



# Killing of al-Zawahiri

U.S. Counter-terrorism Operations, Future of Al Qaeda and Implications for Taliban, Pakistan, other Stakeholders and India

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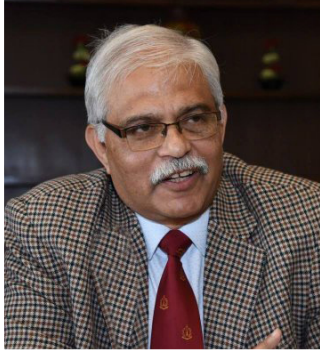
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# Abstract

Al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed on a Sunday morning of July 31, 2022, on the balcony of his Kabul residence by a U.S. missile strike. It is a critical event that has grave implications for the U.S. counter-terrorism operations, Al Qaeda, the global jihadi movement, Pakistan, the Taliban, the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Arab countries, India and the U.S.

Al-Zawahiri's death is extremely significant for three reasons:

- al-Zawahiri was one of the few remaining active early generational figures of Al Qaeda who were part of the core group of the 9/11 attacks.
- The strike is important and symbolic for the U.S. showing its resolve to hunt down Al Qaeda leaders. The U.S. took almost 21 years after 9/11 to find and kill al-Zawahiri.
- It is a significant inflection point for Al Qaeda as a global movement and brand. Who will succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri, how Al Qaeda handles the transition will be crucial for Al Qaeda's future development.

There are question marks about who had put al-Zawahiri and his family in a safe house in Kabul, where he was before move to Kabul, who helped him, who else knew within the Taliban about his stay, who else is the Taliban sheltering and importantly how did the U.S. find him? The relationship of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the interim Interior Minister of Afghanistan, with Al Qaeda, ISI and Zawahiri were well known.

Pakistan has been a critical player in the Taliban's political restoration by providing all the wherewithal for the peace processes led by the U.S., China and Russia. It hosted Taliban leaders and facilitated several peace dialogues involving all the stakeholders. Pakistan became a key ally in the Taliban's political restoration by backing peace processes led by the United States, China, and Russia, hosting Taliban leaders, and facilitating several peace dialogues involving all stakeholders except India.

Some of the details of this operation will remain shrouded in mystery for the public for quite some time and may not be divulged ever. Too many conclusions from a single, successful operation should not be drawn.

There have been crucial issues of how the intelligence was obtained, what were the weapon systems used for the strike, the American over the horizon capability for counter-terrorism operations, the route the drone used for the strike, what will be the effect on the Taliban government, future of Al Qaeda, Pakistan's involvement, India's reaction and what is future course of action of U.S.

This Monograph examines all these issues in detail.

# Preamble

The taking out of Al Qaeda (AQ) emir Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, by U.S counter-terrorism operation in an over-the-horizon attack after a year of U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan has far-reaching repercussions. It has raised a number of critical issues on the role of the Taliban and Haqqani network in providing the safe heaven to al-Zawahiri and his family, how the U.S got the intelligence for such a precise strike, who betrayed al-Zawahiri, how the attack was carried out, what will be the future of Al Qaeda, how will the Taliban deal with the situation, How does it affect AQIS, how will the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) will exploit the incidence, what has been the role of Pakistan, what is the implication on India etc.

Nobody knows better than Americans that the problems of Afghanistan reside in Pakistan. Pakistan provided a safe haven for the Taliban's leadership and men, material, weapons, fund and training. Pakistan did not allow the U.S intelligence agencies to deal directly with the Mujaheddins during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. After the Taliban was overthrown in 1901, for the last 20 years, Pakistan leveraged the logistics supply chain of coalition forces through Pakistan to the hilt. Now they are trying to take advantage of the possible airspace route for any over-the-horizon attack

in Afghanistan by the U.S. by getting IMF loans and FATF sanctions removed as a barter. Pakistan is a past master in these double deals. It will be interesting to see what hard bargain the U.S does.

Within Afghanistan, there is a lot of contradictions between the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Al Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS(K)). The Cross-border Relations with Neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and India's legitimate concerns are major issues.

The Paper is laid out under the following parts:-

- Part –I : Introduction
- Part –II : Intelligence Preparation
- Part -III : Execution of the Strike
- Part –IV : AQ - Present Status and Future
- Part –V : Taliban
- Part –VI : Role of Pakistan
- Part –VII : Who Betrayed AZ
- Part –VIII : Indian Concern
- Part –IX : Conclusion



## Part –I

# Introduction

It was July 31, Sunday, local time 6.18 am and the Sun was still rising over the Afghan capital of Kabul. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the Al Qaeda terror group, had just completed his second morning prayer of the day and was watching the dawn from his third-floor balcony at a house in the city's upmarket district of Sherpur in keeping with a well-worn routine. He was fond of reading alone on the balcony of his safe house early in the morning. Sherpur is a wealthy downtown neighbourhood that once housed several Western embassies and is now home to some high-ranking Taliban officials.



A view of Sherpur neighbourhood where Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri killed by U.S.drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 02, 2022. Source: <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/the-end-of-al-qaeda-11659457068763.html>

Moments later, an American MQ-9 Reaper drone circling up to 50,000 ft overhead fired two R9X 'Ninja' Hellfire missiles and the 71-year-old Al Qaeda (AQ) emir was no more. The lone victim of the strike was Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was living with his family approximately two miles from the site of the former U.S. embassy in Afghanistan in a safe house. Ayman al-Zawahiri succeeded Osama bin Laden as the emir of Al Qaeda in 2011 after U.S. Navy Seals took out the latter in a raid in Pakistan's Abbottabad. Ayman al-Zawahiri was a wanted man for more than 20 years. He was back living with family members in Afghanistan, where he and Osama bin Laden had plotted the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

John Kirby, White House national security spokesman, said the United States has visual confirmation that a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) drone strike killed Ayman al-Zawahiri and officials would need no further corroboration. Kirby stated that the strike did not injure or kill any civilians, and it caused minor damage to the building's structure. The details of disposal of al-Zawahiri's mortal remains are not known. Antony Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State, accused the Taliban of grossly violating the Doha Agreement by hosting and sheltering al-Zawahiri. The Taliban, which returned to power in Afghanistan about a year earlier on August 15, confirmed the strike but did not name al-Zawahiri. Taliban condemned the drone strike as a "violation of international principles" and the Doha Agreement.

For AQ, Zawahiri's death poses an immediate, short-term challenge regarding succession and a long-term challenge of resolving a host of internal tensions and contradictions that the organisation is struggling for years. Some security experts feel that the operation demonstrates that the U.S. can still carry out precision strikes in Afghanistan after last year's

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1 Trevor Filseth, 'Justice Delivered': Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Killed by U.S. Strike in Afghanistan, *The National Interest*, August 2, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/%E2%80%98justice-delivered%E2%80%99-al-qaeda-leader-zawahiri-killed-us-strike-afghanistan-203960>

withdrawal of troops on the ground. It also shows the Taliban's willingness to accommodate Al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan.

The killing of al-Zawahiri raises several issues about AQ's current structure and the threat it poses, U.S.' ability to carry out strikes in Afghanistan and the question of what al-Zawahiri's presence for months in Afghanistan says about assurances by the Taliban to combat terrorism in the country it now rules.

Intelligence preparation for this operation provides fascinating facades of intelligence operations. This aspect will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Part –II

# Intelligence Preparation

The hunt for one of the world's most wanted terrorists, al-Zawahri, started before the September 11 attacks. The CIA was on his tail as he rose to the top of Al Qaeda (AQ) post the death of Osama bin Laden and further after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan about a year back. For years, U.S. intelligence agencies believed that al-Zawahri was hiding in the border area of Pakistan, where many Taliban and AQ leaders took refuge after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

In 2012 and 2013, the CIA concentrated its efforts on Pakistan's North Waziristan region. CIA officials were confident they had found the small village where al-Zawahri was hiding. But intelligence agencies could not find his exact house, making a raid or drone strike impossible. Still, the U.S. hunt forced al-Zawahri to continue in the tribal areas of Pakistan, limiting the effectiveness of his leadership within Al Qaeda.

Senior intelligence officials had told the President that even after the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, they would be able to preserve and build informant networks inside Afghanistan from far away and the U.S. would not be blind to terrorism threats from there. For the CIA, finding al-Zawahri would be a key test of that claim. After the U.S. left Kabul in August 2021,

the CIA intensified its efforts to find al-Zawahri, convinced that senior leaders of Al Qaeda, including al- Zawahri, would be tempted to return to Afghanistan.

Incidentally, there was enough indication of AQ consolidating in Afghanistan. In September 2021, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “the Taliban has never renounced Al Qaeda, or broke its affiliation with them”, flagging this as the principle challenge for U.S. national security”.

### **Identification of a High Value Target**

A variety of intelligence methods were used including Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and Signals Intelligence (SIGINT). It is believed that U.S. aircrafts and drones took turns monitoring the location for months, unheard and unseen from the ground below. It requires a lot of patience. The U.S. intelligence agencies have decades of experience in tracking down terrorist targets and over the period, they have become outstanding at this. The family would have been carefully monitored on any electronic devices, carefully watched to determine how many people lived in the home, how they dispose of trash that might contain DNA evidence, where they did their shopping and monitor purchasing patterns in local markets for signals that could be useful in determining a picture of life inside the house.

Though some officials said Zawahiri employed “long-standing terrorist tradecraft” to conceal his actual location, American intelligence found that Zawahiri’s wife, daughter and grandchildren had been living at the safe house for some time. After months of surveillance, they confirmed Zawahiri’s presence there. The safe house was in a relatively well-to-do area called Sherpur, home to foreign embassies and diplomats under the previous administration. Today, most of the Taliban’s senior officials live in its plush surroundings. The U.S. intelligence established patterns of behaviour from the house’s residents, including the unique mannerisms of

a woman that they identified as Zawahiri's wife. Officials had recognised her use of terrorist tradecraft which she used to avoid leading anyone to her husband's safehouse in Kabul. The family was living under the protection of the Haqqani network, an infamous terror organisation run by two brothers and their uncle. They are closely associated with both Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Son of the group's founder, Jalaluddin, Sirajuddin Haqqani is the current Interior Minister for the Taliban government and leader of the network. One of his aides is the house owner, where Zawahiri's family moved.

CIA officers, in early April, first briefed the President's advisers and then the President himself, apprising him that they had identified a network supporting the Al Qaeda leader and his family through multiple streams of intelligence. Intelligence analysts eventually identified the figure as al-Zawahri, who remained on the balcony reading, but never left the house. Analysts searched for this kind of pattern-of-life intelligence, any habit the CIA can exploit. The intelligence agency established a detailed pattern of life for al-Zawahri for use in planning a strike. He seemed to get fresh air by standing on a balcony on the upper floor. He remained on the balcony for protracted periods, which gave the CIA an excellent chance to target him. His extended balcony visits gave the agency an opportunity for a clear missile shot that could avoid collateral damage.

It is not very clear why al-Zawahri went back to Afghanistan. He had been making recruiting and promotional videos and may have thought it would be easier to produce them in Kabul. He also may have got access to better medical treatment. The AQ supremo living in a posh locality in Kabul and not in rural Afghanistan confirms the story that he was very comfortable under the protection of the Taliban as Taliban and AQ work hand in hand. Whatever be the reason, his close links with leaders of the Haqqani network led U.S. intelligence officials to the safe house. Targeting him posed several problems. The safe house is an urban area of closely spaced houses, and a missile armed with a large explosive could damage nearby

homes. Operations by Special Operations forces would be too dangerous, restricting the options for the U.S. government to conduct a strike.

Al Qaeda leadership has played an advisory role since the Taliban returned to power. According to a UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report released last July, “Al Qaeda 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 Qaeda allies within their de facto administration.”<sup>1</sup> Two months before, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, in another report specifically dealing with the Taliban, noted that Al Qaeda had found “a safe haven under the Taliban enjoying increased freedom of action with the Haqqani Network considered the backbone of this relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Planning Process**

The CIA develops and executes a specific process for such a lethal operation against a high-value terrorist leader. This process is that when intelligence agencies feel that they have actionable intelligence on a senior terrorist leader like al-Zawahiri the following actions take place:<sup>-3</sup>

- A small team of experts from the agency’s Counterterrorism Mission Center (CTMC) are dedicated for vetting the new intelligence.

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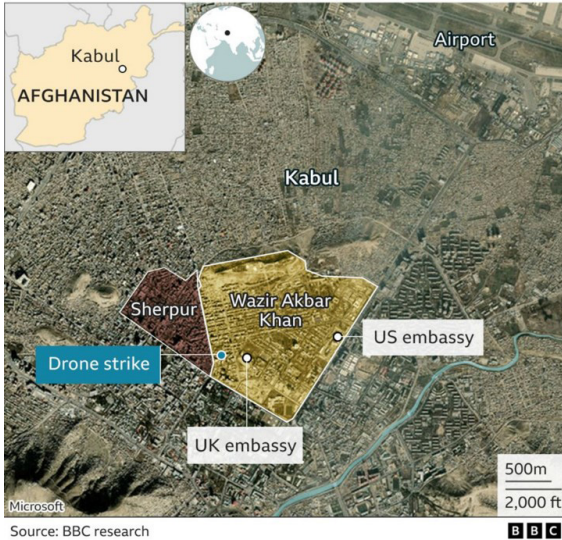
1 United Nations Security Council, S/2022/547 available at: <https://undocs.org/S/2022/547>

2 United Nations Security Council, S/2022/419 available at: <https://undocs.org/S/2022/419>

3 Klon Kitchen, Killing Zawahiri: How the CIA Hunts Monsters, American Enterprise Institute, August 04, 2022 available at: <https://www.aei.org/articles/killing-zawahiri-how-the-cia-hunts-monsters/>

- Tasking new intelligence collection to validate this reporting.
- To start developing operational options for a ‘kill/capture’ mission.

### Scene of Kabul drone strike



This intelligence cell consists of experts on Zawahiri and Al Qaeda and collection and targeting specialists from the CIA and other intelligence agencies. This work will be highly compartmentalised. To further enhance security, the team and its information would often be physically isolated.

The first priority is to confirm the presence of a high-value terrorist leader, in this case, al-Zawahiri, through multiple intelligence sources. A wide-ranging net of intelligence collection is done over the target location 24/7. Imagery platforms search for glimpses of the terrorist leader. SIGINT covers the area thoroughly to hear someone talk about “the guest,” “the old man,” or some other coded language. HUMINT assets are tasked to look for specific details like how many doors, how many windows, which way they open, from what materials the house is built, etc. The aim is to know everything about the house, its inhabitants and its surroundings. All this data is amalgamated into a series of intelligence reports, operational



plans and a physical model that is an exact replica of the house down to the smallest detail.

When the CIA is reasonably sure of the intelligence gathered, a briefing is organised with Deputy National Security Adviser, in this case Jon Finer, and Homeland Security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall. Sometimes, these briefings result in further intelligence and analysis taskings to clarify ambiguities and assess the impact of removing the target. Naturally, decision-makers will want to understand the situation in Afghanistan and how Zawahiri's removal would affect the terrorist group and the terrorist threat to the U.S. After this agency's findings would be briefed to the National Security Adviser, in this case Jake Sullivan, who then will inform the President, Joe Biden.

Two things are expected to happen thereafter. First, a formal briefing would be arranged for the President. This meeting would typically include the director of the CIA, the director of national intelligence, the President's national security adviser, and probably other Cabinet officials and national security personnel. Depending on the President's preferences, a representative from the intelligence cell may be invited to the briefing. At this briefing, the President may be shown a model of the home and walked through the intelligence in detail. The President would also have given guidance on what operational options he would like to consider. As the operational choices are developed, another group of intelligence professionals would have reviewed the Zawahiri intelligence analysis and be tasked with developing or ruling out alternative analytic conclusions. A group of CIA and White House lawyers would also study the intelligence carefully to determine its suitability for lethal action.

Finally, a meeting would be held at the White House where residual questions are answered and the President orders the CIA to conduct the operation. After this, all operational and legal arrangements are finalised, and the CIA director assumes operational control. From an Operation

Center at Langley, the CIA Director, in this case, William J. Burns, would have supervised the final target acquisition, engagement and elimination, with the President, his national security advisers and possibly others to watch in real-time from the White House.

To confirm Zawahiri's death, efforts would have begun immediately through multiple intelligence channels. A final after-action assessment will be made and provided to the President.

### **Timeline of Plotting a Historic Raid<sup>4</sup>**

Earlier this year U.S. intelligence was tipped off that Zawahiri's wife, daughter and grandchildren were shifted to a house in the Sherpur neighbourhood of Kabul. The information was considered sufficiently reliable that the CIA began monitoring the house, hoping that Zawahiri would soon join his family.

On April 1, 2022, top intelligence officials briefed Jon Finner, Principal Deputy National Security Advisor and Liz Sherwood-Randall, the Homeland Security Advisor, the decision makers, at the White House about the safe house and how they had tracked al-Zawahri. After the meeting, the CIA and other intelligence agencies were told to learn more about al-Zawahri's pattern of life. Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, Jon Finner and Liz Sherwood-Randall were briefed subsequently as more intelligence was developed. Jake Sullivan briefed the President shortly after that.

In June and July, officials met in the Situation Room several times to discuss the intelligence and examine the potential implications. A senior administration official said, "They carried out pressure test of the intelligence

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4 Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, How the C.I.A. Tracked the Leader of Al Qaeda, NY Times, August. 2, 2022.

picture to ensure that we had sufficiently red-teamed the options, while also thinking through how we might mitigate any risks or costs associated with moving forward.” On July 1, 2022, William J. Burns, the CIA director, and other intelligence officials briefed President Biden on the safe house model on the plan to kill Zawahiri in the Situation Room. The senior administration official said, “We also investigated the construction and nature of the safe house in which he was located so that we could confidently conduct an operation to kill Zawahiri without threatening the structural integrity of the building while minimising the risk to civilians, including Zawahiri’s family. We convened a team of independent analysts to review all data surrounding the identity of the occupants of the safe house.” “The President closely examined the model of Zawahiri’s house. He sought explanations of lighting, weather, construction material, and other factors that could influence the success of this operation and reduce the risk of civilian casualties. He was particularly focused on ensuring that every step had been taken to ensure the operation would minimise that risk. And he wanted to understand the basis upon which we had confidence in our assessment” he added. At that meeting, President Jo Biden asked about the possibility of collateral damage, the steps of how officers had found al-Zawahiri and their plans to kill him. He ordered a series of analyses.

The White House asked the National Counter-terrorism Center to independently assess the impact of al-Zawahiri’s removal in Afghanistan and worldwide networks. The President also enquired about the possible dangers to Mark R. Frerichs, an American civil engineer who the Taliban had kidnapped in 2020 and then held by the Haqqanis. The planning for the strike also included likely disruptions to continuing efforts to secure the safe relocation of Afghans who worked with the U.S. military and other branches of the U.S. government over the past two decades out of the country. They were now at risk of Taliban reprisals. Also, the possible loss of access to relevant airspace through which future operations could be conducted was factored in. At a later briefing, the President asked about other options to reduce collateral or civilian casualties. He wanted to know

more about the layout of rooms behind the door and windows on the third floor of the building. Simultaneously, a small body of senior interagency lawyers examined the intelligence reporting and confirmed the legal basis for the operation. Based on the available intelligence, assessments of all options for neutralising Zawahiri and their associated risks and the legal determination, Biden's entire national security team unanimously supported executing the proposed strike.

Only on July 25, 2022, the cabinet reconvened to examine updated intelligence and look again at the blueprint for the strike. President Joe Biden enquired about other options and, after being satisfied that the best plan had been selected, he authorised the strike at the earliest possible opportunity. He instructed to execute the mission only if all efforts had been made to minimise the risk of civilian casualties to the greatest extent possible.

In the early hours of July 31, 2022, An MQ-9 Reaper drone fired two R9X 'Ninja' Hellfire missiles with 100 lbs metal warheads and six blades that popped out before impact to obliterate al-Zawahiri. An image of the safe house shows how the missiles smashed through the floor of the rooftop balcony and damaged two of the windows in the room below without harming anyone other than the AQemir.<sup>5</sup> Members of the Haqqani network swarmed the safe home shortly after the strike and moved Zawahiri's surviving relatives to a new location. Though Intelligence agencies were confident that Zawahiri was on the balcony at the time of their attack, they worked over the next day to be sure he was dead before confirming to the President. It is interesting to note that the senior administration official claimed that no American personnel were on the ground in Kabul. However, another independent team was involved in the confirmation that Zawahiri, and no one else, was killed in the strike.

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5 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11072905/Biden-Situation-Room-July-1-planning-CIA-drone-strike-killed-al-Zawahiri.html>

The U.S. officials said that fighters from the Haqqani network hurriedly took away Zawahiri's family from the site. When a BBC reporter arrived at the house next morning, a Taliban cordon sharply waved him away, aiming rifles at him and insisting that there was nothing to see.



Source: <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/how-the-cias-hit-on-terror-kingpin-zawahiri-went-down>

## Post-Strike Assessment

AP reported that a CIA ground team, made up entirely of locals and aerial intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, was involved in the post-strike assessment. It is not clear what happened to Zawahiri's body after the strike. The U.S. made no effort to retrieve Zawahiri's remains, unlike what they did when Osama Bin Laden was killed. U.S. officials said multiple streams of intelligence had confirmed al-Zawahiri's death, but they refused to explain how they had confirmed the attack's success.

The White House stated that the U.S. government does not have DNA evidence that the individual killed in the strike was Zawahiri. However, his identity was confirmed through various sources and methods, including a positive visual identification. Statements from other terrorists eulogising al-Zawahiri have come out, which may be taken as additional evidence that he died. However, since the Taliban have cleaned the area, it is possible

that the remains of *Zawahiri* have been retrieved.

Intelligence agencies strictly guard the identities of their informers. A former director of national intelligence under President Obama, James Clapper, told the BBC that former U.S. allies in Kabul may have provided some information<sup>6</sup>.

Curiously, a picture of an unmanned aerial vehicle with the images of the apparent house where the Al Qaeda leader was killed has been shared online. Though the image's resolution is very low, it is unclear whether it is related to this recent strike. The shape of the unmanned aerial vehicle closely resembles the distinctive wing configuration of the Chinese-made Wing Loong II drone. Incidentally, Pakistan is a known operator of Wing Loong IIs.

### **CIA Operation or Military Operation?**

This particular operation is being depicted as a CIA strike. The C.I.A. plans called for the use of its own drones. Since it was using its own assets, few defence officials were brought into the planning stage for the strike.

The battlespace of unconventional warfare is shared between the CIA and Special Forces. The CIA over a period of time established resources, relations and authorities while Special Forces brings to the table relative mass and specific capabilities necessary to conduct unconventional warfare.

Even if a U.S. military drone carried out the strike, it had to be shown as operating under CIA authorities. Laws of Armed Conflict or the Rules of Engagement followed by U.S. authorities do not permit the U.S. military to have the authority to carry out such a strike.

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6 Matt Murphy, Ayman al-Zawahiri: How US spies found Al-Qaeda's top man in Kabul, BBC News available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/62391950>

The U.S. military can operate only in declared war zones. After U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is no longer a war zone. However, under a presidential finding, the CIA has the authority to make strikes in countries where U.S. is not officially at war. This is the reason when U.S. Special Forces in a raid took out OBL in Pakistan, the operation was chopped to CIA authority to make that strike because U.S. was not at war with Pakistan<sup>7</sup>.

Organisations involved in U.S. counter-terrorism strategy clearly understand that the terrorist threat has a timeless quality and terrorists may even use time as a weapon of war, planning strikes when they are less expected. This is why drones, surveillance planes and special forces units remain engaged in non-contested yet terrorist-friendly environments. Simply put, the Pentagon and the intelligence community appear to understand that the war on terror continues and will require persistent vigilance and resolve.

## **The Authorities**

The CIA has unique legal authorities to conduct lethal intelligence operations under Title 50 of the U.S. Code. These operations fall under the agency's authorization of covert action, "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." This does not mean the U.S. government cannot acknowledge its actions, only that it is not required to do so.

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7 Tom Nagorski, The U.S. just killed 9/11 mastermind Ayman al-Zawahiri: Should Americans feel safer with him gone?, The Grid, August 2, 2022 available at: <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/08/02/the-us-just-killed-911-mastermind-ayman-al-zawahiri-should-americans-feel-safer-with-him-gone/>

The President has the authority to kill Zawahiri under the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed as a joint resolution of Congress on September 18, 2001. The AUMF grants the President the authority to employ all “necessary and appropriate force” against those who “planned, authorized, committed or aided” the 9/11 attacks.

These are the primary legal authorities for killing Zawahiri<sup>8</sup>.

However, the legal fraternity is divided on the issue. They flag the following issues:

- It is not enough to be a member of Al Qaeda in order to be killed. The target has to be engaged in planning or carrying out actual attacks. This was not clear whether the 71-year-old Zawahiri was doing this.
- The CIA and not the military carried out the strike. Intelligence officials cannot legally engage in war under any circumstances as they are not uniformed combatants. The members of the CIA do not enjoy the combatant privileges and immunities in an armed conflict. The CIA has no legal authority or immunity to engage in killing under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Those who did the killing could be prosecuted or held liable for it.
- Sovereignty is the bedrock of international law. The U.S. is no longer at war in Afghanistan. Each state has complete and exclusive sovereignty over the airspace above its territory U.S. needs the permission of the Afghan government to carry out the strike.

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8 Klon Kitchen, Killing Zawahiri: How the CIA Hunts Monsters, AEI, August 04, 2022 available at: <https://www.aei.org/articles/killing-zawahiri-how-the-cia-hunts-monsters/>



That a state can be in a protracted extraterritorial armed conflict with a terrorist group or non-state actor (NSA), implying that this is a “battlefield” for this armed conflict, is itself highly controversial and disputed. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has noted that such claims blur the lines between armed conflict and terrorism.

The U.S. government has taken the stance that its human rights obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including the right to life, do not apply extraterritorially. It could not be held responsible for violating al-Zawahiri’s right to life because he was not “within the territory and under the jurisdiction” of the U.S.

### Taliban’s Reaction



Zabihullah (ذبيح الله م.)  
@Zabehulah\_M33

...

Declaration of the Islamic Emirate on the claim of US President Joe Biden  
[justpaste.it/5aesl](https://justpaste.it/5aesl)



4:46 pm · 4 Aug 2022 · Twitter Web App

Zabihullah Mujahid, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan spokesman, stated:-<sup>9</sup>

The Taliban does not care whether the U.S. military or the CIA conducted the strike. Taliban is saying that this violates their sovereignty, and they object to it. Shortly after the news of Zawahiri's death was announced, the Taliban released a statement strongly condemning the drone strike as it violated international principles and the Doha Agreement.

### **State of U.S. Intelligence Assets inside Afghanistan**

Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. military leaders assured that their capability to monitor and strike a target inside Afghanistan would be difficult but not impossible. This precision strike on Zawahiri proved both. The executive director of the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South Florida, Mr. McKenzie, said, "This was a unique circumstance. You had a target that didn't move, and they had the opportunity to get a good look at pattern of life. That's not always going to be the case. In fact, typically, that is not the case."

A year has passed since the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of Kabul. There are no U.S. troops or military assets inside Afghanistan. The ability to collect real-time intelligence on the ground is not what it used to be earlier. The Coalition forces has very significant intelligence capabilities embedded with the Afghans who themselves had very significant intelligence capabilities. U.S. counter-terror specialists feel that with the over-the-horizon capability, it's not that it doesn't exist, but intelligence now is less certain, less concentrated and less reliable than what it used to be. A tempo of counter-terrorism from over-the-horizon cannot be maintained. But all information are not lost. Still, U.S. intelligence could build up an intelligence picture sufficient to support the strike and avoid

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9 [https://twitter.com/zabehulah\\_m33/status/1554187982407696387?s=21&xt=\\_9Gcgphs1tR3V Uq8Iv eY7A](https://twitter.com/zabehulah_m33/status/1554187982407696387?s=21&xt=_9Gcgphs1tR3V Uq8Iv eY7A)

civilian casualties. How that precise intelligence was generated, how much of it was due to HUMINT on the ground, how much of it was due to overhead surveillance, may never be known. But surely, there is significant intelligence capability still left in Afghanistan.

## The Dilemma

Civilian casualties were a major cause of concern for President Jo Biden. At the last stages of the U.S. evacuation and withdrawal efforts in late August 2021, a botched-up U.S. drone strike completely mistook a target in Kabul, killing a local employee of a U.S. aid group and nine civilians including seven children. In December 2021. President Joe Biden, in August 2021, defended the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan said, “Look, let’s put this thing in perspective. What interest do we have in Afghanistan at this point, with Al Qaeda gone? We went to Afghanistan for the express purpose of getting rid of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan as well as getting Osama bin Laden. And we did.”<sup>10</sup>

However, following Biden’s remarks, John Kirby, Pentagon press secretary, told reporters, “We know that Al Qaeda is a presence, as well as ISIS, in Afghanistan, and we’ve talked about that for quite some time.” Kirby stated they do not believe the number of Al Qaeda fighters in the country “is exorbitantly high but we don’t have an exact figure for you because our intelligence gathering ability in Afghanistan isn’t what it used to be because we aren’t there in the same numbers that we used to be.”<sup>11</sup> Critics quickly

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10 Daniel Dale, Fact check: Biden claims al Qaeda is 'gone' from Afghanistan. Then the Pentagon confirms it's still there, CNN, August 21, 2021 available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/20/politics/fact-check-al-qaeda-gone-afghanistan-biden/index.html>

11 Jennifer Hansler , Pentagon: "We know that al Qaeda is a presence" in Afghanistan, CNN, August 20, 2021 available at: [https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/afghanistan-taliban-us-news-08-20-21/h\\_63401f58e029b0ad321bc7f3629802a0](https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/afghanistan-taliban-us-news-08-20-21/h_63401f58e029b0ad321bc7f3629802a0)

latched on. Bill Roggio, a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the Editor of FDD's Long War Journal, wrote, "The big lie the Biden Administration told us to get out of Afghanistan was that Al Qaeda was gone".

The precision strike against al-Zawahiri without causing any civilian deaths or injuries was a master class in intelligence and the effectiveness of U.S. long-range targeting capability. The strike was a counter-argument to those who believed a permanent presence on the ground was essential to be effective in Afghanistan. Success of the strike confirmed the effectiveness of U.S. long-range targeting capability. However, there was no doubt about this capability. What is being questioned is the U.S. ability to monitor terrorist activity in a country in which it lacks both direct access and a partner on the ground. This emphasised that the U.S. has not lost its intensity and vigilance in counter-terrorism. Notwithstanding the prioritisation of competition with near peer rival China, it showed that the Pentagon and the intelligence community have kept a razor-sharp focus on hunting and killing terrorists who threaten the U.S.

The capability of this type of strike was never in doubt. But return of al-Zawahiri to Kabul under the protection of the Taliban made clear that Afghanistan has become a harbour for terrorists which point to a graver threat than was assumed.

Many questions remain unanswered:-

- Does the U.S. have the capability and the will to execute a continuous campaign against Al Qaeda's command?
- Will President Joe Biden order strikes against Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan?
- Will he order targeting of more Al Qaeda associates in Kabul and beyond?

Doing so would mean admitting they were wrong about the tight bonds between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. To address the threat that emanates from Afghanistan U.S. political, intelligence and military leaders have to admit the mistakes of the past. They must recognise that the Taliban is just as big a part of the problem as Al Qaeda. Daniel Byman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University, said the al-Zawahri strike showed that the United States could still wage war without troops on the ground and Afghanistan would become a sanctuary again for Al Qaeda without troops on the ground. It is difficult to sustain such a campaign in Afghanistan. However, whoever succeeds al-Zawahri will become more cautious, limiting communications and meetings, and making it harder to actually lead a global organisation.



After the intelligence preparation for the operation was completed, it was time for execution of the plan to kill al-Zawahiri. In the next chapter the plan, the weapon system, the bases and the probable route etc. would be discussed.

## Part - III

# Execution of the Strike

### **‘Over the Horizon’ Counter-terrorism Strikes**

Since President Barack Obama, there has been a move to replace conventional forces in large-scale counter-insurgency campaigns with long-range strike operations that rely on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and augmented by world-class armed drones. When U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan by August 31, last year, President Joe Biden assured that an ‘over-the-horizon’ counter-terrorism campaign would keep its enemies at bay. Death of al-Zawahiri seemed to vindicate this counter-terrorism strategy. President Biden asserted that the death of al-Zawahiri vindicated his decision to complete the removal of U.S. ground forces from Afghanistan and pursue counter-terrorism operations from over-the-horizon.

The new mission, Operation Enduring Sentinel (OES), is responsible to protect U.S. national interests by disrupting violent extremist organizations and their external operations that threaten the U.S. homeland, partners and allies from Afghanistan. OES operations are conducted by the Over-the-Horizon Counter-terrorism Headquarters. The joint headquarters

is located in Doha, Qatar, with a staff strength of approximately 100 personnel. All subordinate elements to this headquarters are provided by the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The Department of Defence (DoD) Comptroller reported that in the FY 2022, OES cost to support was approximately \$19.5 billion.

Some counter-terrorism experts expressed caution. Their reasons were:-

- Over-the-horizon counter-terrorism strategy can work but not that it will work generally. This is the first strike against terrorists in Afghanistan since the U.S. left. This is not a common occurrence.
- All the stops would have been pulled out in terms of resources and level of effort in the case of Al Zawahri. The assessment that operating from outside the country has significant limitations remains valid.
- Limited human intelligence from informant networks on the ground.
- Past drone strikes against Pakistan were flown from Afghanistan, while strikes against Syria would have been conducted from friendly territory in Iraq. Now, there are geographical constraints in basing and overflight requirements, which significantly reduce the dwell time of remotely piloted aircraft to loiter over targets in Afghanistan.

## **Air Bases**

With the U.S. withdrew earlier from Afghanistan's Bagram Air Base and Kandahar International Airport, the U.S. now has no airbase in Afghanistan. For intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over Afghan territory, the U.S. should have basing access to house manned and unmanned aircraft in the region. The U. S. has no military bases in

the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan to fly aircraft or drones for strike missions or intelligence collection. The U.S. does not have bases in Central Asia or South Asia. The U.S. has been forced to utilise Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, which is approximately 2,500 miles from Kabul. The nearest country is Oman. Assuming the drone starts from countries like UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, the drone has to fly longer distances along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, reducing its longevity.

A cursory look at the map shows, except Pakistan, a military base to host drones and the infrastructure can only be in the middle east states.



Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, in a testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the greatest challenge for over-the-horizon counter-terrorism operations is that Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Without a presence on the ground, the U.S. relies on aviation assets to collect intelligence, surveillance of terrorist targets and carry out airstrikes on terrorist targets. Hence, the U.S. requires overflight agreements with another nation bordering Afghanistan to enter Afghan airspace. General McKenzie said that the U.S. remained reliant on



Pakistan for overflight options as currently there is no other way to enter into Afghan airspace. General Kurilla said that the flight time required to conduct operations from locations outside of Afghanistan, such as Doha or Qatar gets restricted. Approximately two-thirds of the flying time is spent getting the aircraft to target and back, versus time spent over the target. Conduct of the necessary reconnaissance to establish and locate a potential airstrike target was a resource-intensive effort.

As an example, the MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) has a range of up to 30 hours flying time. It takes the UAV 10 hours to reach over the target and another 10 hours for the return flight. Therefore, counter-terrorism teams would require dedicated multiple MQ-9 Reapers, taking off at 10-hour intervals, to maintain a single sensor over a suspected terrorist target. General Kurilla compared this with the situation when the U.S. military had a presence on the ground in Afghanistan. In that case he would often have 12 sensors monitoring one individual to develop the potential target.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. is trying to relocate assets for air operations using drones, in neighbouring countries where they can launch strikes. It can be safely assumed that the U.S. must have started negotiations with countries such as Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for air base facilities. However, it would be politically risky for many of these governments to allow the U.S. military to fly strike aircrafts or drones. Russia has made its strong opposition to U.S. bases in Central Asia clear. However, surveillance aircraft could be more politically acceptable for some countries.

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan the U.S. is trying to reposition American forces in neighbouring countries where they can

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1 Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, "Hearing to Consider the Nomination of: Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, USA, to be General and Commander, United States Central Command," August 02, 2022.

launch strikes like the one on al-Zawahri. This strategy is still in its initial stages and talks about positioning forces in places like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan are in nascent stages. Most probably, the base used for the strike is in some middle east countries or Pakistan. Understandably this can never be divulged as the host country may be subjected to AQ attacks or their diplomatic embassies in countries may become AQ targets. But what happens if the base used is in Pakistan? Will AQ or Taliban do the same? AQ, Taliban and ISI of Pakistan have the same umbilical cord.

## **Drone as Weapon Platform**

For security reasons, specific information about the aircraft, weapons and tactics used in the Zawahiri strike may never be available. But the successful operation emphasises the importance of stealthy armed drones. Large drones, like the Reaper, Global Hawk and other platforms, maybe less survivable in a contested war with near-peer rivals of U.S. However, these, operating with a powerful arsenal of weapons, have been extremely successful in the war on terror.

Drones have been the primary weapon of U.S. counter-terrorism operations for almost two decades. U.S. military has employed drone strikes against terrorists throughout the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Unmanned aerial vehicles have proven its worth and have become the decisive weapon for identifying and eliminating the world's most dangerous terrorists in some of the most rugged and inaccessible terrain on the planet.<sup>2</sup>

After observing the performance of UAVs early in the war on terror, the U.S. special-operations community invested heavily in aerial drones. U.S.

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2 Kris Osborn, What the Zawahiri Strike Means for the Future of Drone Warfare, National Interest, August 3, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/what-zawahiri-strike-means-future-drone-warfare-203990>

Joint Special Operations Command is the prime purchaser of the UAVs. All special operations units today use drones of all sizes.<sup>3</sup> It is common knowledge that the CIA maintains a fleet of armed unmanned aircraft. Among these aircraft is a variant of General Atomics' Predator drone, called the MQ-9 "Reaper." The strike on al-Zawahiri was reportedly conducted with an MQ-9 Reaper which is the latest, heavier version of the MQ-1 Predator. Another Predator variant, the MQ-1C Gray Eagle, is in use with the 'Night Stalkers' of the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Primarily, the Reaper is employed as an intelligence-collection asset and secondarily against dynamic execution targets. Given its substantial loiter time, multi-mode communications suite, wide-range sensors and precision weapons, it provides a unique capability to execute reconnaissance, coordination and strike against fleeting, high-value and time-sensitive targets.

The Reaper is part of a remotely piloted aircraft system. An operational system comprises of a ground control station, a sensor/weapon-equipped aircraft, a Predator primary satellite link for remote piloting and spare equipment. The drone is typically piloted by one person with another person responsible for the aircraft's sensors and weapons.<sup>4</sup> The drone has a multi-spectral targeting system that includes infrared sensors, colour, monochrome daylight TV camera, a shortwave infrared camera, a laser designator for guiding bombs and a laser illuminator. Each of these sensors can be viewed as an independent stream or fused into a single, multi-

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3 Mike Stone and Idrees Ali, Little-known modified Hellfire missiles likely killed al Qaeda's Zawahiri, Reuters, August 3, 2022 available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/little-known-modified-hellfire-likely-killed-al-qaedas-zawahiri-2022-08-02/>

4 Klon Kitchen, Killing Zawahiri: How the CIA Hunts Monsters, American Enterprise Institute, August 04, 2022 available at: <https://www.aei.org/articles/killing-zawahiri-how-the-cia-hunts-monsters/>

spectral image that makes it very difficult for bad actors to hide.<sup>5</sup>

The MQ-9 can carry a range of ordnance, including the AGM-114 Hellfire missile. The three most common variants of this missile include a dual-warhead, shaped-charge anti-tank missile (AGM-114K), a blast fragmentation warhead for soft targets (AGM-114M) and a metal-augmented charge warhead for larger targets like bridges, bunkers, and urban structures (AGM-114N). None of these variants was used for the Zawahiri strike. It seems the CIA used a newly developed Hellfire missile called the R9X alias, the “ninja bomb.”



MQ-9

Source: <https://media.defense.gov/2007/Oct/11/2000442365/-1/-1/0/070931-M-5827M-016.JPG>

## The Air Route to Target

Afghanistan shares its borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to the north, Iran to the west and Pakistan to the south and east. China has a very short border with Afghanistan. It is unclear from where this particular drone took off and landed, through which airspace the drone had flown, and whether some coordination was done before the strike operations. It must be remembered the surveillance operations by

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5 USAF MQ9 Reaper Fact Sheet available at: <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104470/mq-9-reaper/>

some drones would have been done continuously using probably the same facilities and air space for a long time. U.S. would not use any base or the airspace of China and Iran. It is a safe bet to assume that Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will not get involved in this operation, and the airspace of Tajikistan is under Russian control. With no U.S. military or diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and the nearest U.S. military bases hundreds of miles away, how does U.S. retain over-the-horizon capability?

Islamabad asserts that the Pakistani government was not consulted. Was Pakistani airspace used without the permission of government of Pakistan? Was there a secret deal? Or did the drone approach via one of the Central Asian countries with or without their permission? These are some of the questions which may remain unanswered.



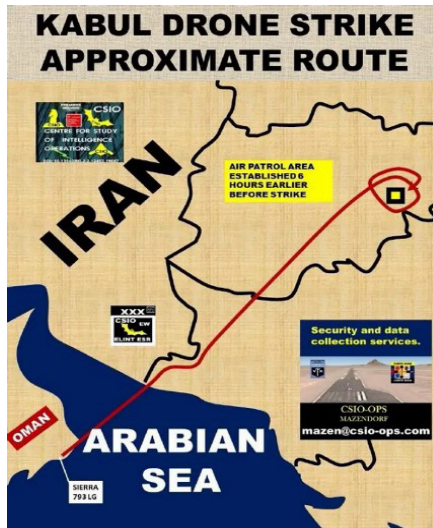
Source: Indian Express

When the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the President and other Pentagon officials claimed that they retained capabilities for over the horizon attacks. This capability, in all probability, is not possible without use of Pakistan's airspace. All these times we were led to believe that since the logistics for the coalition forces in Afghanistan had to go through Pakistan, U.S. had to give in to a lot of demands of Pakistan. When we

were expecting that U.S would be rather strict with their dealing with Pakistan after the withdrawal, nothing happened. One of the reasons may be the use of Pakistan airspace. Pakistan is a past master in exploiting geography to the hilt.

The Senior Administration Official during the briefing after the strike was asked a direct question, “From your estimation and your vast experience, could he have been in that Haqqani safe house without the direct knowledge of Pakistan’s ISI? What involvement could Pakistan have had in hiding him over these years?”The official adroitly bypassed the question by saying, I can’t comment further on other countries’ involvement.<sup>6</sup>

Maj Agha A Amin, a well-respected Pakistani defence analyst, has suggested the following path may have been taken by the drone for the strike.



Source: Maj Agha A Amin

6 Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation, August 01, 2022 available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/08/01/background-presscall-by-a-senior-administration-official-on-a-u-s-counterterrorism-operation/>

The tell-tale signs are already there. In June 2021, The New York Times reported that the CIA was engaged in talks with its counterparts in Pakistani about the possibility of re-establishing a drone base in that country to support future operations over Afghanistan. Dawn newspaper of Pakistan reported subsequently that Pakistan authorities had snubbed the U.S. proposals but instead had “asked the Americans to hand over the drones to them for carrying out the strikes against terrorist targets.”

Perhaps, Biden Administration does not want to put Pakistan in a tight spot at a time when the present army chief is a strategic asset for U.S. General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the current army chief is known to take a hands-on role in all major and minor issues in Pakistan-US relations. He has reached out to the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, seeking her intervention with the IMF to help in financial bail-out for Pakistan. There are no easy answers.

## **The Weapon**

In the US-led war on terror, precision drone strikes are nothing new. Since 2001, the U.S. has been using unmanned aerial systems to monitor, track and kill terrorists worldwide. The U.S. military has been using the AGM-114 Hellfire precision-guided munitions for decades. Several variants tailored to different operational circumstances were developed and frequently used. More than 1,000 Hellfire missiles of all variants were fired in 2015 by units assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command, mostly against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.

However, increased drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere led to increased civilian casualties. There was much criticism for targeting errors and strikes that killed civilians. This prompted the development of the R9X during the Obama administration. The Wall Street Journal revealed the munition’s existence to in 2019. The Journal reported that the missile was used to attack persons in Afghanistan,

Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. The Journal suggested that the R9X was so precise that if a target was in a car with a driver, the missile would take out the target and spare the driver.

The R9X Hellfire missile is now the U.S. military's one of favourite weapons for a precision strike as it has a lower risk of collateral damage. This version named the AGM-114R9X deploys six blades which swing out from the side of the missile as it approaches the target. The kinetic energy from this multi-bladed weapon's speed causes the destruction as they slice through whatever they hit and minimises collateral damage. The missile's blades can cut through buildings and car roofs. R9X Hellfire is being used regularly. Some examples are:-

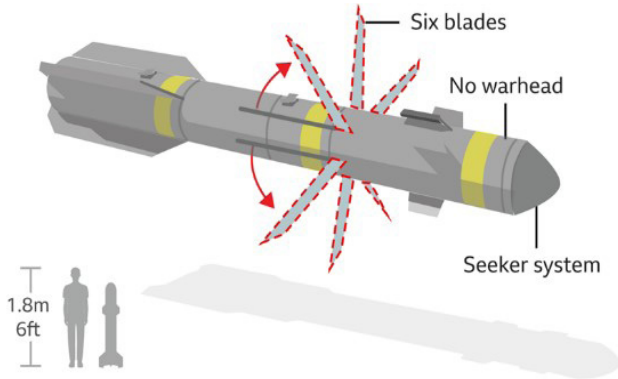
- In March 2017, Abu Khayr al-Masri, AQ leader and one of Zawahiri's deputies, was killed while travelling in a car by a R9X Hellfire in Syria. Photos of his vehicle taken after the strike showed that the missile had cut a hole in the roof and shredded its occupants. There was no sign of an explosion to the vehicle.
- The following year, the missile was the cause of the death of Hurras Al-Din leaders Qassam al-Urduni and Bilal al-Sanaani in Syria.
- In January 2019, it was used to take out Taliban leader Mohabullah in Afghanistan. In the same month, the missile was used on Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Badawi in Yemen, a USS Cole bombing suspect and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Ahmed al-Jaziri in June 2019.
- In early 2020, the U.S. used Hellfires to kill Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad and a 2020 strike in Syria against a senior Al Qaeda member, Sayyaf al-Tunsi.
- In August 2021, the R9X was used to kill two ISIS militants in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. The missiles were fired from



a MQ-9 Reaper drone.

## The Hellfire R9X Missile

### Hellfire R9X missile



Source: BBC research

**B B C**

The missile can be fired from various platforms, including helicopters, ground vehicles, ships and fixed-wing aircraft or from an unmanned drone, as in Zawahiri's case. The R9X has no explosive warhead, unlike other variants. The missile itself is about 6 feet long and weighs 100 pounds. As it enters the terminal phase of its flight, six 18-inch metal blades deploy close to the nosecone and begin to spin. These spinning blades help to cut through cars, walls, and other objects that may protect the intended target. The bomb is relatively light at just 100 pounds but travels at 995 mph. The momentum hits the target like a small car flying at Mach 1.3. While it crushes and kills its target, the risk of collateral damage is minimal.<sup>7</sup> The R9X payload is like a long-range sniper which has a precision and range that makes the R9X a potentially revolutionary development in U.S. military technology.

7 Stavros Atlamazoglouaug, How SOCOM's secret 'knife bomb' became the prime weapon for killing hard-to-reach terrorists, Business Insider, August 8, 2022 available at: <https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/how-socoms-secret-knife-bomb-became-the-prime-weapon-for-killing-hard-to-reach-terrorists/articleshow/93416745.cms>

Two systems formed a deadly duo on Sunday when the Reaper’s sensors allowed the CIA to positively identify Zawahiri, designate him as a target, and then fire two R9X ninja missiles that obliterated the terrorist leader without further casualties. Technologically speaking, it was flawless.<sup>8</sup> The targeted terrorists often surround themselves with family and civilians as “human shields” to deter a strike. But this precise missile will alter terrorist behaviour significantly.

However, the R9X will not be able to solve longstanding issues of legal and ethical concerns on drone strikes. For example, the strike against Zawahiri cannot address the longer-term structural issues that allowed AQ to rise to prominence and ensure its lingering relevance. In an article for the Jamestown Foundation, Jacob Ware argued that the R9X ninja missile marked “a powerful step forward for the U.S. counter-terrorism arsenal, breaching a new frontier in targeting and precision. But until a braver, bolder and more transformative strategic shift is pursued, victory in the so-called War on Terror will remain elusive.”<sup>9</sup>

## Organisation

According to three NATO officials, the operation to kill al-Zawahiri with a drone strike was partially the work of a secret U.S. military unit whose actual name is a state secret. A senior NATO military official who works closely with the U.S. on counter-terrorism said, “It was a huge operation led by the CIA as is typically the case for something like this and everyone plays a specific role. But at the tip of the operation are the people who have to get actual eyes on the target, and that’s where Task Force Orange comes

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8 How does use of ‘ninja missile’ change counterterrorism? [militarytimes.com](https://www.militarytimes.com) , August 10, 2022.

9 Jacob Ware, The Ninja Missile: A Breakthrough in U.S. Counter-Terrorism Weaponry?, *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 19 Issue: 8, April 23, 2021 available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ninja-missile-a-breakthrough-in-u-s-counter-terrorism-weaponry/>

in.”<sup>10</sup> Initially called the Intelligence Support Activity, this organisation was founded in 1980. The unit works within the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and is responsible for collecting real-time intelligence to prepare for specifically planned operations. Currently, within JSOC, the unit is known as Task Force Orange.

The NATO official stated, “The CIA can tell you a lot about a country and the personalities of its government and opposition, but they’re not designed to figure out things like is there a specific person in that specific house, which way do the doors open, how high are the fences. That’s what Orange does to prepare for an operation, whether it’s a drone strike like with Zawahiri or sending in a team of shooters as with Osama bin Laden or Baghdadi. They collect the specific details and they do it in person from close up.”<sup>11</sup> He added, “If it was betrayal, the operation would still need to be done the normal way, which is in April when the family moved, operators from Orange and CIA would have established a presence in the neighbourhood to be able to continually monitor the building and establish what they call a pattern of life.”

The death of al-Zawahiri would bring in to focus the present status of Al Qaeda, its future, who will be the next Emir etc. In the next chapter important issues concerning Al Qaeda will be discussed.

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10 Mitchell Prothero, ‘It’s Jason Bourne Shit’: How the US Killed the Leader of Al Qaeda, *The Vice*, 02 August 2022 available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgyy47/ayman-al-zawahri-al-qaeda-leader-killed>

11 Mitchell Prothero, ‘It’s Jason Bourne Shit’: How the US Killed the Leader of Al Qaeda, *Vice Media Group*, August 02, 2022 available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgyy47/ayman-al-zawahri-al-qaeda-leader-killed>

## Part - IV

# Al Qaeda - Present Status and Future

Of late, Zawahiri was not involved in the daily tactical planning of AQ. His death will not mean the death of AQ in Afghanistan, and Al Qaeda will not stop existing and operating. It is a well-oiled machine that can work despite the head being cut off. However, his death will have a negative strategic and demoralising impact on AQ. Zawahiri's death poses an immediate, short-term challenge for AQ. There are issues of succession. From an operational perspective, the end of al-Zawahiri is unlikely to change much in the short term. Long-term effects will be on AQ's ability to attract people to the cause and their ability to get funds to distribute to other groups. There will be challenges in resolving a host of internal tensions and contradictions.

For more than 25 years, the top leadership of Al Qaeda have been based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) region. The relationships and the interactivity between the central Al Qaeda component led by Osama bin Laden and later al-Zawahiri and regional organisations such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab have evolved. Counter-terrorism pressure, local priorities, internal group dynamics, and the rise and fall of power and

capabilities of the regionally aligned Al Qaeda components have influenced how those regional partners have networked with Al Qaeda's leadership in AFPAK. These dynamics, together with competition from the Islamic State and genuine constraints imposed by U.S. counter-terrorism actions on bin-Laden's and al-Zawahiri's ability to communicate, provide timely guidance and lead have strategically degraded the power and strength of Al Qaeda as a global enterprise.



Over the past two decades, Al Qaeda has become an overwhelmingly decentralised organisation. It is more of a networked organisation than a hierarchical, vertical one where the central leadership would dictate local groups' agenda, strategies and main goals. Most of the sub-organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda are, in essence, independent now. Core Al Qaeda remains in Afghanistan and Pakistan but is not operationally active. The Al Qaeda's fighting strength in Afghanistan is sometimes underestimated. Many are dual hatted as members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Moreover, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Hizbul Mujahedin, Harakat-ul-Mujahedin, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Jamaat Ansarullah have strong Al Qaeda links. In the past, these groups have fought together, shared personnel when needed and can increase the strength of Al Qaeda quickly on as required basis. To these several thousand terrorist foot soldiers in the Al Qaeda assemblage, there are also approximately 4,000 Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have global ambitions. The other groups in Afghanistan have regional jihadi goals. The Uighur-based East Turkestan Islamic Movement targets Chinese rule in Xinjiang; Hizbul Mujahedin, Harakat-ul-Mujahedin, Jaish-e- Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba serve as Pakistani government proxies in their proxy war against India, especially in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its splinter group Katibat Imam Bukhari are Uzbek jihadi groups; and Jamaat Ansarullah is an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Tajik off-shoot dedicated to overthrowing the government in Tajikistan.

## **U.S. View**

Three successive U.S. administrations have told the American people that Al Qaeda in Afghanistan has been on the path to defeat, decimated or degraded. Bryce Loidolt, in his review of captured and declassified Al Qaeda correspondence, found the U.S. drone campaign “eroded the quality of Al Qaeda’s personnel base, forced the group to reduce communications and other activities, and compelled the group members to flee its safe haven in Pakistan’s tribal regions,” with some going to Iran and others scattering to various war zones. As per the former director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, Al Qaeda is in crisis. Al Qaeda still wants to instigate violence against the West, but the threat of a spectacular terrorist attack has diminished. Today Al Qaeda is not very popular among Muslims, who show little support for its extremist ideas. No Muslim-majority state except Taliban rule in Afghanistan has become the theocracy Al Qaeda envisions. Egypt has a military dictator, and Saudi Arabia is trying to moderate its religious zealotry.

Syria, Libya and Yemen have collapsed into civil wars, but jihadis are not winning. Their efforts merely add to the killing and misery of ordinary people. The presence of the U.S. troop globally and in the Middle East is significant. Since 9/11, the U.S. has a presence in new bases such as Iraq

and Syria. It has smaller but technically powerful detachments fighting jihadis in other Arab countries, Asia and Africa. Al Qaeda has failed to drive the U.S. from Muslim-populated lands.<sup>1</sup>

In a newly declassified summary which was provided to the New York Times, American intelligence agencies have concluded that Al Qaeda has not increased its presence in Afghanistan since the U.S. withdrawal. Only a few long-time Qaeda members continue to remain in the country. Al Qaeda does not have the ability to launch attacks from Afghanistan against the U.S.

### **Contra View**

Some counter-terrorist experts feel that intelligence agencies' judgments represent an optimistic view of a complex and fast-moving terrorist landscape. Zawahiri was not the only Al Qaeda leader in Kabul. Without his staff and support network, he would not have been hiding in the capital city alone.

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, referring to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said, "Their numbers of active, hard-core Al Qaeda in AfPak make no sense. At least three dozen senior Qaeda commanders were freed from Afghan jails a year ago. I very much doubt they have turned to farming or accounting as their post-prison vocations." He stated that Qaeda operatives or their affiliates had been given important administrative responsibilities in at least eight Afghan provinces. He suggested the timing of the government assessment was "to deflect attention from the disastrous consequences of last year's shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan."

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1 Eric Schmitt, U.S. Says Al Qaeda Has Not Regrouped in Afghanistan, The New York Times, August 13, 2022.

Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and editor of FDD's Long War Journal asks the following questions:-

- Does the U.S. have the capability and the will to execute a sustained campaign against Al Qaeda's command?
- Will President Biden order strikes against Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan?
- Will he approve the targeting of Al Qaeda associates in Kabul and beyond? This would force the U.S. administration to admit they were wrong about the tight linkages between the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

It is impossible to address the threat emanating from Afghanistan until U.S. political, intelligence and military leaders admit these past mistakes. They must acknowledge that the Taliban is just as big a part of the problem as Al Qaeda. The Taliban assured the Americans that it would not harbour Al Qaeda. It was used as political ammunition by successive U.S. administrations to justify washing their hands of the whole mess. The Taliban lied. Al Qaeda has been operating in Afghanistan from the outset. While each administration negotiated with the Taliban, top Al Qaeda leaders were sheltered. While the U.S. military killed terrorists in operations over the years, Al Qaeda was bold enough to run training camps with the support and approval of the Taliban.

### **Al Qaeda in Afghanistan**

There are plenty of examples to show Al Qaeda's existence in Afghanistan. In 2015, U.S. and Afghan forces, supported by American Air Force, attacked an Al Qaeda training camp in the southern part of the country. The camp was one of the largest ever discovered, and the area of one such camp was over 30 square miles. Hundreds of Al Qaeda fighters were killed



or injured in this operation. After the Doha agreement was signed between U.S. and Taliban officials in 2020, Afghan government forces killed a senior Al Qaeda leader who was under the protection of the Taliban in South Eastern Afghanistan. The raid clearly indicated that the Taliban had not severed its ties with AQ, notwithstanding the commitments made in the Doha talks.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Islamabad, in the eight months after the Afghanistan government collapsed, cross-border attacks launched by the Pakistani Taliban from Afghanistan more than doubled. United Nations warned that the Taliban provided “operating space for about 20 terrorist groups broadly aligned with Al Qaeda and Taliban objectives.”

## **Future Moves of Al Qaeda**

Over the past two decades, Al Qaeda has decentralised and steadily delegated responsibility for operational planning to its affiliates. Today there are a number of Al Qaeda affiliates in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere that perform attacks independently from Al Qaeda’s senior leadership. Africa Command of the U.S. Department of Defense has assessed Al Shabaab to be “the largest, wealthiest and most lethal Al Qaeda affiliate in the world.” Al Shabaab provides funds to Al Qaeda senior leadership and has demonstrated intent and capability to conspire plots against the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Christina Goldbaum and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, For the Taliban, a New Era of Isolation Has Arrived, New York Times, Aug. 2, 2022 available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/02/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban.html?name=stylin-qaeda-leader-killed&region=TOP\\_BANNER&block=storylin%E2%80%A6](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/02/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban.html?name=stylin-qaeda-leader-killed&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storylin%E2%80%A6)

3 Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S%202022%20547.pdf>

Once a new Al Qaeda emir is selected, regional affiliates, in all likelihood, will make an allegiance oath to the new leader, much as affiliates did to Zawahiri following the death of Osama bin Laden. As the leader of a global movement, Zawahiri's successor will indisputably influence the organisation's future.<sup>4</sup> It is not very clear what exactly will happen to Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda offers a lot of jihadist acceptability for its regional affiliates to rally. But Al Qaeda has to grapple with the troublesome relationship with Iran, the distrust and lack of alignment with the Taliban and the absence of a common strategy among the central leadership and the affiliates. For Al Qaeda, running a global organisation of ideologically committed militants has always been difficult. It is going to be much harder.<sup>5</sup>

## **Al Qaeda and Islamic State**

Since 2013, there has been a substantial amount of hostility, competition and open violence between members and supporters of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. The two groups and their broader networks embrace different schools of thought about process, methods, priorities and constraints. al-Zawahiri represented a constrained old school style, which was popular among jihadis for a long time. The Islamic State embraces bolder methods and violence that is less restrained. IS prioritises holding and governing physical territory; al-Zawahiri was at the center of the disagreement between the two networks, and the Islamic State hated him.

Given the death of al-Zawahiri and the recent death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before him, both

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4 Tricia Bacon, Elizabeth Grimm, What Leadership Type will Succeed Al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri? The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, July 15, 2022 available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/what-leadership-type-will-succeed-al-qaedas-al-zawahiri/>

5 Cole Bunzel. Al Qaeda's Next Move, Foreign Affairs, August 3, 2022 available at: [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/al-qaedas-next-move?utm\\_source=pocket\\_mylist](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/al-qaedas-next-move?utm_source=pocket_mylist)

groups are navigating important organizational inflection points. There is a possibility that the global jihadi movement's two primary camps, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State may soften their antagonism toward each other and find pockets of common ground. Though full reconciliation is not likely, there could be a shift in how the two groups interact for softer or less public forms of cooperation.

## **WHO Will Be Next Emir?**

Death of al-Zawahiri is a critical and monumental inflection point for Al Qaeda as a group and movement. The greatest challenge to Al Qaeda is the succession. The new Emir will have to be capable of rapprochement between Al Qaeda and Taliban and ISIS on the other side. He will have a significant role in the jihadi culture of Al Qaeda. There is no well-known leader to take Zawahiri's place.

Who will be the next Emir? The recent UN report gave insight on Al Qaeda's line of succession. As per the report, the long time Al Qaeda leader and veteran, Saif al-Adel is second behind Zawahiri. Next in line are a top Al Qaeda leader, Abdal-Rahman al-Maghrebi, the emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Yazid Mebrak and the leader of Shabaab, Ahmed Diriye, which is Al Qaeda's branch in East Africa.

## **Saif al-Adel**

A young Egyptian national and veteran Al Qaeda operative, Saif al-Adel is the most likely contender to be Al Qaeda emir. Adel has a chequered record of Al Qaeda leadership. He managed Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan during the late 1980s and early 1990s. He trained people like 1993 World Trade Center bombers. After that, Adel fled to Sudan, where he gave training on the use of explosives. Following Al Qaeda's expulsion from Sudan, he was involved in military training activities in Afghanistan. He took refuge in Iran following the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

The UN Security Council, in 2021, assessed that Adel remained in Iran but would have to move out should he become emir of Al Qaeda. Al Adel has a \$10 million U.S. bounty on his head, which increased from \$5 million in 2018. It suggests that Al Adel is still active and that he remains a key senior Al Qaeda player.

Adel is a respected and well-connected legacy Al Qaeda figure with considerable operational experience and expertise. Adel offers continuity and three decades' worth of institutional memory, an important attribute that could help Al Qaeda navigate the position that it finds itself in. Today Al Qaeda has reduced operational capabilities and is not as attractive to potential recruits as it has been in the past. As part of Al Qaeda's old guard, Adel could also serve as a bridge between the older and newer guard of Al Qaeda, and help Al Qaeda start a new chapter.

The question is: Would he have to leave Iran? Would he move to Afghanistan? Or would he move somewhere else? If he wants to leave Iran, would he be allowed to leave Iran because, there is some element there of control over him and Iran may not want to allow him to go and take over Al Qaeda elsewhere and then start making trouble for Iran. There are a lot of unanswered questions about how this would work. If al-Adel is appointed as the next leader of Al Qaeda and remain in Iran, how would he securely and privately communicate with other Al Qaeda leaders? There is the risk that communications to and from al-Adel would be compromised and the Iranians would be able to monitor them. For Al Qaeda, the optics of Al Qaeda's leader being based in Iran and seen as under the thumb of Tehran are disastrous.

It is also not clear whether al Adel would want to leave his family who joined him in Iran or Al Qaeda would be able to secure protections for Adel's family, assuming they are still in Iran. Otherwise, Iran could continue to 'hold' them as a form of leverage over him. It also is not clear if such a

deal would be in Iran's strategic interest.<sup>6</sup> If al-Adel remains in Iran, it is doubtful that Al Qaeda will select him to replace al-Zawahiri, as logistics and sharia constraints make such a move very problematic. According to al-Zawahiri, it is prohibited to have an emir of a group living in custody as a prisoner or under house arrest where that person cannot exercise his own free will or make their own decisions.

## **Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi**

A Moroccan national and son-in-law of Zawahiri, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi is another strong contender to become emir of Al Qaeda. He is the head of Al Qaeda's propaganda arm, al-Sahab. He is also based in Iran. The U.S. State Department described him as a "rising star in AQ for many years." Osama bin Laden had asked the senior Libyan Al Qaeda operative Atiyah Abd al-Rahman to suggest names of potential candidates to succeed him.<sup>7</sup> Atiyah wrote to bin Laden, "our brother 'Abdul-Rahman al-Maghribi has a very good mentality, a solid religion, high morals, and is secretive and patient. He has the right thinking and excellent awareness. He is fit for leadership, by God's permission,"

Both Saif al-Adel and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi are living in Iran under semi-house arrest. Their presence in Iran complicates their potential ascent to the throne. Over the past years, at least three Al Qaeda affiliate groups have questioned the reliability of instructions coming from Sayf al-Adl, given his location in Iran. Iran is an enemy of Al Qaeda. They revile Iranian

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6 For background on the dynamics of al-Qa`ida and Iran's relationship, see Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida's Tactical Cooperation," CTC Sentinel 10:4 (2017) and Nelly Lahoud, "Al-Qa`ida's Contested Relationship with Iran: The View from Abbottabad," New America Foundation, September 2018.

7 "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," dated 17 Shawwal 1431 (26 September 2010), Bin Laden's Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Shiites and make the Iranian Shias responsible for massacring Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It would be difficult for Al Qaeda to accept a leader running the show from virtual house arrest in Iran, suspecting that the Al Qaeda was under Iran's thumb.

### **Emir from outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan Area**

Some analysts have suggested that the leaders of regional Al Qaeda-allied groups based outside Afghanistan-Pakistan may be another cohort of potential leadership candidates to replace al-Zawahiri. This includes Khalid Batarfi (AQAP), Ahmad Diriye (al-Shabaab), Abu 'Ubaydah al-Anabi (AQIM), Iyad Ag Ghaly (JNIM), Usama Mahmoud (AQIS) and Abu Hmam al-Suri (Hurras al-Din). After the two Iran-based leaders, the UN report names Yazid Mebrak in North Africa and Ahmed Diriye in Somalia as next in line of succession. Picking a leader from one of the African affiliates would be an unprecedented move of global leadership Al Qaeda to a different area. Considering the prominence Syria has gotten in the global jihad, there could be pressure on Al Qaeda to name someone like Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri as the new overall head of Al Qaeda. Masri is currently a senior leader of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Hurras al-Din. He is widely respected among younger generations of Al Qaeda jihadis.

The U.N. report has not named any AQAP members, including current leader Khalid Batarfi, as possible replacements for Zawahiri. While selecting an Al Qaeda emir from their traditional Afghanistan-Pakistan territory is likely, it shows the increasing importance these African affiliates play in the future of the jihadist movement.<sup>8</sup> Al Qaeda could also name a younger, relatively unknown militant as its next leader to trigger interest among younger generations of potential jihadis as they were not very enthusiastic about Zawahiri and his obsession with the historical intricacies of Islamic

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8 Bill Roggio, [longwarjournal.org](http://longwarjournal.org), August 2, 2022.

theology.<sup>9</sup> Senior members of Al Qaeda's Hittin Committee coordinate and governs the global leadership. Ultimately, they will play a substantial role in managing the leadership transition.<sup>10</sup>

In case there is a long delay between Zawahiri's death and the naming of his successor, it could lead groups in sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere to seek greater autonomy, especially because these organisations are typically focused on local and parochial grievances rather than the more international and U.S.-focused mission of Zawahiri's Al Qaeda. A splintering or permanent break between core Al Qaeda and any of its affiliates would be disastrous and lead to a cascading effect where other franchise groups followed suit.

The next leader of Al Qaeda will face the difficult challenge of streamlining command and control, improving morale and recruiting new members that might have otherwise been attracted to join the Islamic State. Suppose the next emir can achieve this, along with a return to its safe haven in Afghanistan. In that case, there is a high possibility that it will also be able to rebuild its external attack capabilities.

## **Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)**

On September 3, 2014, the late emir of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of AQIS. It was not a major surprise. For years the AfPak region had been the hub of Al Qaeda's senior leadership. There was pressure from the Islamic State's caliphate declaration and infighting among jihadis. Al Qaeda needed to announce a formal presence in the

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

10 Jake Harrington, *Zawahiri's Death and What's Next for al Qaeda*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), August 4, 2022 available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/zawahiris-death-and-whats-next-al-qaeda>

South Asia region. In his founding statement, al-Zawahiri revealed that AQIS would fight for Muslims in Burma, Bangladesh, Assam, Gujarat, Ahmedabad and Kashmir. What is striking is the omission of Afghanistan in these early statements. AQIS has consistently attempted to downplay its existence in Afghanistan.

Although AQIS was founded eight years ago, it remains the latest formal affiliate of the global Al Qaeda network. It is also the least understood of all Al Qaeda's affiliates in terms of its structure and geographical scope, local embeddedness, and overlap with central Al Qaeda. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, it is essential to take a closer look at the status of AQIS and how the situation in Afghanistan may affect its activities throughout South Asia. In all likelihood, both Al Qaeda and AQIS will benefit from the Taliban takeover.

The leadership of AQIS comes from Al Qaeda's core group. Before becoming AQIS emir, Asim Umar was head of Al Qaeda's sharia committee in Pakistan, while his deputy, Ahmad Farooq, was responsible for Al Qaeda's preaching and media efforts in Pakistan. As per the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi threat, the central leadership of both Al Qaeda and AQIS are in the AfPak border area and work closely.

AQIS has not been able to claim any significant successful operation in its eight years of existence. Its focus has been on uniting disparate militant groups, establishing an effective media apparatus to send targeted ideological messages to recruit and mobilise followers.

While announcing the formal establishment of AQIS, Usama Mahmoud stated that AQIS has the following goals:-<sup>11</sup>

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11 Usama Mahmoud, "The Special Production on the Occasion of Unity Among the Ranks of the Mujahideen and Creating 'Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent,'" As-Sahab Media Foundation, September 3, 2014.



- Waging jihad against the U.S. and destroying the purported global system of disbelief opposing tawhid (monotheism).
- Implementation of sharia and reviving the Muslim societies.
- Liberate Muslim lands in the Indian subcontinent.
- Wage jihad to re-establish a caliphate on the prophetic methodology.
- Support the Taliban.
- Create a just Muslim society.

In an exclusive interview with AQIS’s media organisation in 2017, spokesperson Usama Mahmoud explained: “This movement on the one hand aims to reform Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, and the whole of Subcontinent, into an Islamic Subcontinent. On the other hand, this movement is also a part of the global jihadi movement, i.e., it is part of the same jihadi movement that is fighting against the alliance of Crusaders, Zionists, Mulhids (Anti-Islam activists who claim to be Muslims), polytheists, and secularists.”<sup>12</sup>



*Ahmad Farooq, the founding deputy emir of AQIS (left), and AQIS founding emir, Asim Umar (right), as shown in an As-Sahab AQIS video released in October 2021*

12 Usama Mahmoud, “What do we want to achieve? Jihadi movement in the Subcontinent - Reality & Facts 1,” As-Sahab Subcontinent Media, November 24, 2017.

Ahmad Farooq, the founding deputy emir of AQIS (left), and AQIS' founding emir, Asim Umar (right), as shown in an *As-Sahab* AQIS video released in October 2021. Source: CTC SENTINEL, August 2022, Page 41.

After the release of the AQIS code of conduct, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), a new Kashmir-based group, led by Zakir Musa, was formally announced on July 26, 2017. An official statement confirmed that AGH represents Al Qaeda in Kashmir and works under the auspices of AQIS.<sup>13</sup> AQIS and AGH have tried to spread their activities to many parts of India. In 2019, AQIS spokesperson-turned-emir Usama Mahmoud said that it does “not consider the battle front against India to be limited to Kashmir, wherever you find the Indian army and the polytheist rulers of India, within India and without, strike them.”

AQIS has developed an elaborate media structure. The main media outlet is the sub-continent unit of *As-Sahab* Media Foundation, which published its *Resurgence* magazine, official videos, and leadership speeches. Its main magazine is the Urdu-language *Nawa-i Ghazwatul Hind*, which has continued since 2008. In Kashmir, *Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind* is responsible for front groups of Al Qaeda. In March 2020, AQIS issued a 135-page special issue of its Urdu-language magazine, *Nawa-i Afghan Jihad* (*Voice of the Afghan Jihad*), calling the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban deal a “magnificent victory” for the Taliban and for jihad.

AQIS is aiming to augment its focus on Kashmir and India. In March 2020, AQIS changed the name of magazine *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* (*Voice of the Afghan Jihad*) to *Nawa-i Ghazwatul Hind* (*Voice of the Battle for India*). This indicated a new direction for its focus with Kashmir as

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13 Usama Mahmoud, Zakir Musa - A Commitment and a Movement,” *As-Sahab Subcontinent Media*, June 6, 2019.

its intended future jihad epicentre.<sup>14</sup> To continue its propaganda efforts, Al Qaeda supporters have operated a Rocket.Chat channel named the “Islamic Translation Center” mainly translates official Al Qaeda material into Bengali, Gujarati, Burmese and Rohingya, in addition to Pashto and Urdu languages.

However, AQIS has not been able to establish a foothold in India. Few Indians joined the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s unlike many other countries in the region,. India did not face a large number of returning foreign fighters. Only around 100 Indians allegedly travelled to Syria and Iraq in the last decade to fight.<sup>15</sup>

There is no room for complacency for Indian security agencies. In 2020, a series of arrests highlighted that the Islamic State and AQIS have become active in India. Some of the examples are:-

- In September 2020, nine Al Qaeda operatives planning an attack in New Delhi were arrested under instructions from Al Qaeda officials in Pakistan<sup>16</sup>.
- On July 11, 2021, two operatives affiliated with AGH and operating under instructions from Pakistan were arrested for their plans to bomb markets in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.<sup>17</sup>
- In 2021, India’s National Investigation Agency arrested 11 individuals involved in disseminating Al Qaeda propaganda to

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14 Animesh Roul, “Al-Qaeda’s South Asian Branch Gravitating Toward Kashmir,” *Terrorism Monitor*, April 17, 2020.

15 Hari Prasad, “Still No Storm in the Ocean: New Jihadist Narratives on Indian Islam,” *Hudson Institute*, April 1, 2021.

16 “India arrests nine al Qaeda militants planning ‘terrorist attacks,’” *Reuters*, September 19, 2020.

17 “India claims arrest of two al-Qaeda-linked terrorists,” *UCA News*, July 12, 2021.

radicalise Indians and mobilise for jihad. Those arrested were in contact with handlers in Pakistan and Bangladesh who had instructed them to finally launch attacks in the states of West Bengal and Kerala.<sup>18</sup>

In April and May 2022, two videos were released featuring al-Zawahiri speaking on India and Kashmir. In the first video, entitled “The Noble Woman of India,” al-Zawahiri praised the actions of a young Indian woman who objected to protests against the hijab. In the second longer documentary-style video, al-Zawahiri situated the Kashmiri conflict in the context of the global jihadi movement.<sup>19</sup>

It is possible that for AQIS, the problem in India has not so much been finding dedicated supporters but failing so far to establish a proper organisational structure in India after the arrests in 2015.

## **The AQIS Threat Post-Taliban Takeover**

Due to its close affiliation and cooperation with the Taliban, AQIS will benefit from the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. United Nations has noted that AQIS was “involved in fighting alongside the Taliban, including during the rapid takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.”<sup>20</sup> As per the recent UN report, the majority of AQIS fighters are still located in Afghanistan, specifically in the Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika, and Zabul provinces, with four operational commanders, reportedly responsible

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18 Al Qaeda handlers used social media for recruitment in India: NIA,” Federal, February 27, 2021.

19 Al-Qaeda, “Kashmir and Palestine: A Recurring Tragedy,” As-Sahab Subcontinent, May 2, 2022.

20 “Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team 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,” United Nations Security Council, May 26, 2022.

for these six provinces: Salahuddin (Bakwa), Azzam (alias Hussain), Qari Tufail (alias Fateh), and Ahsan Bilal Waqar (alias Akari). The report stated, “Al Qaeda enjoys greater freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban rule but confines itself to advising and supporting the de facto authorities. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is reported to have 180 to 400 fighters, primarily from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan. AQIS fighters are represented at the individual level among Taliban combat units. AQIS is maintaining a low profile in Afghanistan. AQIS elements remain difficult to distinguish from the Taliban forces in which they are embedded.” This explains why there is little open-source information about recent AQIS activities in Afghanistan.

According to the U.N. report, “AQIS capabilities are assessed as still weakened from losses as a result of the October 2015 joint United States-Afghan raid in Kandahar’s Shorabak district. Financial constraints have also forced AQIS to adopt a less aggressive posture. As with Al Qaeda core, new circumstances in Afghanistan may allow the group to reorganize itself.”

The strike to kill al-Zawahiri has raised some serious questions about the Taliban’s assurance of not allowing Al Qaeda, its future courses of action, its relations with the Haqqani network, TTP, Pakistan, Al Qaeda and its relations with neighbouring countries. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Part - V

# Taliban

After 43 years of almost continuous war, in August 2021, the Taliban's military took over Afghanistan. It has been a dramatic shift in the security situation. Under the Taliban rule, Afghanistan is significantly more peaceful than a year ago, with some pockets of violence that threaten greater insecurity if not effectively managed. As per UN estimates, in the early months of 2022, fighting diminished to only 18 per cent of previous levels.

For the last twenty years, Taliban was under intense pressure from the U.S, NATO and Afghan Government forces. From September 2021 onwards, all these pressures have gone. Taliban controls Afghanistan far more thoroughly than it did in 2001. When the 9/11 attack happened in 2001, there was substantial opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan in terms of the Northern Alliance, Masoud Forces, Dostum Forces etc. Now, these forces are on the run. The Taliban today are fighting two insurgencies: one led by the Islamic State and the other comprising the National Resistance Front (NRF) and other groups aligned with the former government. Taliban is more firmly entrenched than ever before and Al Qaeda will be given more opportunities with better, sophisticated

and unifying leadership.

In its first year in power, the Taliban consolidated its control over the country. However, the Taliban leaders cannot reach a consensus on key governance issues. From girls' education to hosting Al Qaeda in Kabul, the Taliban leadership remains bogged down by contradictions. Taliban officials had assured the international community and the Afghan public that the ban on girls attending secondary school would be lifted by late March, 2022. Just days before the schools were scheduled to resume, the Taliban's reclusive emir, Sheikh Hibatullah Akhundzada overruled his cabinet at a gathering of Taliban leadership in Kandahar. He exercised his authority and extended the ban indefinitely. Western donors had drawn a red line on the resumption of girls' education with the purse string that the Taliban government so desperately needs. But the emir Hibatullah reigns supreme.

As per the 2020 Doha Agreement terms, the Taliban guaranteed not to let Afghanistan become a haven for international terrorists, especially Al Qaeda. Despite this, Al Qaeda chief al-Zawahiri lived in a safe house owned by a top aide to senior Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul and not in rural Afghanistan. This was undisputable evidence that Al Qaeda was operating in Afghanistan with the Taliban's express permission, support and protection. U.S. intelligence officials are sure that the Haqqani network was aware of his presence there. However, they also are confident that other senior Taliban officials did not know. Some eyebrows must have been raised within the Taliban leadership.

Some counter-terrorism experts argue that with the Taliban's experience as insurgents, the group would be able to suppress conflicts in the country and enforce a harsh form of justice to weaken its adversaries. On the contrary, Islamic State Khorasan, or ISK, has waged a persistent and deadly insurgency, launching devastating attacks throughout the country with relative impunity. The Taliban have experience as insurgents but

not as counter-insurgents. Counter-insurgency requires protecting the population while eliminating terror and insurgent threats. Taliban does not have the command-and-control and discipline to fight to avoid civilian casualties. There are many foreign fighters in Afghanistan from the Middle East, Central Asia and Pakistan. The Taliban is not exactly enthusiastic about stopping the flow of foreign fighters. This could alienate jihadi sponsors from the Middle East and Pakistan who support the Taliban.

Some experts believe that the strike on Zawahiri could allow the Taliban to make a clean break from Al Qaeda. Taliban is still under international sanctions despite being active internationally. The Taliban government of Afghanistan remains unrecognised by any other country. There are divisions and alignments within the Taliban. Different powerful groups are: Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada and the sheikhs around him in Kandahar, Sirajuddin Haqqani, more internationally-oriented Mullah Baradar and acting Minister of Defence Mullah Yaqub. Impervious to input from others within the Taliban and the outside, Haibatullah has been able to rule with an iron fist. He wants to establish a vision of sharia that goes back centuries ago.

Taliban's policy can change if the power distribution within the Taliban shifts and Haibatullah loses power. This can happen due to an internal power reshuffle or Haibatullah's death. Sirajuddin Haqqani, Mullah Baradar and Mullah Yaqub are some of the most likely successors. They are expected to be far more pragmatic and responsive on social issues than Haibatullah. Sirajuddin Haqqani has lost credibility, especially after the strike, with the international community as a responsible interlocutor on counter-terrorism issues. The Taliban has to pay the price to avoid extensive international isolation by quietly providing counter-terrorism intelligence. There is a likelihood that the Taliban regime could implode and fragment into factions fighting each other in a civil war.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Zeal, Dogma, and Folly: How the Taliban Bungled*



## Taliban and the U.S.

The strike against al-Zawahiri suggests that Afghanistan could become a safe haven for international terrorist groups. The Doha Agreement, signed in February 2020, assured the withdrawal of all NATO troops from Afghanistan, with the condition that the Taliban would not allow groups like Al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base for attacks on the West. The U.S. seems to have got little out of its 2020 bargain with the Taliban.

On July 6, 2022, the Taliban's supreme leader confirmed that it "will not allow anyone to use our territory to threaten the security of other countries." U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken has stated, "By hosting and sheltering the leader of Al Qaeda in Kabul, the Taliban grossly violated the Doha Agreement and repeated assurances to the world that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used by terrorists to threaten the security of other countries."<sup>2</sup> The crucial question is whether the Taliban will honour its promise not to allow terrorist attacks to be carried out from Afghanistan. The Taliban had refused to cut their ties with Al Qaeda. They conceded that they would not permit Al Qaeda or other groups to use Afghan territory to carry out attacks on the United States. The critical issue is whether the Taliban will provide specific, top secret and counter-terrorism intelligence to the U.S. about attacks on Western countries. The U.S. has to readjust its counter-terrorism strategy. Taliban leaders may allow Al Qaeda more room for freedom of movement and the ability to train, travel and rebuild its external operations capability.

According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Al Qaeda, at this point, cannot plan and execute terrorist attacks in the U.S. homeland. But

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Afghanistan, National Interest, August 15, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/zeal-dogma-and-folly-how-taliban-bungled-afghanistan-204209>

2 <https://www.state.gov/the-death-of-ayman-al-zawahiri/>

there are several concerning developments that should alarm U.S. and other Western officials. A failure to improve the U.S.'s counter-terrorism capabilities and posture will put the U.S. and its partners at a growing risk of a terrorist attack. U.S. intelligence agencies now assess that Al Qaeda and ISIS-K could develop external operations capabilities. The U.S. has always had a partner on the ground in every counter-terrorism campaign since 9/11. In Afghanistan Taliban is not an ally, it is an enemy. After the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, its intelligence capabilities have been reduced considerably.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said that the departure of U.S. military and intelligence assets from Afghanistan had made it much harder to track Al Qaeda and other extremist groups inside Afghanistan. He said, "We're probably at about 1 or 2 percent of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan. This makes it very hard, not impossible, to ensure that neither Al Qaeda nor the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate can pose a threat to the United States."<sup>3</sup> He said that the U.S. would rely on air strikes from drones and other aircrafts based beyond Afghanistan's borders to deal with extremist threats against the U.S. homeland. He added that America's ability to conduct such strikes is based on the availability of intelligence, overhead imagery and other information and communications.

It is difficult to know the feeling of the members of the Taliban regarding Al Qaeda. Twenty years of coalition forces' military actions against the Taliban hardened many Taliban supporters against Western nations. Many younger Taliban have been motivated to join global jihadism. They will feel the U.S. drone strike as a gross violation of the Taliban's sovereignty and an embarrassing example of their weakness.

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3 Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldorous, Commander: Al-Qaida numbers in Afghanistan up 'slightly', AP, December 10, 2021 available at: <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-united-states-taliban-islamic-state-group-bec82acfe6dbd19bed4c11db21d7a78e>

## Taliban and Al Qaeda

The reasons for hosting Al Qaeda by the Taliban can be many. The Taliban had not reformed from their first regime in the 1990s when their hard-line policies and relationship with Al Qaeda turned the country into a pariah state. The former Al Qaeda affiliate, now known as Islamic State or ISIS, has become the greatest rival of Al Qaeda. Taliban considers Al Qaeda an ally against the Islamic State Khorasan in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K). ISIS has become much larger, stronger and richer. The Taliban considers Al Qaeda, an organisation skilled in asymmetric tactics and capable of bringing the fight to ISK, as an additional layer of defence.

Between Al Qaeda and the Taliban, there are ideological differences. However, there is a long history of working together and a strong belief in each other. They have shared battlefield experiences. But the Taliban want to make sure that nothing should happen that will damage their interests. Within the Taliban, there are some differences as to what those interests are. The Haqqanis consider Al Qaeda an asset, but others in Taliban are not so sure. Now the Taliban is trying to get international recognition and develop increasingly practical relations with its neighbours, and they would not want some international terrorist attack to happen, which can be traced back to Afghanistan. But if the Taliban does not get recognition, alienates their potential partners, a fall-out with the neighbours, then the Taliban might well resort to thinking of the blackmail option. Before they took over Afghanistan and since then, the Taliban have consistently denied the presence of foreign terrorist fighters in their ranks and in areas they control. In regular counter-terrorism operations by coalition forces and Afghan government, significant Al Qaeda fighters co-located with the Taliban were killed. The Taliban maintained a completely indefensible falsehood.

Al Qaeda must have felt comfortable about the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Al Qaeda praised the Taliban rule

as a dramatic victory for the cause of global jihad. However, Al Qaeda's ties to the Taliban are complex. A recent report of the Pentagon states, "While Al Qaeda's leaders have longstanding relationships with senior Taliban leaders, the group maintains limited capabilities to travel and train within Afghanistan and is likely restricted due to the Taliban's efforts to achieve international legitimacy."<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) has assessed that "the Taliban will likely loosen these restrictions over the next 12 to 24 months, allowing Al Qaeda greater freedom of movement and the ability to train, travel, and potentially re-establish an external operations capability." General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr, commander of the United States Central Command, said that the Taliban was less firm in dealing with Al Qaeda than with ISIS-K. He said the Taliban has taken some public actions to signal that it controls Al Qaeda, which still maintains an aspirational desire to attack the United States. However, he said that the cultural interweaving of the two groups complicates the relationship and makes it difficult for the Taliban to control Al Qaeda's actions.<sup>5</sup>

On February 15, 2022, al-Zawahiri released a video where he said Afghanistan is a staging ground for Al Qaeda's ongoing global fight against the West. Al-Zawahiri had sworn a personal oath of loyalty to the Taliban's supremo, Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Al Qaeda network and its sympathisers think that they have a role in the success of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> In an editorial of the February 2022 edition of Al Qaeda's magazine, 'Ummah Wahida'h, the Taliban regime was praised as a functional alternative to democratic governments. According to

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4 USCENTCOM, response to DoD OIG request for information, 22.2 OES 18, 4/6/2022.

5 General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, "The Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command," 3/15/2022.

6 Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler and Joshua Fisher-Birch, "Afghanistan Terrorism Report: February 2022," Counter Extremism Project, 3/14/2022.

some experts, Al Qaeda maintains its conceptual framework where the Taliban serves as a government and Al Qaeda stands as the global terrorist vanguard. One of al-Zawahiri's final videos was a thinly veiled critique of the Taliban for trying to represent Afghanistan at the United Nations. Al-Zawahiri saw the United Nations as a representative of a global system of unbelief that needed to be destroyed, not joined.

There is an element of distrust in Al Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban. Documents recovered from the premise of Osama bin Laden in 2011 revealed that Laden was worried about the direction of the Taliban leadership. He found the Taliban divided between a camp of pious believers and a hypocritical faction doing the bidding of Pakistani intelligence, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and perhaps willing to sell Al Qaeda out. According to media reporting, Al Qaeda's reluctance to embarrass the Taliban by carrying out attacks may only be temporary as the Taliban has not publicly disowned its ties to the group. Al Qaeda continues to compete with ISIS and its affiliates for support worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

It is not clear how the Taliban is going to respond to the killing of al-Zawahiri. Do the Taliban take that as deterrence for providing shelter and help the activities of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, or do they consider it a provocation and a violation of their sovereignty? Because of the strike against Zawahiri in Kabul, it will be interesting to see whether the Taliban stop the ridiculous falsehood that Al Qaeda and foreign terrorist fighters are not present in Afghanistan and change to speak honestly to international interlocutors.

### **Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP)**

There is intractable difference between IS-KP and the Taliban. The dispute is based on debates between two movements within Islam - Salafism and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Deobandism. Because of this ideological reason, IS-KP's attempts to lure fighters away from the Taliban have met with little success so far. The trouble started in 2005 during the Iraq insurgency. Al-Zawahiri publicly reprimanded the violent activities of Al Qaeda in Iraq under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. This intensified in 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Zarqawi's successor, renamed Al Qaeda in Iraq the Islamic State. Under Baghdadi, the Islamic State intervened in the Syrian civil war to the dismay of the already existing Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria. This brought further censure from al-Zawahiri. Al Qaeda's Iraqi branch, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership, eventually split from Al Qaeda in 2013. Al-Baghdadi's group's spellbinding territorial victories in Iraq and expansion to Syria inspired many powerful figures to join this group, soon to be known as the Islamic State.



Map showing the rough position of the historic Khorasan region. Source: Laris Karklis/ The Washington Post available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/>

After the Islamic State's swift successes in June 2014 in western Iraq and eastern Syria, Baghdadi proclaimed this conquered territory a 'caliphate', claiming spiritual and temporal authority over all Muslims worldwide. In 2015, Zawahiri refused to endorse or subordinate his organisation to the self-proclaimed caliphate. In Afghanistan, the split between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State occurred in February 2014. It started when nine

Al Qaeda members defected to the Islamic State, soon joined by others from Al Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Taliban. In January 2015, this group, under the leadership of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan commander Hafiz Saeed Khan was formally named the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State—signifying their area of operations extended across Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan.

ISIL rose, held its territory, had the resources of a pseudo-state and caught the world's attention. It was militarily defeated by very sophisticated and effective counter-terrorism operations. Since they were defeated in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019, they had to design a model for surviving military defeat and they did. They conceived and laid out the foundations of the global network and how it would survive and what they call the virtual caliphate. The global network and leadership are very important. ISIL kept losing its leaders in very effective counter-terrorism operations by the U.S.

The creation of the Islamic State in Afghanistan exposed a seething dispute between Salafi and Deobandi schools of Islamic thought in the Taliban movement. Taliban leaders and scholars have adhered to Deobandism, a revivalist movement of the Hanafi school of Islam and traditional to Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. They suppressed Salafism, which comes from the Wahhabi revivalist movement of the Hanbali school of Islamist thought, which stresses a purer and stricter following of Islamic codes and traditions. This conflict is ironic when one considers the past influence of Wahhabism on Deobandism.<sup>8</sup>

The Islamic State in Afghanistan believes it has the right to rule the country as part of the caliphate. The Taliban, for its part, spent twenty

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8 Philip Wasielewski, *Afghanistan After Zawahiri: America's Counterterrorism Options in the New South Asia*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 23, 2022 available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/08/afghanistan-after-zawahiri/>

years struggling to gain power in Afghanistan and is not about to give it up without a fight. The goal of ISIS-K leaders is to use Afghanistan as a base for expanding its footprint in the region and creating a broader, pan-Islamic caliphate. The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K) remains the top terrorist threat in Afghanistan. ISIS-K's strategy in Afghanistan is based on instilling fear through raids and assassinations of Taliban officials and security forces, aggravating sectarian tensions and de-legitimising the present governance structure. ISIS-K's propaganda machinery highlights these events with pictures of dead Taliban officials. ISIS-K points to the Taliban's contacts with the Iranian government as evidence of the Taliban's ideological sacrilege. ISIS-K refers to Afghanistan's Hazara Shia community and criticises its religious festivals.<sup>9</sup>

ISIS-K projects the Taliban regime as a Pashtun ethno-nationalist organisation, exploiting tensions between ethnic groups that may feel marginalized by the Taliban. In February 2022, ISIS-K's propaganda campaign tried to use ethnic tensions in Afghanistan by focusing on the Taliban's relationship with China in light of China's violently repressive treatment of Uyghur Muslims. ISIS-K is trying to do the following:-

- Exploit anti-Taliban sentiment among marginalised populations to increase the group's recruitment.
- Leverage the prevalent poverty and shortfalls in governance in Afghanistan in its recruitment efforts by paying the potential recruits.
- Influence low-ranking Taliban members to leave the Taliban by presenting them as traitors and puppets.
- Emphasise the Taliban's meetings and visits with China, Pakistan,

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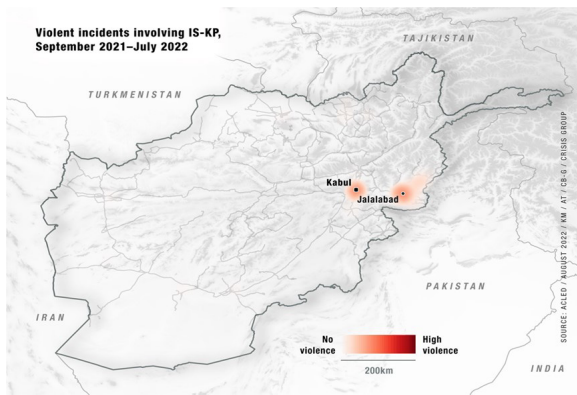
9 Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler and Joshua Fisher-Birch, Afghanistan Terrorism Report: February 2022, Counter Extremism Project, March 14, 2022.



Iran, Russia and Western powers as evidence of its lack of orthodoxy.

As IS-KP came under sustained military pressure by strikes from Afghan and international forces between 2019 and 2020, they responded by decentralising and building clandestine networks with a focus on urban warfare. This adjustment resulted in losses of territory to the Taliban. After the Taliban took over Afghanistan, IS-KP launched more attacks than ever. They were taking advantage of the security vacuum in some eastern districts and its change in tactics toward high-frequency, low-impact attacks. Deprived of rural strongholds, IS-KP reaffirmed itself in cities with a burst of hit-and-run and sniper attacks targeting the Taliban after their victory.

The Taliban has been fighting ISIS-K and has succeeded in destroying its



Geographic concentration of violent incidents involving IS-KP, 15 September 2021 – 15 July 2022. Source: Crisis Group

rural presence. Taliban forces reoccupied most of the installations previously manned by the former government, constructed new checkpoints and set up mobile roadblocks. It has not been able to eliminate the urban cells of ISIS-K.

The Islamic State Khorasan is waging a relentless insurgency, especially in parts of Eastern Afghanistan. While ISIS-K was weakened in Jalalabad, it remained a threat in its traditional stronghold of Nangarhar province. After strong Taliban operations, IS-KP attacks decreased in the first half of 2022.

On March 15, 2022, General McKenzie testified to the U.S. Congress that the Taliban was attempting to maintain pressure on ISIS-K but found it difficult to do so. ISIS-K executed several high-profile attacks since the Taliban takeover. General McKenzie said that the Taliban's indiscriminate release of prisoners from Bagram, Parwan and Pul-e-Charkhi prisons, in mid-August, in addition to the several thousand Taliban fighters, brought about 1,000 ISIS-K fighters onto the battlefield.<sup>10</sup> ISIS-K has approximately 2,000 members operating in Afghanistan. The group is led by Sanaullah Ghafari (alias Shahab al-Muhajir) and has conducted hundreds of attacks in Afghanistan since the departure of the U.S. from Afghanistan.

Assessments of different U.S. military and intelligence agencies on ISIS are given below:- <sup>11</sup>

- DoD assesses that the group retains a desire to attack the U.S. homeland, and without adequate pressure, that threat will only grow over time.
- USCENTCOM assessed that ISIS-K had increased its recruitment and attack capabilities since U.S. and coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan. It is expected to be able to establish external operations capabilities targeting the West, including the U.S. homeland, in the next 12 to 18 months.

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10 General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, "The Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command," March 15, 2022.

11 Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) quarterly report to the U.S. Congress on Operation Enduring Sentinel (OES) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS), January 1, 2022–March 31, 2022 available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jun/01/2003009517/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20FREEDOM'S%20SENTINEL%20AND%20OPERATION%20ENDURING%20SENTINEL%20-%20JANUARY%201,%202022-%20MARCH%2031,%202022-.PDF>

- The Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that ISIS-K attacks aim to destabilise Afghanistan and undermine Taliban rule.
- ISIS-K probably has about 2,000 members operating in Afghanistan. ISIS-K could direct attacks against the U.S. homeland within the next year if the group prioritises developing such a capability.
- ISIS -K is connected to fighters from countries across Central and South Asia.
- ISIS-K has been publishing in Central Asian languages to reach ethnic minorities in the region. It aims to inspire supporters from this region to move to Afghanistan or conduct attacks against Western personnel and interests.
- ISIS-K targets religious minorities such as Afghanistan's Shia Hazara community whom it views as renegades.

The U.S. Department of State has offered two cash rewards of \$10 million each for information on ISIS-K group's leader, Sanaullah Ghafari and another for any of the terrorists responsible for the August 26, 2022 bombing at Kabul International Airport. The Taliban, by February 2022, increased counter-terrorism operations targeting ISIS-K to deny ISIS-K the capability to target critical infrastructure. The Taliban can target some ISIS-K members but does not have the intelligence capability to disrupt their attack planning proactively. Since the Taliban seized power, IS-KP has found no support among the members of other jihadist groups in Afghanistan.

There are some complexities. When ISIL-K attacked certain types of targets like religious minorities or ethnic minority areas, some questions are raised about whether the Taliban perceived this attack as a problem. Do the Taliban truly commit themselves to try to stop that, or is there a

Machiavellian calculation by the Taliban that such attacks strengthen their hand in some way? The more the international community worries about ISIL-Khorasan, the more the international community will be tempted to work with the Taliban.

Is there any chance of compromise between the Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan which could help both Islamist parties to survive? Though in present circumstances it seems impossible, one can never say never again. With the death of al-Zawahiri, a new Al Qaeda leader with better leadership skills might emerge who can reconcile past differences between the Islamic State and Taliban to facilitate a reconciliation between the Al Qaeda and Taliban. This would reunify the jihadist movement and increase the chances of survival for their terrorist safe haven in Afghanistan. If the Taliban and Al Qaeda reconcile with the Islamic State, the world will face the greatest collection of Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It may look highly improbable now, but the possibility exists.

## **The Haqqani Network**

The movement known as the ‘Haqqani Network’ was born in Eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistani border decades ago. It is named after Jalaluddin Haqqani, father of Sirajuddin Haqqani. The elder Haqqani died in 2018. Jalaluddin Haqqani came into prominence in the 1980s as a prominent leader of the Mujahideen, the group that fought the Soviet military in Afghanistan. The Mujahideen received generous support in terms of funds, weapons, training and a safe sanctuary from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pakistan’s ISI. CIA officers who worked with Haqqani at the time praised him for his fundraising skills and tribal connections, and ability to “kill Russians like you wouldn’t believe.”

Historically, Haqqanis are grateful to Al Qaeda fighters who supported the late Jalaluddin Haqqani in the late 1990s when the group was consolidating its rule in Afghanistan. Haqqani forged a strong bond with fellow Mujahid

Osama bin Laden during this period. In the 1980s, Jalaluddin Haqqani was instrumental in recruiting Arab militants from the Persian Gulf to join the jihad in Afghanistan. First Afghan training camp of Al Qaeda was made in Haqqani territory in Pakistan. The former CIA asset, Jalaluddin Haqqani, refused to turn over Osama bin Laden, saying he couldn't give up Laden to "infidel invaders."

The Haqqanis took a prominent role in fighting the coalition forces after the Taliban was ousted in 2001. The Haqqani Network was involved in some of the bloodiest and most high-profile terrorist attacks on coalition forces and Afghan government targets. They introduced suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Haqqani Network was implicated in the single deadliest attack on the CIA in its history and multiple attacks on the U.S. and Indian embassies in Afghanistan and an international hotel in Kabul. In a paper published in 'War on the Rocks' in November 2021, in an independent assessment, virtually everyone from the U.S. government, the United Nations Security Council and independent researchers from Stanford University concluded that the Haqqani Network would maintain strong and growing links to Al Qaeda. It was doubtful they would cut ties.

The U.S. government formally designated the Haqqani Network as a terrorist organisation in 2012. Interestingly, the U.S. never did that with the Taliban. The Haqqanis drew their power from their connection with international terrorist organisations and their ties with Pakistan's intelligence services. Admiral Mike Mullen, the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2011, called the Haqqani Network a "veritable arm of Pakistan's ISI." Former Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., publicly claimed that the Haqqanis receive protection and medical care inside Pakistan.

Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Haqqanis share deep ties that have developed over decades. The Haqqani network is the primary Taliban liaison to Al Qaeda. According to a UN report, in February 2020, members of the Haqqani network met the Al Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri to discuss the

terms of the Doha Agreement with the U.S. In 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department stated that the Haqqanis and Al Qaeda were discussing forming of joint units of armed militants. In 2021, a U.N. report described the Haqqanis as the primary liaison between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. When the Taliban marched into Kabul in August 2021, it was evident that the Haqqani Network, which predated and later merged with the Taliban, had emerged as the greatest victor of the Afghan War.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-2000s, Sirajuddin assumed operational leadership of the Haqqani network from his ailing father. He published a manifesto advocating global jihad outside Afghanistan's borders. In August 2021, the Haqqani Network supposedly was overseeing the security of Kabul when a suicide bomber killed 13 U.S. military servicemembers and over 170 Afghan civilians at the Kabul airport during the rushed U.S. withdrawal.

The Haqqani Network has the sense and the pragmatism not to challenge the authority of the Taliban leadership or Hibatullah in Kandahar but to work with it and to continue to be useful and not create unnecessary standoffs because they might lose influence. Various Western counter-terrorism experts believe that most Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan remain under Haqqani's command. Sirajuddin Haqqani has visibility into their activities through Haqqani fighters embedded within Al Qaeda networks.

Three crucial questions remain unanswered:-

- Would the Haqqanis be willing to tolerate a terrorist attack from within Afghanistan?

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12 Jeff M. Smith, Good Riddance: The Elimination of al-Qaeda's Top Terrorist and the Troubling Questions It Raises, The Heritage Foundation, August 3, 2022 available at: <https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/commentary/good-riddance-the-elimination-al-qaedas-top-terrorist-and-the-troubling>

- Would the Taliban, including the Haqqanis, be able to prevent an Al Qaeda attack?
- Could Al Qaeda conduct a terrorist attack abroad without informing the Haqqanis or their learning about it?

## **Rise of the Son**

The collapse of the Afghan National Government saw the emergence of Sirajuddin Haqqani, as one of the most powerful officials in Kabul. In his late 40s or early 50s, Sirajuddin Haqqani is a more flamboyant figure than his father, who groomed him to lead the network. Sirajuddin Haqqani is seen to be very interested in his clothes and personal appearance. He has expanded the Haqqani Network's ties to international terrorist organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistan-based group that attacked Mumbai in 2008. After the death of Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2015, he was named as one of the two deputies to Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the movement's new head. He is wanted for questioning by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in connection with several crimes and a plot to assassinate former Afghan president Hamid Karzai. The U.S. has designated him a 'global terrorist' and placed a US\$10 million bounty on his head.<sup>13</sup>

A UN Report states: "the Haqqani Network's securing of key positions increases its capability to work with the foreign terrorist groups that are its traditional allies. Several Member States have expressed concern at the Haqqanis' control over the issuing of identity papers with Member States and expressed concerns that Afghan citizenship is being granted to foreign terrorist fighters."<sup>14</sup>

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13 Brahma Chellaney, *Afghanistan's abyss*, ASPI, August 16, 2022 available at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/afghanistans-abyss/>

14 "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other



*Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani reviews new Afghan police recruits standing in formation during a graduation ceremony at the police academy in Kabul on March 5, 2022. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images)*

The Haqqani Network played a vital role in the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Outmanoeuvring the traditional Afghan Taliban leadership, Sirajuddin assumed control over internal security in Afghanistan and appointed other Al Qaeda linked Haqqani Network leaders to senior posts in the new government.<sup>15</sup> Haqqani is now one of two deputy Taliban emirs and the Taliban's interior minister. Asfandyar Mir, the senior expert at the Asia Center at the U.S. Institute of Peace, said, "He is in charge of security, broadly considered, especially in Kabul. Kabul is controlled and managed by his people. The intelligence arm of the Taliban reports to him. And he also speaks to the international community."<sup>16</sup>

As the Taliban wanted to present a kinder, gentler image to the outside

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associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations, May 26, 2022.

15 <https://undocs.org/S/2022/419>

16 Joshua Keating, Who is Sirajuddin Haqqani? The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri puts the spotlight on a powerful Taliban warlord, Grid, August 5, 2022 available at: <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/08/05/who-is-sirajuddin-haqqani-the-killing-of-ayman-al-zawahiri-puts-the-spotlight-on-a-powerful-taliban-warlord/>



world, Sirajuddin Haqqani, its deputy leader, served as the Taliban's public face. Given his family name is synonymous with jihadi terrorism, he may not have been the most obvious choice for this role. Over the past year, Sirajuddin Haqqani, acting Minister of Interior, has tried to convince foreign diplomats of his stature as a reasonable, pragmatic interlocutor on many policy issues, including girls' education. Some of his statements speak for themselves:- <sup>17</sup>

- “I am convinced that the killing and the maiming must stop”, Haqqani's message for American readers.
- “Our land will not be used as a terrorist threat to anyone”, in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour in May 2022. “There is no one who opposes women's education in Afghanistan, and girls would be allowed back into secondary school once some logistical issues were worked out.”
- “As far as Al Qaeda is concerned, it has no presence in Afghanistan”, in an interview with an Indian TV network.

The Al Qaeda, Taliban and the Haqqani Network remain deeply intertwined in Afghanistan. The Taliban gave Al Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan before 9/11. After the U.S. invasion, they continue to protect and fight alongside Al Qaeda for two decades. In an intriguing development in late August 2022, the Taliban released a video showing Sirajuddin Haqqani and other top terrorist commanders plotting a large-scale suicide

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17 Joshua Keating, Who is Sirajuddin Haqqani? The Taliban warlord now in the spotlight The Grid, August 5, 2022 <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/08/05/who-is-sirajuddin-haqqani-the-killing-of-ayman-al-zawahiri-puts-the-spotlight-on-a-powerful-taliban-...>

assault against U.S. forces based in eastern Afghanistan in 2010.<sup>18</sup> The video showed top Haqqani leaders, including Sirajuddin and Badruddin Haqqani, Qari Zakir, Mullah Sangeen Zadran and Ghani Muhammad, sending off the suicide assault team that attacked Forward Operating Base Fenty at Jalalabad Airport in the Behsud district in Nangarhar. At that time Sirajuddin Haqqani was the operational commander of the Haqqani Network, his brother was Badruddin Haqqani, Qari Zakir was the Taliban's chief of suicide bombers, Mullah Sangeen Zadran was a dangerous Haqqani leader and Ghani Muhammad was an Al Qaeda-linked military commander based in Pakistan. The attack was foiled by a quick reaction force of U.S. and Afghan troops. Six attackers were killed and two suicide vests were recovered.

Mullah Sangeen Zadran was listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. According to the U.S. State department, Sangeen helped “lead fighters in attacks across Southeastern Afghanistan, and is believed to have planned and coordinated the movement of hundreds of foreign fighters into Afghanistan.” He served as the Taliban's military commander and then shadow governor of Paktika province in eastern Afghanistan. He was a senior aid to Sirajuddin before he was killed in a U.S. drone strike in the Ghulam Khan area of Pakistan's tribal agency of North Waziristan on Sept. 5, 2013. Sangeen openly admitted that the bond between the “brothers” of Al Qaeda and the Taliban was unbreakable. In an interview released in Al Qaeda's official media outlet *As Sabab* in September, 2009, Sangeen said, “We do not see any difference between Taliban and Al Qaeda and the two groups are all one and are united by Islam.” The Taliban so revered Sangeen that the group put up a billboard with his image on it in Khost province less than a month after the group took control of Afghanistan.

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18 Bill Roggio, Taliban circulates video of Haqqanis plotting 2010 suicide raid against U.S. troops, Long War Journal, August 22, 2022 available at: <https://www.fdd.org/>

Whatever the compulsions, the U.S. policy towards the Haqqani Network displays muddled thinking. The Biden administration has tried to distinguish the Haqqanis and the Taliban:-

- The State Department has repeatedly said the Taliban and the Haqqani network are “separate entities,” although it has admitted they are affiliated.
- Last year the Pentagon said there is “commingling” and “marbling” between the Taliban and the Haqqanis.
- Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, said, “The Taliban, obviously, to a considerable extent, are integrated with the Haqqani Network.”

Haqqani’s credibility with the international jihadi movement will be adversely affected by the U.S. strike on al-Zawahiri. Asfandyar Mir stated, “There are lots of jihadi groups in Afghanistan and outside who will say that this was the most important jihadi sheikh of our time and a great leader and you failed to protect him.” Immediately after the targeted strike, U.S. officials directly accused elements of the Haqqani Network of sheltering Zawahiri and taking steps to conceal evidence of the strike. The direct connection to the Haqqani confirms the grave concerns about the implications of Sirajuddin Haqqani serving as Afghanistan’s *de facto* interior minister. Within the Taliban power structures, the Haqqanis are not exactly liked by the other factions. Immediately after the Taliban came into power, an argument between Sirajuddin’s uncle, now minister of refugees, Khalil ur-Rahman Haqqani and Taliban co-founder Mullah Baradar developed into a fistfight between their supporters inside the presidential palace.

One year after the Taliban seized power in Kabul, the state of the country under Taliban rule is worse. By every major yardstick of economic, social, security and human rights indicators, the Afghan people are in a bad state,

with economic, social, security and human rights indicators all declining.<sup>19</sup> The international community wanted the Taliban to form an inclusive government and ensure women's rights. The Taliban has not kept any of its promises. The strike on al-Zawahiri was carried out days after the Taliban met with representatives of 30 countries at a conference in Tashkent, the Uzbekistan capital, to unfreeze some US\$7 billion in Afghan foreign currency reserves. Days later, Tashkent hosted foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO), consisting of Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and India. Afghanistan was high on their agenda.

## **Insurrections by other Jihadist Groups**

Afghanistan is home to several jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda, TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and others. Many of these groups enjoy sanctuary in Afghanistan and greater overall freedom under Taliban rule than under the previous government. Islamic State is not the only group that resists Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Other groups are primarily ethnic Tajiks and some Hazara and Uzbek elements wishing to liberate their native regions from Taliban control. Currently, these resistant movements are small, outnumbered and poorly supplied. However, they can be allies with the U.S. to conduct counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan.

An Afghan political organisation is trying to unite many former Afghan leaders outside the country. On May 17, 2022, in Ankara, Turkey, approximately forty persons formed the 'Supreme Council of National Resistance' to Save Afghanistan. They aim to resist the Taliban and negotiate with them for political changes. This is a political grouping of

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19 Zawahiri's Killing Caps Off an Awful Year Under the Taliban, World Politics Review, available at: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/after-a-year-under-the-taliban-afghanistan-is-on-the-brink/?one-time-read-code=120787165962162137693> 2/4

various senior leaders such as Dostum, Haji Mohammed Mohaqiq (a Hazara), Atta Mohammed Noor (a Tajik), Abdulrab Rasoul Sayyaf (a Pashtun), Ismail Khan (a Tajik) and others. The NRF sent Hamid Wali Massoud, younger brother of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud and former Afghan ambassador to London, to observe the meeting. This is a group of the major Afghan political parties to unite them to work together rather than work at cross purposes.

## **Cross-border Relations with Neighbours**

Afghanistan's cross-border relations with neighbours remain complex. No country has officially recognised the Taliban regime. However, Russia, China, Iran and others operate embassies in Kabul. ISKP fighters have launched missiles into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to undermine the Taliban's claim to control Afghanistan's borders and territory and to gain more recruits from Afghan and Central Asian countries.<sup>20</sup>

Resistance against the primarily Pashtun Taliban is based on minority groups indigenous to Afghanistan's northern border region with several Central Asian countries. They could serve as a sanctuary or conduit for outside support. Most of these countries are cautious to provide such support, fearing possible Taliban retribution. Bruce Pannier, a Central Asian specialist, highlighted, "The deteriorating situation in the region demonstrates the limits of Central Asian states' security strategies, and highlights that they have few options in dealing with a new threat on their border."

Since the August 2021 Taliban takeover, the Taliban fighters have been involved in several clashes with Pakistani, Iranian, and Turkmen border

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20 Richard Weitz, Afghanistan adrift one year after the Taliban takeover, August 9, 2022 available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistan-adrift-one-year-after-taliban-takeover>

forces. Taliban border guards also clashed with Uzbek forces. The Taliban announced, in February 2022, that it was sending 10,000 troops to its borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Taliban's Ministry of Defence raised several military units in three border provinces in the country's North, Northeast and West and deployed about 4,400 additional troops in those regions. Of these, approximately 3,000 were deployed to Badakhshan province, which borders Tajikistan, China, and Pakistan. The neighbouring countries expressed concerns about the Taliban's military build-up along the borders.

## **Relations with Pakistan**

It is generally believed that Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan would be warm and friendly. The Pakistani military establishment helped the Taliban come to power in 2021 after decades of sheltering them in Pakistan. It was not surprising that within days of the Taliban walking into Kabul, Faiz Hameed, former head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, landed in Kabul, putting key proteges into important appointments who would run the government by proxy. However, some Taliban leaders, like the Taliban's acting deputy prime minister Abdul Ghani Baradar who was not singing the tunes of Pakistani intelligence, were thrown into jail and tortured for several years. They are certainly not going to be very friendly with Pakistan.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, sometimes also referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, aims to overthrow the Pakistani government. Pakistan, the pillar of strength of the Taliban, particularly the Haqqanis, is not happy with how the Taliban is handling issues related to the TTP. TTP has used its safe havens in Afghanistan for its attacks against Pakistan. It happened even before the Taliban took over. Pakistan has criticised the Taliban for its unwillingness to curb cross-border attacks by Afghan-based fighters of TTP. The TTP is one of the largest terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It is led by Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. It has between 3,000 and 4,000 fighters

in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> The Taliban will probably adopt Pakistan's method of working with jihadi militants. The Taliban will tolerate and protect TTP until international pressure dictates temporary limited action, strikes or negotiations. In April 2022, Pakistan Air Force aircrafts bombed the Afghan provinces of Khost and Kunar in reprisal for bombing a Pakistani military convoy in North Waziristan. The Taliban was not amused. The Taliban defence minister and son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoob, warned Pakistan that it should be more restrained in the future.<sup>22</sup>

India has considerable goodwill in Afghanistan, and India's recent aid of medicine and grains are well appreciated. Increasing contacts between India and Afghanistan are another source of Taliban-Pakistani tensions. Durand line will remain a bone of contention between Afghanistan and Pakistan for years to come.

## **Relations with Tajikistan**

After the Afghan army collapsed under Taliban onslaughts and President Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul on August 15, First Vice President Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, with several thousand Tajik soldiers and policemen, moved into the Panjshir Valley. Amrullah Saleh, in the absence of Ghani, declared himself the "caretaker" president of Afghanistan. NRF's opposition to the Taliban began immediately and Panjshir was left the only province outside the Taliban's control. However, the Panjshir Valley was surrounded by the Taliban on three sides and fell after three weeks of

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21 United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security, June 15, 2022 available at: [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/220615\\_sg\\_report\\_on\\_afghanistan\\_s.2022.485.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/220615_sg_report_on_afghanistan_s.2022.485.pdf)

22 Jyoti Malhotra, Is Pakistan the bad boy of South Asia? Its military Deep State hurts neighbours, The Print, August,23, 2022 available at: <https://theprint.in/opinion/global-print/is-pakistan-the-bad-boy-of-south-asia-its-military-deep-state-hurts-neighbours/1095507/?amp>

fighting. Massoud and Saleh escaped by helicopter to Dushanbe. Their forces melted away into the mountains and reconsolidated in remote valleys.

The National Resistance Front (NRF) of Tajik claimed credit for multiple attacks that inflicted casualties on Taliban members. The media reported that the NRF had several hundred fighters, remains weak, no clear chain of command, limited resources and no significant support from the tribals, public or foreign governments. Many members of the largely ethnic Tajik NRF, including its leader, Ahmad Massoud, may be operating from or maintaining contacts in Tajikistan. NRF is performing far below expectations. The Taliban has pushed the NRF into the mountains, has effectively shut down even its low-level tactical efforts and continues to target the NRF and ISIS-K.<sup>23</sup> The government of Tajikistan continues to remain hostile to the Taliban and counts on its long-lasting partner Russia to support it. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has cautioned Vladimir Putin, his Russian counterpart, against recognition by Russia of the Taliban regime. Mr. Putin asserted that he would consider Tajik concerns about ethnic minority rights in Afghanistan.

By the early summer of 2022, a number of NRF attacks has been relatively modest but growing. In Andarab, NRF fighters have gained the limited capacity to confront Taliban security personnel. However, when the Taliban send reinforcements, they usually withdraw to mountain redoubts and avoid direct clashes. NRF activities in Panjshir, Parwan and Kapisa provinces mainly consist of hit-and-run attacks, occasional ambushes on remote Taliban checkpoints and patrols, and rarely assassinations of Taliban officials, including improvised explosive devices.

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23 Lead IG Report to the U.S. Congress, January 1, 2022– March 31, 2022 Operations in Afghanistan NRF and ISIS-K.



## **Relations with Uzbekistan**

After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Warlords Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor and some former Afghan government officials left Afghanistan for Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is keen to continue joint economic projects with Afghanistan irrespective of its new regime. Recently Uzbekistan hosted an international conference, with about 30 countries in attendance along with Taliban representatives, to promote such activities.

IS-KP has launched minor attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Those countries are exploring options to secure their borders. Uzbek drones have apparently flown inside northern Afghanistan, although Uzbekistan denies it.

## **Relations with Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs)**

The nations of CAR look to Russia for Afghan policy as part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) alliance. Russia established direct contact with the Taliban in 2017, but is still deeply sceptical of Taliban intentions and concerned about the spread northwards of religious extremism, weapons, terrorism, opium and their ability to destabilise the CARs. In the interim, all plans for pipelines and railway lines across Afghanistan depend on recognition of the Taliban by the international community and on peace in Afghanistan.

## **Relations with China**

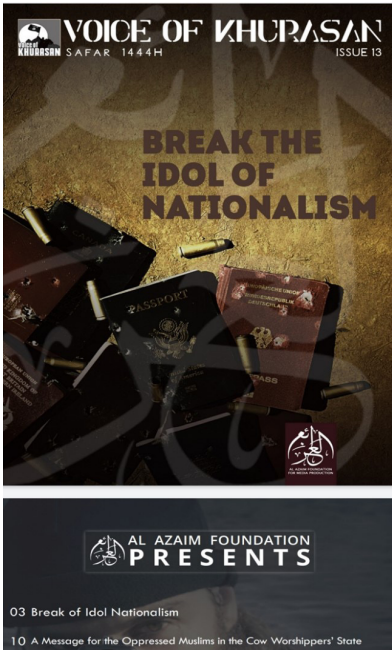
China's primary concern is the militant Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM wants to use Afghanistan as a launching pad for attacks on China to retaliate against China's brutal crackdown on the Uyghur Turkic Muslim minority in the North Western Xinjiang province of China. A United

Nations Security Council report stated that ETIM had built strongholds in Badakhshan near the Chinese border in North East Afghanistan, where it had “expanded its area of operations and covertly purchased weapons, to improve its capabilities for terrorist activities.”

China has engaged the Taliban authorities on this issue. China is pressing the Taliban to curtail ETIM’s activity. The Taliban stated that they had

moved about 1,000 Uyghur fighters away from the Chinese border to other parts of Afghanistan in October, 2021. However, Taliban officials are concerned that persisting with this course might drive Uighur militants into IS-KP’s folds. Interestingly, on September 2,2022, ISKP published the 13th issue of its Voice of Khurasan magazine series. It devoted an entire section to a thorough editorial titled ‘China’s Daydream of Imperialism’. This article traces China’s rise, its growing tensions with the U.S., its potential for future conflict with Islamic State forces and more.

The article is unique in both its comprehensiveness and its content.<sup>24</sup> ISKP argue that “just like the global military expedition of Tatars ended after confronting the Muslims, the Chinese socialist disbelievers will not face any different fate than that of the brutal Tatars, by the will of Allah.”



24 Lucas Webber, ISKP Publishes Its Most Comprehensive Critique of China Yet, Threatens War with Beijing, and Sees Opportunity in “WW3”, September 2, 2022, available at: <https://www.militantwire.com/p/iskp-publishes-its-most-comprehensive>

China is worried after one year of Taliban rule. The Taliban and Haqqanis show no interest in handing over Uighur militants to the Chinese authorities. There are concerns in China that Uighur extremists may have started collaborating with Balochi groups and the TTP to undermine the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. There have been a number of attacks inside Pakistan in which Chinese citizens have been targeted, including the bomb blast in Quetta in April 2021 which the Chinese Ambassador narrowly escaped. A year later, a Balochi suicide bomber killed three Chinese citizens near Karachi’s Confucius Institute. This has led to a renewal of Chinese pressure to deploy their own security to Pakistan, a demand which Pakistan has repeatedly refused.

## **Relations with Iran**

Iran and Afghanistan share a common history and culture, a similar language, a long border and shared regional interests. Yet they had conflicts over the persecution of Shias, refugees, water rights, drugs etc. As the major Shia country in the world, Iran feels its role is to support and protect Shia populations throughout the Islamic world. The Taliban have been in power in Afghanistan for a year. Iran is trying to ascertain if it can work with the Taliban. Its embassy in Kabul is open. It is observing how the Taliban treats the large Shia minority in the country.

Iran has kept its communications channel open with the Taliban to counter ISIS-K, secure protection for Afghan Shia minorities, improve border security and expand trade. Taliban’s Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi went to Iran and, on January 8 and 9, 2022, met opposition leaders Ahmad Massoud and Ismail Khan, who led separate military resistance movements. The Taliban stated that it offered the opposition leaders safe passage back to Afghanistan. However, opposition spokespersons, following the meeting, said that the meeting had not produced any result and the Taliban was not serious about addressing their concerns.

In mid-February 2022, Iran announced that it was willing to recognise the Taliban provided it formed an inclusive government. In mid-March, Iranian and Taliban officials discussed ways to resolve border clashes.

## **Russia**

In March, 2022, Russia showed its willingness to work with the Taliban and offered to arbitrate between the Taliban and the NRF. In this month, two Russian delegations visited Afghanistan for the first time. Russia remains worried about violent extremists and narcotics crossing into Central Asia. Russia has not formally recognised the Taliban and urges the Taliban to form an inclusive government.

## **Taliban Army**

Taliban is building a Military to counter ISIS-K and Resistance Groups. The Taliban's Ministry of Defence announced in January 2022 that it plans to establish a 100,000-strong army. On January 10, 2022, The Taliban's Chief of the Army Staff, Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat attended the graduation of 500 army soldiers in Herat province. He stated that Taliban's military had about 80,000 soldiers, organised in eight corps across Afghanistan. These forces are armed and equipped partly with weapons and equipment and materials provided to the previous Afghan government by the U.S. Taliban forces had taken control of more than 300,000 light arms, 26,000 heavy weapons and about 61,000 military vehicles during their takeover of the country.

On January 8, 2022, the Taliban announced that it had graduated a battalion of 200 special operations forces. They are equipped with night vision devices and laser-mounted weapons. A special battalion of suicide bombers would be part of the Taliban's future army. The suicide bombers would be employed in special operations. As per the Taliban, it has already deployed suicide bombers on Afghanistan's northern border with

Tajikistan. On January 9, more than 500 Taliban soldiers conducted a training demonstration in Herat province with armed vehicles captured by the Afghan security forces. The aim was to intimidate enemies of the Taliban and convince the people that the Taliban was capable of providing security to them. This was done when many criminal activities like armed robbery, kidnapping and assassination took place in the province.

### **Taliban's attempts to Recruit Afghan Air Force (AAF) Pilots and Crew Members**

According to the DIA, the Taliban attempted to recruit former AAF personnel. While some former AAF pilots said that they refused to join the Taliban for fear of violent reprisals, a Taliban commander claimed that at least 4,300 former AAF members, including 33 pilots, have joined the Taliban's air force under the Taliban's offer of amnesty. Some former AAF personnel who joined the Taliban said that while they have not been harmed or threatened, they also have not been paid and lack full-time work. One former AAF mechanic told that due to the lack of spare parts, he had to cannibalise damaged aircraft to recondition those that remained airworthy.

### **Reprisal Killings**

Since the Taliban has taken over, certain former Afghan government and security officials have been the targets of reprisal killings. Most of these killings were not directed or explicitly sanctioned by Taliban senior leaders. Senior leaders of the Taliban have been urging their rank-and-file to honour the regime's amnesty decree. Taliban senior leaders stated they would investigate reprisal killings against former Afghan government and security officials. Most reprisal killings were initiatives of local individuals or lower-level Taliban commanders.

## Purification Commission

The Taliban established the Purification Commission to eradicate Taliban members who committed religious, ethnic and personal animosity crimes or violated the rights of others. The chief inspector of the Taliban's Ministry of Defence and Chairman of the Purification Commission, in February 2022, claimed that 4,350 members were identified and expelled from the Taliban.

The Purification Commission has limited ability to discipline local-level commanders. This would hamper the Taliban's ability to provide amnesty to former Afghan government and security officials. Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, on January 19, 2022, directed Taliban commanders in Kabul not to seek revenge on former security forces and to obey the amnesty as announced by overall Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Notwithstanding the Taliban regime's official guidance, the execution of former Afghan government and security personnel continued. It showed the Taliban's inability to control local-level commanders.

The Taliban has not been able to deliver essential goods and services to the people in Afghanistan. Failed states are a cradle for terrorism. Afghanistan's economy is in a mess due to continuing international economic sanctions and incompetence of Taliban. The country's GDP is expected to decline by 34 percent by the end of 2022, compared to 2020. The humanitarian situation is terrible, with approximately 59 percent of the population in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>25</sup>

Pakistan has a very important role to play in whatever happens in Afghanistan. Geography compels the U.S entry to Afghanistan through Pakistan. Pakistan leverages this to its advantage. In the next chapter the role of Pakistan will be analysed.

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25 Seth G. Jones, Afghanistan's Terrorist Threats to America Are Growing, National Interest, August 20, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/afghanistan%E2%80%99s-terrorist-threats-america-are-growing-204335>

## Part - VI

# Role of Pakistan

Pakistan shares a long and disputed border with Afghanistan that goes back to the era of British colonialism. The Taliban emerged from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Under the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the Minister of the Interior is on record referring to the Taliban as a “strategic and political ally.” All subsequent governments of Pakistan, both military and civilian, maintained close ties with the Taliban under the guidance of Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI-D). One must understand that the Taliban is not a natural manifestation of Afghan political culture. They are a proxy of Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI). There cannot be any peace in Afghanistan until the cost of the ISI’s interference is too high for Pakistan to bear. Following the American invasion after 9/11, the Taliban regime was ousted in 2011. Even as ISI was supposed to cooperate with the U.S. on its “war on terror,” ISI continued its ties with the Taliban leadership.

In 1996, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were the only three countries to recognise the Taliban’s legitimacy. Since ISI had wielded considerable influence over the Taliban, it successfully eliminated Indian influence in Afghanistan. In December 1999, when an Indian Airlines aircraft was hijacked and flown

to Kandahar, the Taliban protected the hijackers and sent them to Pakistan. Three hard core terrorists, including Mohammad Masood Azhar, under Indian custody, had to be released to free the hostages. Masood Azhar is the leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). JeM was responsible for the attack on Indian parliament in Delhi in December 2001. It carried out a suicide bombing on February 14, 2019, killing 44 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in Pulwama.

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Maulana Masood Azhar, in the third week of August, 2022, was in Kandahar to meet Taliban leaders, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, to seek their support in fomenting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Issue**

Pakistan has not recognised Taliban government officially. The Pakistani government is extremely concerned about the presence of an anti-Pakistani terrorist organisation, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in Afghanistan. Through Sirajuddin Haqqani, Pakistan had reached out to the TTP. To reach an accord with the TTP, Pakistan had made a ceasefire agreement and offered to release about 100 TTP operatives currently lodged in Pakistani jails. However, this proposal has not been successful. The Haqqanis, under their leader Sirajuddin, have not been able to act as effective intermediaries between Pakistan and TTP. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in the winter of 2021, TTP escalated its attacks on Pakistan and Chinese assets in Pakistan from Eastern Afghanistan. After the Taliban regime refused to intervene, Pakistan's military used Chinese-made Wing Loong II drones to attack TTP camps inside Afghanistan in April 2022.

The Pakistani Minister of the Interior, Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad, alleged that the TTP gained access to modern weapons left behind by NATO forces in Afghanistan. A Taliban spokesman rejected the Pakistani Foreign



Minister's claim and stated that the Taliban had secured all weapons left behind by departing coalition forces. In February 2022, the UN estimated that 3,000 to 5,000 TTP members were active in Afghanistan. Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan acknowledged the Taliban's relationship with the TTP as the most critical factor preventing Pakistan from recognising the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.

The relationship between the Taliban and the Haqqanis' with TTP is complex. They have operated in Eastern Pakistan and had cooperative and supportive relations. There is also TTP intermarriage with Taliban networks in eastern Afghanistan. The Haqqanis have been able to take advantage of TTP networks in Pakistan. The Taliban, including the Haqqanis, do not want to alienate TTP and send more TTP militants toward ISK. This tolerance of TTP by the Taliban further complicates its relations with Pakistan and China. Pakistan cannot afford to cut its relationship with the Haqqanis. Many southern Taliban factions resent Pakistan and may enjoy the pain the TTP inflicts on Pakistan.

## **U.S. – Pakistan Ties**

The ISI's bonds to the Taliban are old and deep. CIA has been working with ISI on Afghan issues for a long time. No wonder as soon as American troops left Afghanistan, the British and American intelligence chiefs landed up in Islamabad, indicating a more significant Pakistani role in regional intelligence cooperation. The readers are encouraged to read Steve Coll's seminal book, 'The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan'. Coll drew attention to U.S.'s dysfunctional relationship with the government of Pakistan and the Pakistani Army, which calls the shots on all matters related to internal and external security. Coll concludes that Washington's inability to solve the riddle of Pakistan's ISI and to stop its covert interference in Afghanistan constituted the most significant

strategic failure of the American war.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. assumed that Pakistan could be persuaded into complying with America's purposes in Afghanistan. The assumption was widely off the mark. While the Generals commanding the Pakistani Army and directing the ISI made a show of cooperating, they were concurrently working to undermine U.S. military efforts. Though U.S. elevated Pakistan to the status of a "major non-NATO ally" and gave subsidies amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, the Pakistanis actively supported the Taliban. Pakistan's military leaders were playing a double game. United States officials knew they were being had yet could not do anything about it. Despite being the only superpower, the U.S. found that it could exert minimal leverage. American officials went to ridiculous lengths to befriend or flatter their Pakistani counterparts. Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called on Pakistan's army chief on no fewer than 27 occasions without getting much results.

### **Pakistan's Role in the Zawahiri Drone Strike**

Pakistan has denied any role in the drone strike. Its Foreign Office has issued a carefully drafted ambiguous statement, "Pakistan stands by countering terrorism under international law and relevant UN resolutions."<sup>2</sup> This official position does not mean that Islamabad had no role in this action. Pakistan's civil and military leadership are past masters in denying their role in such attacks in the country's tribal areas or in Afghanistan while secretly partnering with the U.S. to carry these out. For example, In August 2008, then Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said, "I don't care if they [CIA] do it as long as they get the right people. We'll protest in the

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1 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, January 31, 2018 available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/books/review/steve-coll-directorate-s.html>

2 <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-release-511/>

National Assembly and then ignore it.”<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons to believe that without Pakistan’s assistance, the strike which killed Zawahiri could not have happened.<sup>4</sup> It seems Pakistan-U.S. cooperation in counter-terrorism operations in the region is back on track. Abdul Basit, a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, said, “The drone definitely entered Pakistani airspace over Baluchistan and entered Afghanistan. The operation was probably conducted according to the terms of a 2003 agreement under which Pakistan provided an air corridor for US military flights to and from Afghanistan while it occupied the country. The 2003 agreement expired when US forces left Afghanistan in August last year, but it was kept intact to keep the airspace open for the US.”<sup>5</sup>

Jonathan Schroden, director of the countering threats and special operations programmes at CNA Corporation, a security think tank based in Virginia in the U.S., agreed that the drone traversed Pakistani airspace. He said the MQ-9 Reaper, which fired the missiles, possibly took off from a U.S. airbase in a Gulf Arab country, flew across the Arabian Sea and entered Pakistani airspace. Though the range of the drone is enough not to refuel at any Pakistani airbase, this is a long journey, reducing the time drones have to hover over their targets. The U.S. has a substantial drone infrastructure in Qatar. It would be much easier if the U.S. had a permanent basing arrangement with Pakistan. Gen. Frank McKenzie, former CENTCOM

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3 Umair Jamal, Did Pakistan Help the US Take Out al-Zawahiri? The Diplomat, August 03, 2022

4 Tom Hussain, US used Pakistani airspace for drone that killed al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahri, This Week in Asia, 2 Aug, 2022 available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3187439/us-used-pakistani-airspace-drone-killed-al-qaeda-chief-ayman-al>

5 Srishti Singh Sisodia, US used Pakistan airspace to carry out drone strike that killed Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahri, WION, August 02, 2022 available at: <https://www.wionews.com/world/us-used-pakistan-airspace-to-carry-out-drone-strike-that-killed-al-qaeda-chief-ayman-al-zawahri-report-502967>

commander, told Congress last year that the United States had ‘launching points’ in a neighbouring country of Afghanistan, which could be a pointer to Pakistani bases.<sup>6</sup> Without evidence, The Pakistani newspaper Dawn tried to pass the buck by writing that the drone which killed Zawahiri took off from the Ganci Airbase in Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. earlier operated a facility, but it was closed at Russia’s behest.

Pakistan’s army has been working hard to resurrect its partnership with the U.S., which could translate into much-needed financial assistance directly from the U.S. or global institutions under its influence, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Pakistan’s Generals would have happily obliged the U.S. if they were asked to cooperate in the operation.<sup>7</sup> In early May, talks were held in Washington between ISI chief Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum and top U.S. officials, including National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. Defence Analysts stated that the likely point at which the two sides agreed was to restore their covert cooperation on counter-terrorism.

Pakistan’s economy is in dire strait and the economy can collapse. In this context, Pakistani army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa spoke to U.S. CENTCOM commander Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla just before the Zawahiri strike. He called Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to request expediting the dispersal of a \$1.2 billion loan from the IMF, raising suspicions of a quid pro quo. Pakistan is waiting for the IMF to revive the stalled extended fund facility worth \$6 billion signed way back in 2019, to inject some succour into the economy. Pakistan now needs cash to avoid default as its foreign reserves stand only at \$9 billion. However,

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6 Andrew Desiderio and Lara Seligman, U.S. intensifies talks to use Russian bases for Afghan counterterrorism ops, Politico, September 09, 2021 available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/29/us-russia-basesafghan-counterterrorism-514743>

7 Umair Jamal, Did Pakistan Help the US Take Out al-Zawahiri?, The Diplomat, August 03, 2022 available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/did-pakistan-help-the-us-take-out-al-zawahiri/>

talks with the IMF may upset China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) may turn from lifeline to noose as Pakistan falters on payments to Chinese power producers setting up dedicated power plants inside Pakistan as part of the CPEC trail; it is already indebted to China to the tune of Pakistan Rupees 340 billion. Most significantly, IMF conditions on debt relief mandate that Pakistan reduce budget allocations to the military. Can Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif do that? Will the Deep State of Pakistan allow some elected prime minister to undercut the ground beneath his feet?<sup>8</sup>

There is conjecture that Pakistan Government (ISI) may have given the U.S some tips about al-Zawahiri because they need economic support badly. This may be pay off for getting IMF loan and lifting of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) restrictions. Domestically Pakistan appears to have successfully managed the fallout of the drone strike and with it, the country may have pulled out something which could help ease its financial and diplomatic woes in the coming months. Faran Jeffrey, deputy director and head of the South Asia terrorism desk at the Britain-based Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism, said, “The real story isn’t about General Bajwa discussing the economy with the US government. The real story is: what’s the quid pro quo?” The question is whether the U.S. played hardball and demanded a quid pro quo - U.S. support for Pakistan’s emergency loan in exchange for Pakistan giving up the location of Al Qaeda’s chief or the drone overflight right. Biden government has adopted a policy towards Pakistan that can at best be described as benign decline. President Joe Biden never called up former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, who propagates an anti-Pak conspiracy theory. President Biden has not embraced the new Sharif government either.

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8 Jyoti Malhotra, Is Pakistan the bad boy of South Asia? Its military Deep State hurts neighbours, August 23, 2022 available at: <https://theprint.in/opinion/global-print/is-pakistan-the-bad-boy-of-south-asia-its-military-deep-state-hurts-neighbours/1095507/>

Pakistan's Military-Jihadi Complex is a multi-dimensional unit comprising military, intelligence, militant, radical Islamist establishments and politico-economic structures. It has followed funding policies, cultivating and training radical terror networks to serve its political and financial objectives. There are numerous instances of the Pakistan army and ISI's involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> Some examples are given below:-

- Javid Ahmad, who served as Afghanistan's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates until the fall of Kabul, told a panel organised by Stanford University's South Asia Initiative that the Taliban's recent military success was due to the "deluge" of Pakistani mentors and advisors attached to Taliban military units
- The partnership of Pakistani officers with Taliban units was well known. In the last weeks of the war, primarily Pakistan-based foreign terrorists, more than 4,000 in number, joined the Taliban in Afghanistan's northern provinces to cut off any supply route between the former Soviet Republics and Afghanistan's anti-Taliban forces. At least 1,200 were Pakistani terrorists. Pakistani terrorists or their sympathisers revealed the "martyrdom" of Pakistanis killed in Afghanistan and published photos or videos of those buried inside Pakistan after their body's return.
- The bodies of Pakistani terrorists and soldiers killed fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan were returned and buried within one to three days. It shows the organisation of the Pakistani military network and the collusion of Pakistani officials who were aware of who was Pakistani among those who killed in the fighting.
- Pakistani prisoners captured by Afghan National Defence and

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9 Michael Rubin, How Much Did Pakistan Help The Taliban Conquer Afghanistan? October 7, 2021 available at: [https:// www.19fortyfive.com/2021/10/how-much-did-pakistan-help-the-talibanconquer-afghanistan/](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/10/how-much-did-pakistan-help-the-talibanconquer-afghanistan/)

Security Forces provided concrete evidence of Pak complicity. Many of them gave videoed confessions.

There are troubling questions:-

- What other cards will the Pakistani military have to trade in the future?
- Will it protect Al Qaeda's new leader?
- Shouldn't Pakistan cut all ties with Al Qaeda before they get a single penny of international assistance?
- Shouldn't Pakistan be forced to choose between the viability of the state of Pakistan and its desire for terror support?

Pakistan is now the closest to the West as a counter-terrorism partner among Afghanistan's immediate neighbours. The U.S. does not have boots on the ground in Afghanistan. Intelligence agencies must rely on local partners, the ISI of Pakistan, to gather intelligence. Pakistan remains an important, albeit difficult, counter-terrorism partner.

*Pakistan is the past master of running with bare hunting with hounds.* The U.S. State Department has long carried water for Pakistan despite that country's terror support; rewarding Pakistan more than a billion dollars for information on Zawahiri or drone overflight is like awarding the country that protected Al Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden. The U.S. failed to compel Pakistan to eliminate the sanctuaries on its soil established by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and other extremist and insurgent networks that carried out attacks in Afghanistan. The U.S. was unable to disrupt or degrade those sanctuaries by unilateral operations.<sup>10</sup> The U.S.

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10 David Petraeus, Afghanistan did not have to turn out this way, The Atlantic, August 8, 2022 available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/08/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-strategy-shortcomings/670980/>

administration should be careful about allowing Pakistan to profit from continued terror support. It is time to tell Pakistan bluntly: Deliver every Al Qaeda asset now, abide by every FATF counter-terror recommendation, or be designated a terror sponsor and face bankruptcy.

## **Pakistan's Problems**

In the past year, events have not gone as planned for Pakistan. Pakistan wanted the Taliban to deliver three objectives: - <sup>11</sup>

- Wanted to keep India out of Afghanistan. But India, rather than sponsoring opponents of the Taliban, has engaged with Kabul. India has given vital food aid to Afghanistan in real need. India has subtly played on the Kandahari Taliban's traditional dislike of Pakistan. The Taliban defence minister Mullah Yaqub has even suggested military training in India.<sup>12</sup>
- The Taliban and the Haqqanis were expected to finish the TTP and hand over the wanted terrorists to the Pakistani army. The Haqqanis made it known that they would not comply. Instead, the Pakistani army now has to engage in complex ceasefire talks with the TTP.
- The new Afghan government was to recognise the 1897 Durand Line as the international border. Pakistan had erected a wire fence at considerable expense in recent years, but within weeks the Taliban and TTP were cutting the wire and renewing claims to

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11 Tim Willasey-Wilsey CMG, One Year On: The Aftermath of the Kabul Evacuation, RUSI, August 15, 2022 available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/one-year-aftermath-kabul-evacuation>

12 Taliban willing to send Afghan troops to India for training: Mullah Yaqoob, News Desk, June 05, 2022 available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/963573-taliban-willing-to-send-afghan-troops-to-india-for-training-mullah-yaqoob>



Pashtun areas of Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Who has provided the information about al-Zawahiri hiding in a safe house in Kabul to the U.S. intelligence agencies is shrouded in mystery. In the next chapter an effort is made to clarify some issues based on open source intelligence.

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13 Taliban cuts border wire on Durand Line with Pakistan; warn of 'war', South Asia Monitor, Dec 21, 2021 available at: <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/region/taliban-cuts-border-wire-durand-line-pakistan-warn-war>

## Part - VII

# Who Betrayed Al-Zawahiri?

The precise, sophisticated strike to eliminate AQ chief al-Zawahiri could not have been done without specific, detailed and actionable intelligence. After U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, there was a definite void in intelligence. There are number of conjectures, the actual story may never come out for understandable reasons. An educated guess can be made.

U.S intelligence agencies were tipped off even earlier that wife, daughter and grandchildren of Zawahiri were relocated from the tribal belt in Pakistan to a safe house in the Sherpur neighbourhood of Kabul in April this year. It is not clear which source gave this input. It could have come from:- <sup>1</sup>

- U.S. human and technical collection.
- Intelligence from another government.
- The Taliban or another terrorist group.

The authenticity of this intelligence was quite credible as CIA started

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1 Dario Cristiani, The Killing of Al-Zawahiri and the Future of Al-Qaeda, August 5, 2022 available at [https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/killing-al-zawahiri-and-future-al-qaeda#\\_ftn11](https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/killing-al-zawahiri-and-future-al-qaeda#_ftn11)

monitoring the house hoping that Zawahiri would soon join his family. After the strike, U.S officials confirmed that Haqqani network was actively involved in sheltering Zawahiri. The last general officer in command of the now-defunct Afghan Army, Haibatullah Alizai, now living in the U.S., stated that his sources informed him that it was a faction within the Taliban that tipped off the U.S. government about the Zawahiri. Since the Taliban took over the reigns in Afghanistan, there have been reports about internal disputes, between sub-groups, including the Haqqanis. Another Taliban faction might have betrayed out al-Zawahiri to weaken Haqqani network. Another Taliban faction might have betrayed out al-Zawahiri to weaken Haqqani. In that case, the frictions and tension within the Taliban leadership would increase. This can strengthen ISIL-K, which can exploit these tensions to weaken the Taliban regime.

There is another school of thought that it is plausible that CIA was tipped off by the Taliban or its powerful Haqqani faction as part of some secret deal. The Taliban leadership might have tacitly allowed the U.S. to carry out such an operation to open a new chapter in their relations. Should relations between the Taliban and the US improve in near future, this explanation might gain some traction.<sup>2</sup> An intelligence official from the European Union (EU) stated, “The US controls a lot of money that the Taliban need to run the country and while I am sure Zawahri had his supporters, it really only takes one person to decide they’d like \$25 million or whatever the reward is. So, it could have been a policy by the Taliban. Also, the Americans may have left a powerful intelligence apparatus.”

The exact nature of ISI and Haqqanis’ role in al-Zawahiri’s killing is critical. There are distinct possibilities. It could be the handiwork of ISI acting in concert with the Haqqanis, possibly for favourable trade-offs from the U.S.

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2 Charles Lister, Strike on al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri is a major win for US counterterrorism, August 1, 2022 available at: <https://www.mei.edu/node/84588>

The grant of 1.1 billion dollar as IMF sanction and favourable report from FATF may indicate something like this. The most probable answer to the question may be that of the ISI, past master in double dealing, betraying al-Zawahiri to the Americans in exchange of some benefits for Pakistan after some hard bargains.

Afghanistan is very important to India because of geostrategic reasons. India has some legitimate concerns about what happens in Afghanistan. In the next chapter India's concerns are deliberated upon.

## Part- VIII

# India's Concerns

During the first Taliban regime, India had no presence in Afghanistan. Before the Taliban takeover, India had backed a sworn enemy of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance. The Taliban had been actively involved in allowing the hijackers of an Indian Airlines flight 814 from Kathmandu to fly into Kandahar in late December 1999. From there, the hijackers issued a set of demands to release a number of Pakistani terrorists locked up in Indian prisons. The Taliban arranged to send the hijackers and the freed terrorists to Pakistan.



Source: <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-vajpayee-govt-chose-to-swap-3-terrorists-with-160-passengers-of-ic-814-two-decades-ago/342217/>

After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, India started working with the new Karzai government. India's role in Afghanistan was mainly developmental during the Karzai and the Ghani governments. India provided economic assistance to the tune of \$3 billion through some excellent programs by which the people of Afghanistan immensely benefitted. India provided various scholarships for Afghan students to study in Indian universities. India has immense goodwill with the Afghan population. India, in 2011, renewed and expanded the 1950 treaty, which improved diplomatic and trade ties between the two countries. The two countries formed a strategic partnership which included political dialogue, scientific and cultural cooperation and a pledge to combat terrorism.

India's diplomatic presence and its support for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance finished with the arrival of the Taliban 2.0 in August 2021.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its goodwill, India was conspicuously absent from political negotiations in Afghanistan and the Doha agreement of February 2020 that effectively brought the Taliban back to power in Afghanistan. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the Ghani government led to a complete loss of Indian influence in the country. India closed its embassy and evacuated all its citizens working in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

India's security interest is to ensure that the new Taliban government does not host several terrorist organisations that are active in India, especially in J&K. India is deeply worried about the Haqqani Network which has strong linkages with the ISI-D. India cannot forget that the Haqqani Network carried out, in Kabul in 2008, the fatal attack on the Indian Embassy, which left 54 Indian civilian and military personnel dead. Outlining Indian concerns, in October 2021, India's Chief of Army Staff, General

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1 Stuti Bhatnagar Zahid Shahab Ahmed, How India and Pakistan See the Taliban's Afghanistan, National Interest, August 15, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-india-and-pakistan-see-taliban%E2%80%99s-afghanistan-204197>

2 Sumit Ganguly (2022) Kabul and a Strategic Triangle, The Washington Quarterly, 45:2, 59-71, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090758

Manoj Mukund Naravane said, “What we can say and learn from the past is that when the previous Taliban regime was in power, that time, definitely we had foreign terrorists of Afghan origin in Jammu and Kashmir.” India is looking for to work with other like-minded countries to find ways to deal with the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan. The focus of the talks is to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a haven for international terrorists again.<sup>3</sup>

India’s strategic options in Afghanistan are limited. Pakistan stands between India and Afghanistan geographically. The Taliban’s ideological orientation and relationship with Pakistan make Indian policymakers suspicious about their trustworthiness. However, India has some trump cards - the disastrous economic plight of the Taliban regime and its critical need for humanitarian assistance. The Taliban will approach India to improve its economic conditions. India can leverage the aid on the condition that the Taliban addresses some of the Indian security concerns. Afghanistan should not turn out to be a safe haven for anti-Indian terrorists or a staging ground for terrorist attacks on India.

India had shown its willingness to help Afghanistan when all other countries did nothing. In December 2021, India provided much-needed medical supplies to Afghanistan. In February 2022, India sent over 33,000 metric tons of wheat and 500,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines to Afghanistan as humanitarian assistance.<sup>4</sup> India has re-engaged with the Taliban on security issues, perhaps encouraged by the Taliban’s tensions with Pakistan. This re-engagement follows a long history of bitterness between India and the Taliban, who, offered safe haven to anti-India militant groups when ruling

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3 Kallol Bhattacharjee, “India, Australia, 2+2 Talks,” *The Hindu*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-australia-hold-inaugural-22-talksafghanistan-situation-boosting-strategic-ties-on-agenda/article36400326.ece?homepage=true>.

4 Belquis Ahmadi and Vikram J. Singh, “Can India Help Bring Peace to Afghanistan?,” *United States Institute of Peace*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/can-indiahelp-bring-peace-afghanistan>.

Afghanistan in the 1990s. This time, India is treading a different path, engaging with the Taliban government to forestall the spread of weapons and militants into Kashmir. Media have reported that the Taliban assured India to take action based on Indian intelligence against groups that threaten India. However, how far the Taliban would go against groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Tayyaba that have traditionally enjoyed tacit Pakistani patronage remains to be seen. Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent continues threatening to carry out attacks on India.

In May 2022, the Indian National Security Adviser, indicated a shift in India's perception of the Taliban as a terror group to a quasi-official entity. He stated that regional countries must "enhance the capability of Afghanistan to counter terrorism and terrorist groups which pose a threat to regional peace and security." India's response can also be seen in the context of the Taliban's desperation for developmental and humanitarian assistance.

To re-establish its presence in Afghanistan, India sent a technical team to be based in Kabul and reopened its embassy along with the first consignment of earthquake relief assistance to Afghanistan in June 2022. This technical team focuses on business and trade opportunities and food and medical aid distribution. There are growing indications of broader cooperation. Mullah Yaqub, the Taliban's Defense Minister, expressed an interest in training its army personnel in India. In August 2022, the Taliban welcomed the return of twenty-five Indian-trained Afghan soldiers affiliated with the previous regime.

Over the last 20 years, Pakistani military-jihadi complex (MJC) has played a risky game of sheltering and guiding the Taliban's actions while supporting the U.S. in its Afghanistan campaign. Pakistan played a crucial role in steering the Taliban to sign the Doha Agreement. In the last two decades, Pakistan has worked overtime to decrease the Indian economic and political footprint in Afghanistan.



## India's Options

India may take the following actions:-<sup>5</sup>

- Should be ready to accept a reduced economic and diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan. Pakistan will make sure that India's presence is severely restricted. India should wait for the tide to change.
- Should increase its vigilance on the Pakistan border. Pakistan may use non-kinetic warfare means.
- Must improve and strengthen the relationship with the U.S. India and the U.S. need each other to confront the bigger strategic challenge of China

In April, 2022, Al Qaeda released a video in which al-Zawahiri praised an Indian Muslim woman who defied a ban on wearing the traditional headscarf, or hijab. He called upon Indian Muslims to fight the battle of jihad. Apparently, this message was another attempt to recruit terrorists in India to revive Al Qaeda in the subcontinent. In all probability, some of al-Zawahiri's comments as the Emir of Al Qaeda about issues like jihad in Kashmir and the hijab controversy in India are mere propaganda. Since his final days were under the Haqqani Network's control, he likely acted and spoke at the behest of people inimical to Indian interests. Al-Zawahiri's comments did not yield anything substantial for Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has not been able to make much dent in India.<sup>6</sup>

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5 What Taliban's victory means for Pakistan and therefore India, Strategic Study, August 23, 2022 available at: <https://takshashila.org.in/commentary/what-talibans-victory-means-for-pakistan-and-therefore-india>

6 Pranay Kotasthane, Pak's Generals & Af's Taliban, August 23, 2021, The Times of India available at: [https://takshashila.org.in/research/killing-of-al-zawahiri-raises-more-questions-than-provides-answers?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://takshashila.org.in/research/killing-of-al-zawahiri-raises-more-questions-than-provides-answers?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

## Part - IX

# Conclusion

The killing of Al Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, on the balcony of his safe house provided by Haqqani Network by a U.S. missile strike is a landmark event in the history of Afghanistan. This incident has momentous implications for the U.S. counter-terrorism operations, Al Qaeda, the global jihadi movement, Pakistan, the Taliban, the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Arab countries, India and the U.S.

There has been crucial issues of how the intelligence was obtained, what were the weapon systems used for the strike, the American over the horizon capability for counter-terrorism operations, the route the drone used for the strike, what will be the effect on the Taliban government, future of Al Qaeda, Pakistan's involvement, India's reaction and what is future course of action of U.S. There is no doubt that the over-the-horizon strike operation was carried out after years of painstaking effort to trace al-Zawahiri, especially when there is no boots on ground of U.S forces, meticulous planning when there is no aviation base of U.S in neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and perfect execution of a precision strike without any collateral damage. It confirmed the U.S. claim of its capability to hit target in Afghanistan even without their physical presence.

Intelligence is an art. It was years of very painstaking effort to obtain specific actionable intelligence. Besides only about 0.1 percent, all source intelligence collection operations remains in the background. The information collected are generally ambiguous, contradictory and incomplete and have to be debated and analysed very carefully to be converted to actionable intelligence. Today surveillance in Afghanistan is extremely difficult as the country is one of the most denied areas of the world. U.S intelligence agencies must be given due credit. For valid and understandable reasons, the sensitive information about the airbase used for the strike and the route used to get into Afghanistan may never be known.

Al Qaeda is still very much a big player in terrorism. Over a period of time drone attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan inflicted enormous damage to Al Qaeda leadership. They have gone more and more underground. It is not very clear what exactly will happen to Al Qaeda after the death of al-Zawahiri, who will be next Emir, will he carry out reproachment between Al Qaeda and Taliban and ISIS on the other side?

Today the Taliban controls Afghanistan far more thoroughly than it did in 2001. The terrorists hiding in Waziristan on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border have returned to Afghanistan for the first time since late 2001. Due to the favourable environment in Afghanistan, regional and global terror groups are using the country as a safe haven and a recruiting ground, like what they did during the Taliban's first period of rule from 1996 to 2001.

After a year in power the Taliban has become more repressive. Taliban officials had assured the Afghan public and foreign diplomats that the ban on girls attending secondary school, would be lifted by late March, 2022. The Taliban's reclusive Emir, Sheikh Hibatullah Akhundzada, overruled his cabinet and extended the ban indefinitely. The Taliban decision-making regarding girls' return to secondary school, along with their fumbled implementation and muddled public relations exercise, raised critical

questions about how, and under what structure, the Taliban would govern the country's affairs.

The Haqqanis, who have long been close to the Al Qaeda leadership, have not changed their spots. They lead a terrorist organisation which is both distinct from and part of the Taliban. They are the biggest barrier to countries considering whether to discuss recognition with the traditional Kandahari Taliban, led by the more moderate Mullah Baradar.

Taliban is serving Afghanistan's national interests and there are anti-Pakistan elements within the Taliban. The Taliban maintains its opposition to the recognition of the Durand Line as a permanent border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has resisted the Pakistan military's efforts to erect fencing along the borders. There has been border clashes on several occasions. Pakistan is not in a position to coerce Afghanistan. Pakistan finds geo-economics demands that a stable Afghanistan offers many dividends like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>1</sup>

U.S. director of national intelligence in 2009 wrote, "No improvement in Afghanistan is possible without Pakistan taking control of its border areas." So long as Pakistan provides safe haven for the Taliban's leadership and a conveyer belt of material and personnel for its rank-and-file, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan would remain hopelessly out of reach, irrespective of progress on the other fronts. This remains true. Nobody knows better than the Americans that problem of Afghanistan lies in Pakistan. Pakistan is expert in leveraging geography as Afghanistan is a land locked country and U.S entry to Afghanistan goes through Pakistan. Only American officials can explain as to why as they took out al-Zawahiri after so many years

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1 Stuti Bhatnagar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, How India and Pakistan See the Taliban's Afghanistan, National Interest, August 15, 2022 available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-india-and-pakistan-see-taliban's-afghanistan-204197>

of painstaking efforts, they are still officially engaging with the Taliban's 33-member cabinet appointed in September 2021, more than half of whom appear on U.N. or U.S. lists of sanctioned terrorists. Among them is the Taliban's caretaker prime minister, Mullah Hassan Akhund, who served as foreign minister and then deputy prime minister during the Taliban's previous rule from 1996 to 2001.

The U.S. has listed the head of the Haqqani Network and Taliban's interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) with a US\$10 million reward for information that directly leads to his arrest in connection with attacks targeting Americans. These appointments do not give any hope that the Taliban could partner the U.S. in countering violent extremism in Afghanistan. However, after killing of al-Zawahiri, the U.S. and the Taliban statements indicate that both sides are leaving enough space open for limited continued engagement.

Leaving Afghanistan will not address the U.S.' counter-terrorism worries. An isolated Afghanistan sliding into civil war is far more dangerous than a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan where the U.S. can keep an eye on evolving terror threats. Taliban support on the security front remains crucial for the United States. Al-Zawahiri's killing could be the beginning of a new road instead of its end, depending on how the Taliban evolves from here. Leadership of Taliban is caught between devil and deep-sea. There is enormous pressures from international community. Will Taliban reconstruct Afghanistan or spread jihad and harbour the global Al Qaeda groups?

India has taken very sensible and measures steps to engage the Taliban government. Only time will tell in which direction the Afghanistan conundrum moves next. All stakeholders will keep a close watch on the future developments in Afghanistan.

## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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