



Al-Qaeda after killing of Al-Zawahiri

Navigating along with crises, leadership impasse, Alliance disintegration, and the Problematic approach.



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Abstract

In this analytical article, Jordanian researchers who are experts in terrorism and extremism, Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniya, argued that although practical experience with jihadist movements, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, has proved that they are not greatly affected by killing of their leaders and have the rapid ability to rebuild leadership ranks and adapt with various security pressures, Nevertheless, the killing of Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, in particular, has an impact that may transcend in its repercussions and reflections of what occurred formerly with the most important global jihadist leaders, such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, Saeed Al-Shehri and even Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and others.

The greatest secret lies in the impact of Al-Zawahiri's killing on Al-Qaeda in the timing and overall context, Al-Qaeda has practically suffered for years from major structural crises, and continuous decline in its capabilities, operations, and proliferation. The article presents the most prominent crises experienced by Al-Qaeda, foremost of which are the leadership crisis, the crisis of disengagement and the relationship with the Taliban movement, the insurgency of its branches, the geographical deployment recession, and the crisis of vision and approach.

Despite all, the absolute judgment that Al-Qaeda is destroyed actually needs a more deliberated and deep look, meanwhile, Al-Qaeda didn't emerge in a vacuum, Rather, it is a logical and objective reflection of the outcomes of the major crises in the Arab and Islamic world such as authoritarianism, tyranny, dependency, corruption, economic and developmental failure, in addition to the failure of the Arab Spring movements, which was an opportunity and a hope for peoples to break of the impasse and wandering. Therefore, the ideological justifications and the incentives behind the Al-Qaeda project still exist, rather strong.

The researchers concluded the article with future indications of the weakness of the Al-Qaeda status quo and the dynamics of the crises that afflict it, and other dynamics that create a state of strategic vacuum in the Arab world, leaving the possibility open for such ideas to find a listening ear and youth groups looking for radical solutions to a miserable reality!



Although Al-Zawahiri is not the first leader to be killed among the ranks of the senior Al-Qaeda leaders, whether Osama bin Laden, the former historical leader, or even the historical leaders of the first rank, such as Abu Hafs al-Masri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Atiyah Allah and others, and even though Al-Zawahiri's period witnessed a significant decline in the capabilities of the central Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and its network of regional branches in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, there is a significant decline in its operational capabilities and the level of its operations as well; However, the killing of Al-Zawahiri at the end of last July (by two Hellfire missiles targeted by a drone) posed a severe blow to Al-Qaeda, in which its power and influence on the organization overcome the impacts of the former leaders of Al-Qaeda assassinations, according to the current conditions, context and timing in which Al-Qaeda face unprecedented crucial challenges.

The impasse of leadership and legitimacy

The leadership crisis poses a critical juncture in the path of the organization, which was established on a kind of partnership and harmony between Osama bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, and the Saudi and Egyptian components, bin Laden's assassination on May 2, 2011, in Abbottabad in Pakistan, by a special American operation, led to a great vacuum among Al-Qaeda members and supporters of the global jihadist current, His successor, Al-Zawahiri, despite his great legacy in global jihadism, as well as his capabilities of theorizing are greater than bin Laden capabilities, however, the capabilities were not able to fill the vacuum, on the contrary, several problematic issues related to the succession of Al-Zawahiri arose, foremost among which are the well-known structural crises among the different wings within Al-Qaeda and the various groups, particularly the traditional accusations of the domination of the Egyptian group on the inner circle close to Bin Laden, which led to the gaps existence in the level of acceptance and conviction of Al-Zawahiri's leadership, furthermore the onsets of major fragmentation during his reign, especially the severe conflicts (as we will explain later) with the Islamic State (ISIS) and later the separation of Jabhat al-Nusra – Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, from Al-Qaeda.



Admittedly that Al-Zawahiri is not personally fully responsible for the Al-Qaeda state during his leadership reign (2011-2022); since there have been several developments internationally and regionally, however, notably Al-Zawahiri's legitimacy or popularity was not as Osama bin Laden, who has a charismatic personality, which made Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, despite his great controversies with Al-Qaeda, obliged to declare his affiliation with it and declare allegiance to Bin Laden, Moreover, the intensive and accurate persistent US and international intelligence security prosecution of Al-Zawahiri, equipped with the state-of-art technology, forced Al-Zawahiri to disappear and hide for long periods of up to continuous months, which weakened his role, reduced his influence and created several internal crises amidst the Al-Qaeda network¹.

Recently, the crisis has deepened after the killing of Al-Zawahiri in the absence of most of the leaders of the first and second ranks who witnessed the Al-Qaeda foundation then planned and executed the attacks on Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, moreover most the main figures who hold important keys to the organization on the ideological and strategic levels have been killed, such as; Abu Hafs Al-Masri, Abu Muhammad Al-Masri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Atiyatallah Al-Libi, Bin Laden's son's Saad and Hamza, and in the branches Abu Khaled Al-Suri, Abu Firas Al-Suri in Syria, Abu Basir Nasir Al-Wuhayshi, Saeed al-Shehri and Abu Hurairah Qassem Al-Rimi (The Arabian Peninsula- Yemen), Abu Musab Abdul-Wadud (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb - North Africa), and Mukhtar Abu Al-Zubayr (Al-Qaeda in Somalia - Al-Shabab movement), but the biggest painful blow was killing of Hamza bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's son, who was expected to succeed his father's, rebuild Al-Qaeda and consolidate the ranks of jihadists around the world¹.

¹ During Al-Zawahiri's reign, Al-Qaeda lost a number of its leaders like **Abu Al-Zubayr Mukhtar** in Somalia branch, who was killed in the beginning of September 2014, by an American military aircraft, the same repeated with killing of **Abu Basir Nasser Al-Wuhayshi**, the emir of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, by an American drone on June 9 / Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb lost its historical leader, **Abdelmalek Droukdel, nicknamed Abu Musab Abdel-Wadud**, on the fifth of last June, in a military operation in northern Mali on June 3, 2020 as well, and Syrian branch "Guardians of the Religion" lost most of its leaders within the period (2018-2021), for instance Abu Muhammad Al-Sudani and Abu Al-Qassam, in August 2019, **Hamza bin Laden, former Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden son**, was killed by a special US operation in the border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Hamza was a candidate to lead, restructure and revitalize Al-Qaeda organization in Syria, On August 7, 2020, Al-Qaeda lost **Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Abu Muhammad Al-Masri), the number two man in Al-Qaeda**. Al-Masry was assassinated by Mossad agents in Tehran/ Iran



Only Saif Al-Adl, Muhammad Salah Al-Din Zaidan Al-Masri, who is a well-known military and security leader in Al-Qaeda, was left of the well-known and nominated historical figures - within the traditional assessments - to take over the leadership position of Al-Qaeda after killing of Al-Zawahiri, Al-Adl was certainly detained for a long time in Iran with a group of Al-Qaeda leaders, and it is not currently known whether he has left Iran for another place, or if he is still there, which raises several problems and questions among Al-Qaeda about the legitimacy of this choice and its relationship with Iran, as well as the traditional historical sensitivities known to the Al-Qaeda wings towards the hegemony of the Egyptian group².

Among the candidates is Abd al-Rahman Al-Mughrabi, who is the brother-in-law of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, according to the US State Foreign ministry, he is the historical head of the “Al-Sahab” Foundation, which is the media branch of Al-Qaeda. He also heads the Office of External Communications, where coordination with al-Qaeda branches outside the Afghan-Pakistani sanctuary is carried out, also among the candidates is Yazid Mubarak, nicknamed Abu Ubaidah Youssef Al-Anabi, who pledged allegiance to the emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2020 after a French raid killed his predecessor Abu Musab Abdel-Wadud. The fourth candidate is Ahmed Dairi, head of Al-Qaeda's branch in East Africa, the Al-Shabab movement in Somalia.

Taliban - Al-Qaeda disengagement: Absence of an alternative

Osama bin Laden established a strategic partnership with the Taliban since its rise in 1994, then its control over Afghanistan, thus Bin Laden pledged officially of allegiance to Mullah Omar as a caliphate of the Muslims, then Al-Qaeda continued to consolidate the strategic

² Muzamjir al-Sham stated in a tweet that Abu Khaled Al-Suri, Al-Qaeda leader who was killed in Syria and was close to Al-Zawahiri, ruled out, in a previous dialogue with a group of jihadists in Syria, that Saif Al-Adl would assume the leadership of Al-Qaeda after al-Zawahiri, since he was a narrow-minded man. See: Jihadi reactions to the killing of Ayman Al-Zawahiri: Al-Qaeda is silent and disagreements loom, Akhbar Al-Aan website, 8-3-2022.



relationship with the Taliban movement after the Islamic Emirate was eradicated by the U.S war on terrorism in 2001, moreover, the relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban was strengthened even after killing of both Bin Laden in 2011 and Mullah Omar in 2015, even though it is obvious that there is a pragmatic and influential wing of the Taliban movement that has explicitly declared that it is fed up with this relationship since the burdens and crises that the movement bears with the whole world, in addition to that Al-Qaeda held liable by Taliban for eradication of “Pashtun Emirate” after the events of September 11 and the Afghan war.

Although Al-Zawahiri pursued Bin Laden’s approach of declaring allegiance to the Taliban and Mullah Omar’s successors, Akhtar Mansour, then Hibatullah Akhundzada, also he declared support to the movement after regaining control of Afghanistan in August 2020, following the American withdrawal, However, the bright fact that Al-Zawahiri was unable to cover is that the movement had recognized the Doha agreements in February 2020 with the US administration which stipulated prevention of using Afghan territory to launch attacks on the United States and its allies, however, the latest blow of Al-Zawahiri's assassination refers to a flaw of the withdrawal agreement that the United States signed with the Taliban, which allows Al-Qaeda and other armed groups to remain in Afghanistan as long as they do not train, raise funds or plan attacks, nevertheless, it was obvious after the Taliban’s return to rule that its pragmatic, unofficial wing was keen to disintegrate with Al-Qaeda and to compromise (trade-off) the movement’s rule by normalizing external relations, while the radical wing, particular the Haqqani network, was still maintaining the relationship with Al-Qaeda and providing a protection network for, Thus Haqqani network represents the main part that has strong ties with Al-Qaeda and its leaders.

In contrast, it seems that killing of Al-Zawahiri mostly is associated with the security breakthroughs in Al-Zawahiri's protection network, which refers to disagreements among the Taliban and its allies to address Al-Qaeda and its limited network that still exists nowadays in Afghanistan, so United Nations report last year estimated that Al-Qaeda still has about 400 to 600 members in the country, and they periodically fight alongside the Taliban, raise funds and



produce explosives, also the social ties that bind the two organizations through marriages between the two groups abound³.

The problematic issue lies in the post-Zawahiri reign, the questions and suspicions it may raise between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as well, that is there is no strategic alternative that can embrace the forthcoming Al-Qaeda leadership if the Taliban movement abandons Al-Qaeda, in conjunction with Al-Qaeda influence recession and the branches and groups associated with it globally (as we will point out later), which means that when Osama bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri resided in Afghanistan, the land became a haven for jihadists a quarter of a century ago, at present, there is no other obvious haven, particularly after the separation of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham from Al-Qaeda, the retreat of the organization in Yemen and Africa, except the Somali branch, as well as the levels of international and regional security coordination increase, thus the process of hunting leaders will be easier, consequently if the relations between the movement and the Taliban government deteriorated further, the alternatives for the Al-Qaeda families and groups that still reside in Afghanistan will be almost absent, with the exception of some border zone with Pakistan, where there is no place today where the organization has a strong presence and a high reach potential.

The crisis of the various branches and bases.

While the central leadership of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is in a state of decline, the regional branches are in a state of fragmentation and division, and the status of the “Jihad Base in the Arabian Peninsula” organization, which was classified by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 2010, as the most dangerous branch of the organization, confirms that Al-Qaeda is living its worst days, therefore the latter mentioned branch was the most dangerous and active branch among Al-Qaeda branches, yet it has declined, that is the operational activity

³ For more details, see: Thomas Parker, What is the future of Afghanistan-based terrorist groups?, The Washington Institute, June 28, 2021, at the link: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/ma-mstqbl-aljmaat-alarhabyt-alqaymt-fy-afghanistan>.



of the organization has gradually declined since 2015, despite the objective conditions that indicated the inevitable rise of the organization⁴.

Recently Al-Qaeda's tribal and ethnic alliances have expanded, such as the Nusrat al-Islam and Muslims Group, which reflects the largest Al-Qaeda alliance in the world, which encompasses, along with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Macina Liberation Front, which represents the Fulani ethnicity, Ansar Dine group, which represents the Tuareg in Mali, and the Al-Mourabitoun organization, which represents the Arab ethnicity; thus Al-Zawahiri's killing would cause the breakdown of these alliances, these movements - despite their ideological and ethnic disparities - pledged allegiance to Al-Zawahiri since they convinced of his consensual personality, his great jihadist prominence, his high capability of ideological theorizing, and avoidance the ethnic conflicts in the movements, but with the withdrawal of France from Mali, the Nusrat Al-Islam and Muslims group which is loyal to central Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, rebound, as well as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb utilize the chaos that engulf the Sahel region, thus it became one of the most active and valuable branches of the global organization by carrying out kidnappings of Western hostages and launching attacks across large areas of lands⁵.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has also experienced a setback since its establishment in 2014. Several sources indicate the killing of its leader, Osama Mahmoud, who took the lead of the organization after the killing of its former emir, Asim Omar, in Afghanistan on September 23, 2019. Since its founding in 2017, the group has lost several leaders, however, the persistent success of the Taliban probably provides more impetus to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and the central organization, to reconfigure its goals and rethink expanding its

⁴ See: Elizabeth Kendall, where is al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula now? Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 2021, at the link: <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/15370>.

⁵ See: Caleb Weiss, The Negotiation and Militarization Controversy: Tactics of Al-Qaeda's Extension from the Maghreb to West Africa, Future Center for Research and Advanced Studies, July 2022, the link: <https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/7427/%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84>



presence and operations throughout South Asia, which is possible since the organization has the haven in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where it can regroup and increase its members⁶.

Al-Shabaab movement in Somalia is an exceptional case, which remarkably grew and expanded, that is after Trump withdrew the American soldiers from the region, who are about 700 soldiers, Biden, brought the troops back, thus Al-Zawahiri reaped the benefits of his decision to strengthen the Al-Shabab movement in Somalia, arguably the twenty-year during the previous US support, which ended in 2021, in which Somalia was partially able to weaken the strength of Al-Shabab, raises fears of the possibility of central government fall in the country⁷.

Of course, Haya't Tahrir Al-Sham is considered the prominent example of the defection of one of the most prominent branches associated with Al-Qaeda from the central organization, Which led to ideological disputes between the two parties, thus the "Hurras AlDin" organization emerged from the disputes, which represented last faded form of Al-Qaeda in the Arab Mashreq, a weak organization with limited capabilities, thus hunting its leaders affiliated with the distinguished Khorasan Group among Al-Qaeda became an easy mission for American and Western military aircraft with facilities indirectly by Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, which turned on Al-Qaeda⁸.

⁶ See: Muhammad Sinan Sych, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: After the Return of the Taliban, European Eye on Radicalization, February 2022, the link:
<https://eeradicalization.com/ar/%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A>

⁷ See: Mervat Auf, Washington comes back to Somalia... The world's policeman in Africa again, Al Jazeera Net, at the link:<https://www.aljazeera.net/midan/reality/politics/2022/6/9/%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89>

⁸ For more details, see: Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh, Guardians of Religion Organization: The Rise and Decline of Al-Qaeda in the Arab Mashreq, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman Office, 2021.



Approach crisis and strategic uncertainty

The crisis of the approach and the strategic vision or the theory of action of Al-Qaeda is no less than the previous crises, notably Al-Qaeda conducted comprehensive revisions before the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, overseen by Bin Laden himself, as well as the formulations and major contributions of Abu Yahya Al-Libi and Attiya Allah Al-Libi, these critical reviews results as producing a new form of approach or development in the theory of work towards adopting a model based on more attention and consideration of local communities and building a network of cordial relations with them, and not insisting on adhering of Al Qaeda strict approach, or even holding on to power, in case that the process of eliminating a hostile regime is carried out.

Consequently, so-called Ansar Al-Sharia groups emanated from such groups which tend to be more decentralized, the clear example of this model was Jabhat Al-Nusra in the internal war in Syria, but the set of setbacks and internal disputes among Al-Qaeda and their relationship with the new branches, as occurred with Jabhat Al-Nusra, and by ISIS, created several questions about the organization's theory of action and change in a clear and specific way, for instance, the organization emphasized that the emerging groups wouldn't rush toward establishing an Islamic state, or to get involved in the governance and clash with society, but the branches did not commit to this, even Jabhat Al-Nusra, which established an emirate in the areas it controlled (before it became an independent group and defected from Al-Qaeda) or the Al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, which also controlled certain lands before its influence receded.

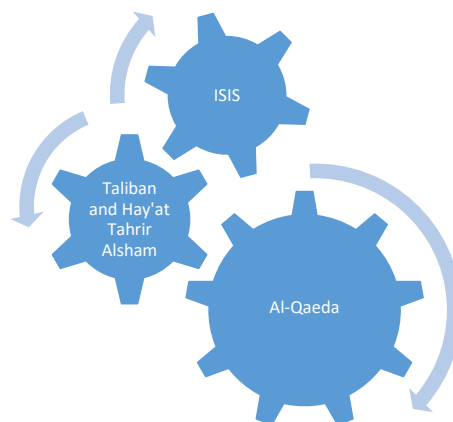
The crisis of strategic vision and approach is explicitly evident when compared to ISIS, which has more solid and clear theoretical and strategic perceptions than Al-Qaeda, which makes it more capable of attracting new jihadist elements of the young generation who are looking for a clear ideological, intellectual and political system.



Internal cohesion and the fragility of the organizational case

There is a motive to believe and be convinced that Al-Qaeda will suffer in the upcoming period from a wave of defections and disintegration on more than one level, which is the result of former causes and contexts; The leadership crisis, the vision and approach crisis, the branches crisis, and the crisis of external alliances and strategic partnerships, it is known that the largest defection occurred with Al-Qaeda was the emerging of the Islamic State from the womb of the organization, which led to the division of global jihadism itself between groups closer to Al-Qaeda and groups closer to ISIS, thus it is noteworthy that ISIS has become more capable and effective in new elements acquisition and building political and media propaganda, despite its successive losses, particularly the loss of the caliphate, it is still more attractive to the young generation looking for a solid, clear, and coherent ideology.

In the subsequent phase, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham defected from Al-Qaeda, thus there is a new different model of jihadist action, which formed a new distinctive trend different from the two former ones, which is represented by the Taliban with its new version and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, and they have a completely different perception of ISIS which insists on hostility with the United States and confrontation armed with, in contrast to Al-Qaeda, which targeted towards the distant enemy instead of the near one, therefore this new trend, which is characterized by locality and disassociates itself from the global conflict, which probably constitutes a new competitor to the Al-Qaeda model.





Conclusion... future indications

Despite the retreat and decline of Al-Qaeda during the Al-Zawahiri period, the decline in its operational capabilities to carry out external attacks and its vulnerability to defections and divisions, however, the future of the organization is shrouded in uncertainty, thus the future of the organization is associated with several conditions and challenges, therefore the ultimate challenge is to choose a successor to Al-Zawahiri who is competent and reliable by all the regional branches.

The relationship with the Taliban movement will play an essential role, which depends on the position of the United States and the international community on the Taliban movement, therefore if the United States insists on not politically recognizing the Taliban government, and isolating it economically, consequently the radical wing of Taliban will strengthen its relationship with Al-Qaeda and protect the jihadist movements, which will lead to rebuilding Al-Qaeda by providing safe havens and recruiting new members.

Given the weak efforts of counter-terrorism, particularly in Africa, the strength of regional branches in Somalia, Mali, and North Africa will grow, thus Al-Qaeda's center of gravity (power) may move from Afghanistan to Africa, as well as the United States relies on an "over-the-horizon" strategy that relies on drones and intelligence work, without troops on the ground, the strategy of beheading leaders will not make a great difference, therefore Al-Qaeda will expand on the ground.

Due to the lack of political tracks in the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, southern Sahara, the Sahel, and the African continent in general, and in Southeast Asia, which are regions that suffer from economic crises, Al-Qaeda can rebuild itself amid crises, as it does not create crises rather exploits them.

Despite the emergence of a more radical and attractive approach of jihadists represented by the "Islamic State" (ISIS), Al-Qaeda still has the ability to adapt, moreover, despite the hostility between representatives of global jihadism, opportunities for cooperation are still possible in the presence of a common enemy.

Therefore, Al-Zawahiri's absence is a curse and a blessing at the same time for Al-Qaeda, his era was related to divisions and defections, thus considering the international consensus on the war on terrorism, the decline of international interest in cross-border terrorism, the emergence of multipolarity, and the growth of competition among the countries, consequently, the opportunities for global jihadism viability still promising.