

The Killing of al-Zawahiri: Repercussions for the Taliban

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Brief Analysis

Following the drone strike against al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, many variables are up in the air that could significantly alter the stability of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as well as the future of the al-Qaeda framework.

Several weeks ago, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had been killed in a drone strike in Afghanistan, in an operation carried out by the CIA in Kabul. Some officials indicated that al-Zawahiri had been in a safe house when he was targeted by two missiles fired from a drone. The assassination came just before the Taliban would mark one year of its control of Afghanistan on August 15, and it highlighted some of the visible fissures within Taliban leadership and its approach to terrorist groups within its borders.

The United States emphasized that the al-Qaeda leader's presence in Afghanistan was a gross violation of the Doha agreement, wherein the Taliban had promised that after U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan, that they would not allow al-Qaeda or any other extremist organization to operate in areas under their control or to threaten U.S. interests. The U.S. Secretary of State pledged

(<https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/20220801-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B2%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86>) that Washington

would support the Afghan people “in the face of the Taliban’s unwillingness or inability to abide by their commitments [to] continue to support the Afghan people with robust humanitarian assistance and to advocate for the protection of their human rights, especially of women and girls.” Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell stated (<https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/3624956.aspx>) that “al-Zawahiri’s return to downtown Kabul

further indicates that Afghanistan is again becoming a major thicket of terrorist activity following the President's decision to withdraw U.S. forces."

For its part, the Taliban stated that it was unaware of Zawahiri's return to Kabul, and Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid issued a statement hours after the incident condemning the U.S. attack as a violation of the Doha agreement and international principles. He said that the attack echoed other U.S. failures over the past twenty years and was at odds with the interests of the United States, Afghanistan, and the region.

Analysts believe that the targeting of the al-Qaeda leader in Kabul aimed to undermine the Taliban's cohesiveness and to go after its offshoots. The Haqqani network, one of the main offshoots of the Taliban, has long provided a safe haven for al-Qaeda elements, including after the U.S. intervention in the wake of the September

([https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-](https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-Network.pdf)

[Network.pdf](https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-Network.pdf)) 11 attacks. The Haqqani network and al-Qaeda grew closer after the former group's founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani, fell ill. His son Sirajuddin Haqqani officially assumed

([https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-](https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-Network.pdf)

[Network.pdf](https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-Network.pdf)) control of the group in 2018 after his father's death. Sirajuddin is considered more violent and extremist than his father, traits that became more evident after the group tried to assassinate former Afghan

President Hamid Karzai in 2008 (<https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ref-0241-The-Haqqani-Network.pdf>). Sirajuddin Haqqani's influence in Afghanistan and within the Taliban reached its peak when he became deputy leader of the Taliban under Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2016 (<https://arabic.euronews.com/2016/05/22/taliban-leader-mansour-killed-in-us-drone-strike>).

As the Taliban gained power and turned towards the political sphere, many disputes emerged within the movement that led to ongoing conflict between moderate and extremist factions. Some reports

(<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/taliban-a-divided-house/>) have indicated that the Taliban has split into at least three subgroups. The first group—the wing that engaged in peace talks with the United States—is led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar; the second, the Taliban's military wing, is led by Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoob; and the third, the Haqqani network, is led by Sirajuddin Haqqani and still appears to act under the auspices of the Taliban. With regard to these conflicts, Mullah Yaqoob brushed aside Mullah Baradar's role and said that those living in luxury in Doha could not give orders to those engaged in military struggle against the U.S.-led occupation forces. There have also been disagreements between Haqqani and Mullah Yacoob.

The most recent reports indicate that the house in which al-Zawahiri was killed belonged to the Haqqani network, whose members tried to conceal the fact that he had been in the house after the strike. However, U.S. sources confirmed al-Zawahiri's presence. The Haqqani network may potentially respond to al-Zawahiri's killing by retaliating against U.S. hostage Mark Frerichs (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/01/zawahiri-al-qaeda-killed/>), who was kidnapped in Afghanistan in January 2020. Potentially, if the Haqqani network continues in this vein, a scenario may emerge in which the Haqqani network could split from the Taliban. Both sides may now feel that the alliance is not productive given that its main objective—getting foreign forces out of Afghanistan—has been met. This rift is also driven by underlying ideological differences between the two groups, especially since the Haqqani network is interested in global jihad and developing ties with groups elsewhere while the Taliban focuses only on domestic affairs. The United States has always seen the Haqqani network as linked to al-Qaeda, while the former has maintained an independent financial and organizational (https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF23_WeinbaumBabbar_Haqqani_web_0.pdf) structure.

Shifts within al-Qaeda itself may also have an impact on this rift; the killing of the al-Qaeda leader is expected to have various repercussions for the organization's central leadership and its various branches. Choosing a new leader

after al-Zawahiri will be a significant challenge for al-Qaeda, especially since potential candidates include Saif al-Adel, a former Egyptian Special Forces officer who led the group during the transitional period after the killing of Osama bin Laden. At the time, there were various internal disputes since some members did not want al-Adel in charge due to his ties with Iran. It is believed that al-Adel has spent most of the last twenty years in Iran, which has lost him the support of the new generation in al-Qaeda and of anti-Shia members within the organization. These concerns could prevent al-Adel from being appointed—or else lead to disputes if he is appointed that could undermine the stability of the central leadership.

Nevertheless, al-Qaeda had been gradually moving towards a decentralized structure, a strategy that has borne positive outcomes for the organization as a whole. It initially had a **centralized** (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9a81980efcf04a6dbe003df94b300297>) hierarchical structure from 1992 to 2003, during which it carried out around 74 attacks, and then began to move away from this hierarchical order during 2004-2008, when it became more active and carried out 501 attacks. As it shifted towards a decentralized structure during 2009 to 2013, the group carried out 1,958 terrorist attacks, and as decentralization increased from 2014-2018, there were 3,838 attacks. If conflict erupts over who will succeed al-Zawahiri, this could gradually push the group further towards decentralization, which will provide more room for branches to operate independently. It is therefore expected that the activity of al-Qaeda's subgroups will continue to expand.

Conversely, these shifts suggest that al-Qaeda has limited options in responding to the recent attack in Afghanistan. Most importantly, the group's new generation is different. Bin Laden had tried to create a resilient generation that dealt with the death of its leaders as an opportunity to expand activity and rally support in defense of Islam, rather than viewing such killings as a setback. Al-Qaeda tried unsuccessfully to encourage youth involvement in the organization in a statement issued in May 2011 announcing Bin Laden's death. During the al-Zawahiri era, there was a drop in the number of operations carried out in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the U.S. targeting of the central al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan has contributed significantly to the group's decline, curbed youth membership, and cut down on recruitment and training centers in Afghanistan.

After Bin Laden's death, the central leadership was primarily focused on keeping a low profile and evading U.S. attacks. The expansion of other groups also contributed to reducing the control of al-Qaeda's central leadership over its branches. These groups include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is active in several countries such as Mali, Nigeria, and Tunisia, as well as al-Shabaab in Somalia, which expanded and began to carry out terrorist operations beyond Somalia as it had done after the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006. These developments have eroded the capacity of al-Qaeda's central leadership relative to its branches, and may reduce the friction within the Taliban when dealing with al-Qaeda simply through the internal reduction of al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan.

In addition to these implications for the cohesiveness of the Taliban, the killing of al-Zawahiri in Kabul also has domestic repercussions in paving the way for the rise of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province. It is likely that current al-Qaeda elements will move to join ISIS if there is an internal rift around al-Zawahiri's successor. Conflict with the Taliban could also lead it to split off and join the Khorasan Province. The Taliban government's support for terrorist groups could also undermine its own stability and efforts to form international networks, particularly as a result of security issues in Kabul.

Ultimately, the potential repercussions of al-Zawahiri's death depend upon the stances that the Taliban adopts and the extent to which conflicts emerge between the Haqqani network and other offshoots. These impacts are also contingent upon the U.S. stance and potential escalation in Afghanistan in the case of retaliation from al-Qaeda's central leadership. The killing of al-Zawahiri might not change the nature of the threats that the United States and Europe face in an Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Instead, the United States must continue to ensure that Afghanistan does not slip into instability and become fertile ground for the incubation of jihadism and terrorism,

regardless of the banner. ❖

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