

The Killing of Al-Zawahiri and the Future of Al-Qaeda

by Dario Cristiani

In the afternoon of 1 August, Joe Biden gave a speech from the White House confirming the killing of Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Afghanistan. According to senior sources from the administration, Zawahiri was killed by “a precise tailored airstrike” conducted at around 06:30 am local time in the Sherpur neighbourhood of Kabul.¹ The strike was carried out via two Hellfire missiles (allegedly, two R9X missiles) fired from a drone.²

The area in which the attack was carried out is particularly significant: the Sherpur neighbourhood is located in a deeply protected area of the capital, in which many Taliban leaders now live. Al-Zawahiri was reportedly killed in the

house owned by a top aide to senior Taliban leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani.³

This seems to confirm the rumours that had emerged weeks before the attack: Al-Qaeda had returned to Afghanistan with the explicit support of the Taliban leadership. Such rumours gained momentum in mid-July after the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released a report noting that “Al-Qaida senior leadership enjoyed a more settled period in early 2022 [...] al-Zawahiri’s apparent increased comfort and ability to communicate has coincided with the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan and the consolidation of power of key Al-Qaida allies within their de facto administration.”⁴

¹ Kevin Liptak et al., “US Kills Al Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri in Drone Strike in Afghanistan”, in *CNN*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/01/politics/joe-biden-counter-terrorism>.

² Peter Baker et al., “U.S. Drone Strike in Kabul Kills Top Qaeda Leader”, in *The New York Times*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/08/01/us/al-qaeda-leader-killed>.

³ “CIA Drone Strike Kills Al-Qaida Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan”, in *PBS NewsHour*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/cia-drone-strike-kills-al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri-in-afghanistan>.

⁴ UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Thirtieth Report Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2610 (2021) Concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated*

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Two months before, in another report specifically dealing with the Taliban, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team also noted that Al-Qaida had found “a safe haven under the Taliban”, enjoying “increased freedom of action” with the Haqqani Network considered the backbone of this relationship.⁵

Following the strike, the Taliban spokesperson accused the United States of violating “international principles and the Doha Agreement”.⁶ However, openly hosting the Al-Qaida leader and its fighters contradicts the Taliban’s own commitments under the Doha Agreement, as noted by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in the immediate aftermath of the strike.⁷

The US had already raised the issue following the full withdrawal from Afghanistan. In September 2021, US

General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “the Taliban has never renounced al-Qaida, or broke its affiliation with them”, flagging this as the principle challenge for US national security.⁸

As to why the Taliban have kept hosting Al-Qaeda, there can be several explanations. Likely, they consider Al-Qaeda as an ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K), which remains much stronger, larger and richer compared to the former.⁹ But there is also a historical element at stake, what is known as the “legacy al-Qaeda” as the Haqqanis feel indebted to Qaedaist fighters who established ties with the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, supporting them and the Taliban in the late 1990s, as the group was consolidating its rule in Afghanistan.¹⁰

That said, an operation carried out with such a level of sophistication and the fact that the US seemingly monitored the target for a long time, does lead to questions about how Washington received such detailed intelligence and whether Taliban operatives cooperated with the US strike.¹¹ From this point of

Individuals and Entities (S/2022/547), 15 July 2022, point 7, <https://undocs.org/S/2022/547>.

⁵ UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Thirteenth Report Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2611 (2021) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan (S/2022/419)*, 26 May 2022, p. 3, <https://undocs.org/S/2022/419>.

⁶ Zabihullah [@Zabehulah_M33], “Statement of the Islamic Emirate’s spokesman on the drone attack in Kabul city” (in Arabic), *Twitter post*, 1 August 2022, https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1554187985041719298; and “Statement of the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate regarding the drone attack in Kabul city”, *Twitter post*, 2 August 2022, https://twitter.com/zabehulah_m33/status/1554357900063248384.

⁷ “Blinken Says Taliban ‘Grossly’ Violated Doha Agreement by Sheltering al Qaeda’s Zawahiri”, in *Reuters*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/blinken-says-taliban-grossly-violated-doha-agreement-by-sheltering-al-qaedas-2022-08-02>.

⁸ Jim Garamone, “Taliban Remains Dangerous, Harbors al-Qaida, Joint Chiefs Chairman Says”, in *DoD News*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2793387>.

⁹ John McLaughlin, “Reflections on the Death of Ayman Al-Zawahiri”, in *Lawfare*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/23114>.

¹⁰ UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Thirteenth Report*, cit., point 29.

¹¹ Charles Lister, “Strike on Al-Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Is a Major Win for US Counterterrorism”,

view, two hypothesis can be advanced.

Another Taliban faction might have ratted out Al-Zawahiri to weaken Haqqani. In this case, the event is likely to increase frictions and tension within the Taliban leadership, and to further strengthen ISIL-K, which can exploit these tensions to weaken the Taliban regime.

Another possible explanation, albeit a less likely one, is that the Taliban leadership might have tacitly allowed the US to carry out such an operation as a means to open a new chapter in their relations. Clearly, there is no public evidence available to support such a hypothesis. Yet, should relations between the Taliban and the US improve over the next months, this explanation might gain some traction.

From a symbolic point of view, the killing of Al-Zawahiri is clearly a major blow to Al-Qaeda. For the United States, it represents an important success and effectively closes the circle regarding the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Operationally, this targeted killing shows that Washington maintains unmatched capabilities to carry out such operations even in Afghanistan, in which the US has little direct presence these days.

From an operational standpoint, however, the death of Al-Zawahiri is unlikely to change much, at least in the short-term. Over the past two decades, Al-Qaeda turned into a deeply decentralised organisation –

in *MEI Articles*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/node/84588>.

a horizontal movement more than a hierarchical, vertical organisation in which the central leadership would dictate the agenda, strategies and main goals to local groups.

The fact that Al-Qaeda has turned into a decentralised movement in which its local branches have gradually enjoyed a greater degree of freedom has not made the movement less dangerous. This dynamic has merely shifted part of its logic of action. Local groups have shown an astonishing capacity not only to adapt to local conditions, but also to reframe their message to meet local grievances revolving around ethnic, social and economic dimensions and directing these against the dominant elites, thereby attracting more recruits.

The emergence of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (*Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* – JNIM) in the Sahel and its current, further expansion into the littoral states of West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, with the Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin being increasingly under attack, is a significant example of this dynamic.¹² On the other side of Africa, Al Shabaab – the Somali Al-Qaeda affiliate – also demonstrated that it has gradually regained capabilities, making the group even more dangerous.¹³

¹² Caleb Weiss, "Jihadists Kill Dozens across Northern Togo", in *Long War Journal*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/07/jihadists-kill-dozens-across-northern-togo.php>.

¹³ Jack Detsch, "Somalia's al Qaeda Branch Has Gotten 'Bigger, Stronger, and Bolder' Since U.S. Exit", in *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/26/somalia-terrorism-al-shabab-us-military>.

The death of Al-Zawahiri clearly raises the question about his successor. In the already mentioned mid-July report, the UN also reflected on the next potential leader of Al-Qaeda. The list includes: Sayf-al 'Adl and Abdal-Rahman al-Maghrebi; Yazid Mebrak, most commonly known as Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Annabi, the emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); and Ahmed Diriye (Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah), the emir of the Somalian Al-Shabaab.¹⁴

The first two individuals are based in Iran, and this creates potential problems. According to Charles Lister, over the past years, at least three al-Qaeda affiliate groups have questioned the trustworthiness of instructions coming from Sayf-al 'Adl given his location in Iran. Should he actually become the next Al-Qaeda emir, this might push affiliates "[to assert] their organizational independence even more than they already do".¹⁵

Picking a leader coming from one of the African affiliates, instead, would create "an unprecedented move of global leadership to [a different] area", as noted by Aaron Zelin.¹⁶ While the next leader might re-galvanise the movement globally and give it new momentum, the situation as it is –

¹⁴ UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Thirtieth Report*, cit., point 8.

¹⁵ Charles Lister, "Strike on Al-Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Is a Major Win for US Counterterrorism", cit.

¹⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin [@azelin], "Lot of Known Unknowns for AQ Succession. Sayf al-Adl & 'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Maghribi Are Based in Iran, Creating Potential Legitimacy Issues", *Twitter post*, 2 August 2022, <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1554256498414469120>.

particularly in Africa – suggests that Al-Qaeda affiliates are likely to continue in their growth independently of who will be Al-Qaeda's new central leader.

From this point of view, history can offer a lesson. Al-Zawahiri was one of the key minds behind Al-Qaeda's expansion in Africa in the 1990s.¹⁷ That was a crucial moment in the global rise of the organisation, an essential passage before the 9/11 attacks. The territories in which Al-Qaeda operates are also seen as potential platforms to re-launch its global relevance. Observing the group's trajectories over the past decades, despite its liquid and fuzzy nature, seems to indicate that Al-Qaeda is systematically in search of stable, territorial safe havens in which, and from which, to operate.

As shown by the presence of Al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan, the country under Taliban control was also returning to be an important base for the group. Yet, at the moment, its central activities are more concentrated in Africa. The capabilities of local Qaedaist groups to seize the opportunities presented by the local environment suggest that, independently of whether the next leader of the organisation actually comes from an African affiliate, this space will be crucial for the future direction of the group. The killing of Al-Zawahiri is unlikely to change this dynamic.

Over the past ten years, the capacity of Jihadist groups to operate in Africa

¹⁷ Lawrence Wright, "The Man Behind Bin Laden", in *The New Yorker*, 8 September 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/16/the-man-behind-bin-laden>.

has grown exponentially. For Al-Qaeda affiliates, particularly in the Sahel, this happened despite US and European counterterrorism efforts. France, for instance, has killed several major local leaders of Al-Qaeda in Africa.¹⁸ Yet, the military approach has proven ineffective in stopping the rise of these groups.

On the contrary, despite leadership decapitation, these groups continue to grow and were even able to merge with other actors and local populations, exploiting long-standing grievances against ethnic and political elites. From this point of view, while these groups will likely be only marginally affected by the death of Al-Zawahiri, the inevitable transition that Al-Qaeda as a movement will experience can create some occasions for external actors and their regional partners.

Promoting approaches not only focused on leadership decapitation, but centred on some of the social and economic grievances – from underdevelopment to perceived discrimination; from promoting more inclusive social contracts to reviewing justice mechanisms and addressing the concerns of historically marginalised groups – that have fuelled the rise of Jihadist groups is just as important today as it has been in the past.

Such efforts might create cracks among Qaedaist militants and local populations and may become more effective counter-terrorism tools than the traditional security-first model, particularly among those groups who retain a more local focus compared to others which are fully engaged in global Jihad and the fight against the “far enemy” (the US, France, etc.).

After over a decade of military first approaches to fight terrorism, now is time for a more multidimensional and comprehensive framing of the issue and its root drivers. While unlikely to be able to eradicate these groups entirely, a more nuanced approach may well carry more chances of containing, at least partially, this new wave of radical extremism in Africa and beyond.

5 August 2022

¹⁸ France also killed a number of leaders linked to the local branches of the Islamic State, the most notable being Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and former No. 2 of the Qaedaist group known by the name of *Al-Mourabitun*, established by Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

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