islamic State could exploit and capitalize on al-Qaeda’s loss of its leadership. Today the Islamic State is flexible. It morphs and adapts to its

environment. A new disruptive leader with operational and tactical goals could tilt the balance of power between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. It might even unite the two groups. Al-Qaeda publicly severed ties with the Islamic State because of the latter's use of tactics and brutal approaches. If the emerging leader resolves those differences, it could potentially bring harmony to their strife.

Suleyman Ozeren: When Zawahiri was the leader of core al-Qaeda, ISIS emerged as the leading jihadist group in Iraq and Syria. Despite Zawahiri's objections, ISIS declared the establishment of the so-called Islamic caliphate in June 2014. While al-Qaeda and ISIS share similar jihadist ideological platforms, they differ in their interpretations. Once al-Qaeda's backbone for recruitment, foreign fighters chose ISIS over al-Qaeda, and thousands of wannabe jihadists traveled to Syria to join ISIS. Obviously, the dispute and competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS have weakened Zawahiri's position in the eyes of al-Qaeda supporters and other jihadist organizations. During ISIS's heyday, al-Qaeda affiliated groups joined ISIS because of the shared ideology and struggle against the same local enemy in Syria-namely the Assad regime and foreign military forces.

But the relationship between the al-Qaeda core and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP) (ISIS affiliate) could change if—although not plausible—the Taliban cuts its ties with the remaining elements of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Reflecting the rivalry between ISIS leadership and al-Zawahiri, the ISKP and al-Qaeda core have not gotten along well. His death could change that dynamic if the Taliban regime makes a big shift in how they would approach their "al-Qaeda problem."

Colin P. Clarke: ISIS could very well use Zawahiri's death as an opportunity to press its advantage in different regions, from parts of the Sahel to South Asia. Given the US pivot away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, ISIS and its affiliates will look to mount a comeback and generate a sense of momentum. Zawahiri's death is a significant blow to al-Qaeda's command-and-control, both operationally and organizationally. If al-Qaeda is unable to reconstitute an external attack capability, it will grow seemingly less relevant over time, which will have cascading effects on its ability to recruit and raise funds.

Ismail Onat: The impact would be minimal. The two groups, al-Qaeda and IS, have recently maintained their territoriality without any serious conflict. This territoriality also influences the way their networks cooperate separately from each other. Some resources argued that Zawahiri had been severely ill before his killing by the US, which may have prepared al-Qaeda`s networks and affiliates for a possible leadership change. Also, the two organizations have different (mis)interpretations of jihad in their own way.

How will it affect the US relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan?

Colin P. Clarke: It was a major shock that Zawahiri was killed in Kabul, and it was proof that the Taliban has continued to maintain a close relationship with al-Qaeda, in clear violation of the Doha Agreement. I think it means that the US simply can't trust the Taliban, and it makes any negotiations even that much more unlikely. Moreover, with Siraj Haqqani in a position of leadership within the Taliban, it makes US-Taliban cooperation nearly impossible, as Haqqani has a multimillion-dollar bounty on his head for terrorist activity.

Suleyman Ozeren: The Taliban's affinity and decades-long partnership with al-Qaeda core were severed after the Taliban signed the Doha Agreement with the United States. Al-Qaeda's leadership saw that as a deviation from the Taliban's longstanding position against the United States. When Zawahiri was killed in a residence belonging to a member of the Haqqani network leadership, there were accusations by the Biden administration against the Taliban regime. There is little prospect of progress in US-Taliban relations, given the Taliban's failure to honor its promises. The future relationship will be transactional, for both parties—the United States and the Taliban regime—will continue maintaining distrust against each other while looking for opportunities to collaborate whenever it might suit them.

Sara Harmouch: The Taliban's commitment and enthusiasm for international recognition seem to be primarily a façade. The Taliban violated the Doha Agreement and continues to harbor and breed high levels of support for its relationship with al-Qaeda. The presence of Zawahiri at the Kabul guest house of Siraj Haqqani shows that the Taliban and al-Qaeda continue to cooperate. The Taliban retains deep ties and history to al-Qaeda and will continue to allow the group to use Afghanistan as a safe haven. However, what is more troubling is

Pakistan's proximity and support to the Taliban ruled-Afghanistan. On October 13, 2022, President Biden told a Democratic Congressional fundraiser that Pakistan "may be one of the most dangerous nations in the world. Nuclear weapons without any cohesion." Suppose al-Qaeda continues to be committed to acquiring nuclear capabilities. In that case, there is no doubt that Pakistan's nuclear *facilities* may well position al-Qaeda to advance its nuclear ambitions.

Ismail Onat: Zawahiri's presence in Kabul means a violation of the Doha agreement and will definitely result in a lack of trust. On the other hand, the Taliban's legitimacy is heavily dependent upon its relationship with the US and the international community. That said, both the United States and the Taliban will be more cautious in this relationship.

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