



The Ramifications of Ayman al-Zawahiri Targeted Killing

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Summary

Ayman al-Zawahiri's assassination by the U.S. is a severe blow to al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem that his demise will affect al-Qaeda's offshoots' activity in the various jihad theatres due to their decentralized nature. Although al-Zawahiri's pale and uncharismatic image, his contribution was articulated in maintaining the survival of al-Qaeda and sometimes even strengthening the influence of al-Qaeda in old and new territories such as Mali.

Al-Zawahiri's most important publication under his leadership was "General lines for Jihad" - a manifesto outlining the path of al-Qaeda characterized by a more pragmatic line.

So far, it has not been announced who will be the successor of al-Zawahiri, but it seems that his obvious successor will be Sheikh Seif al-Adel, who is considered a leading strategist in al-Qaeda. The question that arises is whether the new leadership of al-Qaeda will continue the political path of al-Zawahiri or adhere to a different path.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, Zawahiri, Jihad, Afghanistan

On August 1st, 2022 Pres. Biden announced the killing of al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The latter was killed in a targeted American UAV strike in Kabul, Afghanistan. Al-Zawahiri was considered a prominent leader in the global jihad movement and one of the planners of the 9/11 attacks. His targeted killing has a perceptual influence on his organization's members as well as other jihadists however it doesn't seem that his demise will affect al-Qaeda's extensions' activity.

Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (1951-2022) an Egyptian born physician formed the Islamic Jihad organization in Egypt in the 1970s. After the Sadat assassination in 1981 he was incarcerated for suspicions of involvement in the assassination but eventually released. He immigrated to Afghanistan in the 1980s to partake in the fight against the Russians where he met Sheikh Osama Bin Laden. In 1998 he became Bin Laden's deputy and merged his organization into bin Laden's.

Unlike Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri was perceived as an uncharismatic figure. Despite the above image, al-Zawahiri contributed to al-Qaeda's survivability, strengthened it and expanded its influence. During his tenure, al-Qaeda gained two new extensions: **al-Shabbab al-Mujahidin** and **al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)**. Additionally, al-Zawahiri allocated resources to form power bases in various conflict regions especially in Mali and the Sahel region where **Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin** is considered a powerful actor; Syria (**Huras al-Din**) and Kashmir (**Izat al-Hind**).

Another significant contribution of his to al-Qaeda is manifested in the strategy he charted post Arab Spring events in 2011. In July 2013 he published a manifesto-like document titled **General Guidelines for Jihad** that included instructions for al-Qaeda members on ways to promote the organization's goals. For example, he allowed collaboration with local jihadi organizations even if their world view was not fully aligned with al-Qaeda's but like al-Qaeda strived to topple the reigning regime ("near enemy"). He also called to refrain from hurting minorities (i.e. Shiite, Yazidi and even Christians) unless they bore arms however his motivation was to avoid waste of resources and keeping the troops focused on their main goals.

Al-Zawahiri's killing has a few ramifications:

1. Successors - Naturally, al-Qaeda's Shura council will have to select al-Zawahiri's successor, a person that will be able to maintain unity within the ranks and strengthen the ties with the various extensions. Within intelligence services circles, Saif al-Adel, widely considered as the number two person in al-Qaeda is mentioned as the likely successor. Al-Adel is considered a leading strategist and very capable

operationally. For example, he took part in bombing the US embassies on Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. After 9/11 he fled to Iran where he found refuge. It is highly likely that he moved to Afghanistan in August 2021 upon the Taliban retaking the country.

2. Reputational Damage to al-Qaeda – the killing will have a negative effect on Afghans as al-Qaeda will be perceived as having no power to protect them.
3. IS stature in Khorasan will elevate – the latter is leveraging al-Zawahiri's killing to embarrass al-Qaeda and recruit new operatives.
4. Exposure of Taliban's terrorist ties – al-Zawahiri was killed in a house belonging to Saraj al-Din al-Haqqani, the Taliban's Internal Security Affairs minister. Al-Zawahiri's killing proves that jihadi terrorist organizations flourish under the Taliban's auspice, contrary to the latter's undertaking in the Doha Agreement to deny refuge to al-Qaeda's operatives and despite its denials regarding such refuge. One can assume that the intelligence regarding al-Zawahiri's location was provided to the Americans by some of Haqqani's political rivals within the Taliban who frowned upon the former's connections with global jihadists in light of their desire to focus on Afghanistan's rebuilding and welfare.
5. A perceptual impact on global jihadists and the Taliban regarding the US' intent to refrain from conducting counter-terrorism thwarting activity in Afghanistan contrary to its undertaking in the Doha Agreement.
6. Revenge – al-Qaeda may try to retaliate against American targets likely through one of its stronger offshoots in Somalia or Mali or by activating sleeper cells in the west.

Al-Zawahiri's targeted killing raises the question whether his successor will follow al-Zawahiri's policies path or take another. Be that as it may it seems that al-Qaeda's leadership will respond in a proportional and considered manner to that targeted killing so as to preserve their alliance with the Taliban. Regarding the identity of al-Zawahiri's successor, it may be revealed on the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.