



# **The death of Ayman al-Zawahiri**

## **Implications for al-Qaeda and the future of global jihadism**

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## Introduction

On 1 August, US President Joe Biden announced to the world the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri. The life of al-Qaeda's leader for the last eleven years reportedly ended on 31<sup>st</sup> July following a US anti-terrorist operation carried out by the CIA using an MQ-9 Reaper drone, from which two R9X Hellfire missiles<sup>1</sup> [1] were launched early in the morning against a house in the Sherpur district of Kabul, just 500 metres from the British embassy. According to what is known so far, al-Zawahiri is reported to have arrived in Kabul at the end of April to visit his family, although the information is somewhat sketchy, citing CIA personnel involved in the operation. The area where he was staying was not new to him, as it is the same neighbourhood in Kabul where al-Zawahiri, his family, and close associates used to reside before the war on terror was declared in 2001. It has also been alleged that the house where he was eliminated belongs to Sirajuddin Haqqani, the current Taliban Interior Minister, which would show that links between the Haqqani network and al-Qaida are still being maintained. In the past, when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, al-Zawahiri's family was sheltered in the house of Jalaluddin Haqqani<sup>2</sup> in Gardez, near Khost. On that occasion too, the US was able to locate them and bomb the house where they were staying, killing several members of al-Zawahiri's family and his close circle of Egyptian associates. Although the US reported that no other people were killed in the July 31 attack besides al-Zawahiri, sources indicated when the operation was made public that Sirajuddin Haqqani's son-in-law and one of his sons were also killed along with the al-Qaeda emir.

Despite having withdrawn from the country barely a year ago, the United States has had the operational capacity to locate and defeat the al-Qaeda leader, thanks to the information and monitoring work of one of its intelligence agencies, the CIA, which probably still has officers on the ground and is active in Afghanistan. Given that since the US withdrew from Afghanistan it has no bases in the country, another question to consider is where the drone took off from (and subsequently landed). An MQ-9 Reaper like the one used by the CIA to launch its attack has a range of 1,850 km, which makes it feasible that it was launched from a ship positioned in the Gulf of Oman, or from a nearby allied country (mainly Tajikistan or Pakistan). The location of al-Zawahiri was possible thanks to the tracking of his wife and family members, who showed such a marked counter-surveillance behaviour that those monitoring them became suspicious. An important detail is who exactly was being followed by intelligence members, since after the death of his wife in the November 2001 attack on Gardez's house, al-Zawahiri had married at least two other women: Umayma Hassan Ahmad and Sayyida Ahmad

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<sup>1</sup>These missiles are also known as *flying ginsu*, due to the fact that they carry six blades that deploy a few milliseconds before impact instead of an explosive charge. Hellfires of this type have been used before against targets moving in vehicles, but this would be the first time they had been used against a building. The main reason for their use, but not the only reason, is to minimise the potential collateral damage caused by an explosive device.

<sup>2</sup> Founder of the Haqqani network and father of Sirajuddin, he passed away in 2018.

Halawa<sup>3</sup>. Sayyida has been in the custody of the Pakistani authorities since 2018, so it was most likely Umayma who was monitored by the CIA (always bearing in mind that it is possible that al-Zawahiri had more wives).

After establishing the behavioural patterns of al-Zawahiri and his family, the CIA observed that early every morning, al-Zawahiri would go out to read on one of the terraces of the house, where he would be eliminated by the impact of the Hellfire R9X on the morning of 31 July.



Figure 1. The house where Ayman al-Zawahiri was hiding is located at سرک ۱۶ م Street, Sherpur district, Kabul (coordinates 34.5340999, 69.1771752). Source: Own research carried out applying OSINT/GEOINT.

Given the magnitude of the event and the possible consequences it will have in the short and long term, the purpose of this paper is to try to shed light on the new panorama that begins after al-Zawahiri's death in an exercise that will prioritise the qualitative analysis of the information, using primary sources to a large extent. Opting for this type of documentation source is particularly important, given the enormous volume of

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<sup>3</sup>Both were previously married to a close friend, to the point of being considered a brother, of al-Zawahiri, Tariq Anwar, a former fellow member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Anwar was also killed in the attack on Gardez.



information published over the last few days, which in many cases has been contradictory.

### **The Doha Agreements, up for debate**

It is in relation to the signing of the Doha Accords of 2020<sup>4</sup> between Taliban representatives and the United States, that several points of this agreement have been put back on the table after the death of al-Zawahiri. According to some specialists, the fact that the al-Qaeda leader is in Kabul, under the supposed knowledge and protection of the Taliban, would mean that the transnational terrorist organisation continues to have its own refuge on Afghan soil, which would be a clear violation of what was signed. However, as the renowned researcher Tore Hamming points out, if we go into detail on the point of the Doha agreement that alludes to this issue, there is no breach of the document in practical terms, as in the words of the agreement itself *"the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan furthermore reaffirms its ongoing commitment to prevent any international terrorist groups or individuals, including al-Qa'ida and ISIS-K, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States, its allies and other countries"*. Therefore, and contrary to popular belief, the Taliban only undertook in this agreement not to harbour al-Qaeda, or other groups, in the event that they used Afghan soil to directly threaten the West, something that strictly speaking has not happened in this case due to the mere presence in Kabul of the leader of the terrorist organisation. Moreover, the Doha Agreement itself states in its third point that *"the United States reaffirms its readiness to continue to conduct military operations in Afghanistan with the consent of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in order to disrupt and degrade efforts by al-Qa'ida, ISIS-K, and other international terrorist groups or individuals to carry out attacks against the United States or its allies"*. Once again, and on the basis of the terms agreed in Doha, the only party that would have failed to comply with what was signed would be the United States, since the counterterrorist operation carried out in Kabul on al-Zawahiri does not seem to have had the Taliban's consent to be carried out. This at least is attested to by the Taliban government itself in an official statement (see below) in which its spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid condemns the attack, stating that *"it is a clear violation of international principles and the Doha Agreement"*. In this sense, demonstrations have been called and held by Afghan citizens, encouraged by the Taliban government, harshly criticising the Biden administration, and campaigns have even been launched on social networks such as Twitter with the hashtag #Down\_with\_America in these same stances of rejecting the attack.

A significant detail in this regard is that the communiqué lacks the classic and usual formulas of respect and courtesy *"May Allah have mercy on him"* (used when speaking of a deceased person), or *"May Allah protect him"* (used when speaking of someone alive), as if the Taliban were unaware of the fate of al-Zawahiri or whether he is alive or

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<sup>4</sup>The full original document can be found at the following link: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>

dead, which may indicate their ignorance of his presence in Kabul. Nor do they give him any praise or kind words, contrary to the usual practice when referring to members of al-Qaida or other Taliban-related groups. Some sources, who say that there are some splits and tribal quarrels in the government, have indicated that a rival faction would be aware of al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, but not the entire government. In this regard, and perhaps coincidentally but with significance, on August 5<sup>th</sup>, and without much publicity, the most powerful person in Taliban intelligence, Dr. Bashirmal (also known as Dr. Bashir and one of the most important members of the Taliban in the fight against the ISKP), head of intelligence in the province of Nangarhar, bordering Pakistan, from where al-Zawahiri may have moved to Kabul, was dismissed.

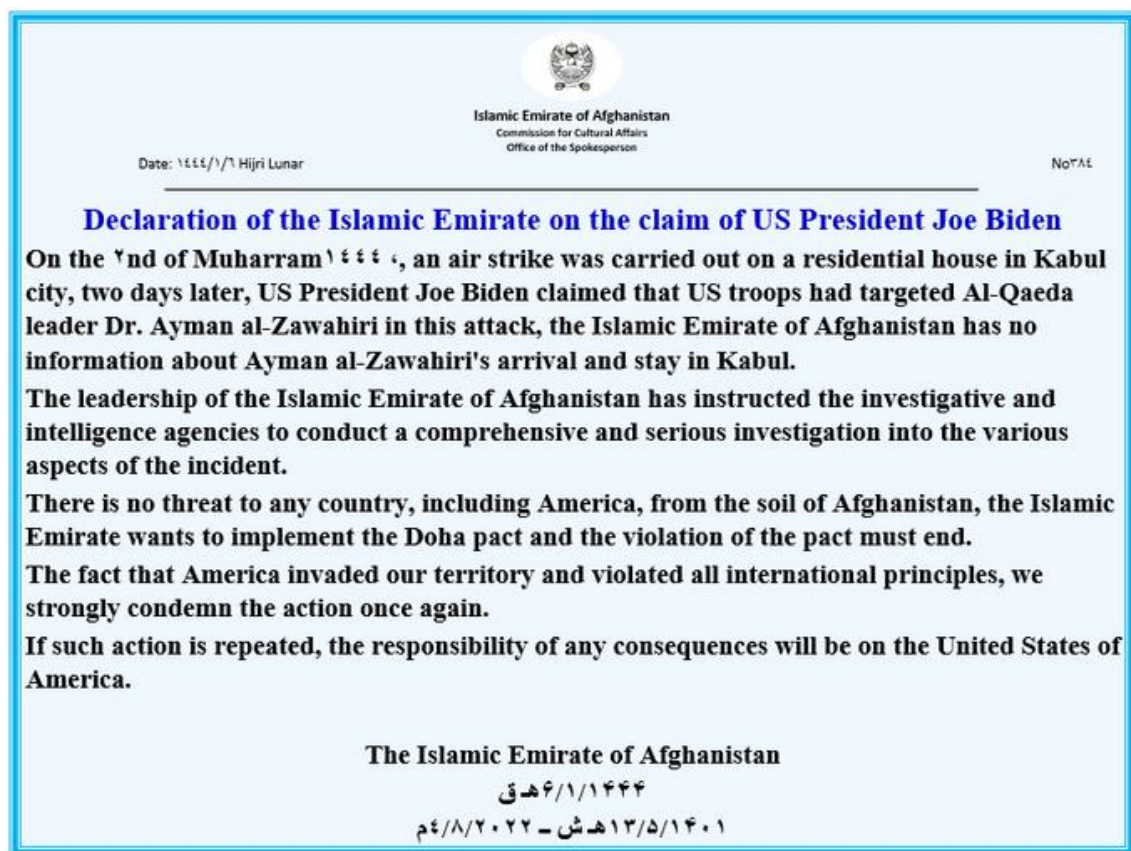


Figure 2. An official statement by the spokesman of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan following the operation that killed al-Zawahiri.

On the other hand, we should also not make the mistake of claiming that the Taliban are going back on their word because the death of al-Zawahiri in Kabul clearly shows that they have not severed their ties with al-Qaida. It is important to keep this in mind, because such a statement has never been made by any representative of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and is rather the result of misinterpretations of what was signed in Doha or errors of analysis. It is worth noting that the Taliban have never confirmed that they will sever their ties with al-Qaida, but rather that they will not harbour or protect terrorist organisations or individuals from Afghanistan who plan attacks or pose a threat to the West, as mentioned above. In a way, this is an ambiguity that somehow

allows the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to excuse itself and avoid the responsibility that can be attributed to it in situations such as the recent death of al-Zawahiri as the leader of al-Qaeda is on its territory could give rise to the interpretation that he does not represent a threat in himself at that moment or that he is planning any kind of terrorist action.

### **Al-Qaida's relationship with the Taliban Emirate**

Nearly a year after the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, it should come as no surprise that the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida remains as close as it has been for the past quarter century. However, that they continue to maintain this strong bond as in the past and are once again allowing al-Qaida to regain sanctuary, which as seen with the death of al-Zawahiri is perhaps not as secure as they might have hoped, does not mean that the relationship will be as permissive on the part of the new Taliban regime. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will not, as they stated in Doha, allow al-Qaida to regain its global agenda or focus on orchestrating attacks on the West again (Igualada and Yagüe, 2021b). This also applies to any other terrorist organisation, and the reason for this is none other than to try to avoid collateral damage from counterterrorism operations, as happened just over twenty years ago when their protection of al-Qaida after 9/11 to the last consequences ended with the overthrow of their government<sup>5</sup>.

Anba Jassim, the source who revealed the assassination of Abu Muhammad Al-Masri in Tehran in August 2020, recently quoted jihadist sources as saying that al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul "*was a top-secret project of the Haqqani network*"<sup>6</sup>. Given the different factions within the Taliban movement, it could be an indication that not all of the Emirate's government was aware that al-Zawahiri was in Kabul.

The death of al-Zawahiri in a high-security district (it is known as the diplomatic quarter, and many members of the government and businessmen live there) of Kabul is a problem for the Taliban for several reasons. For months, al-Zawahiri's activities in Kabul have been detrimental to the interests of the Taliban movement and its government, including the production and dissemination of videos threatening and inciting violence, which would pose a breach of the Doha agreements. The top Taliban leaders are at a crossroads in the eyes of public opinion and the international community: either they approved of al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, and therefore were aware of his activities, or they were unaware of his presence in the diplomatic quarter of the Afghan capital. Both scenarios are equally negative for the Taliban's reputation.

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, it is essential to understand the importance of the Pashtunwali code, a code that governs many moral aspects of daily life, including the protection of all those who are considered guests.

<sup>6</sup> For the original document in which this information is quoted, see:

[https://anbajassim.com/2022/08/02/exclusive\\_zawahiri/](https://anbajassim.com/2022/08/02/exclusive_zawahiri/)

What has happened also means that the Taliban's need and desire for international recognition and support for their government will be greatly thwarted, which will undoubtedly cause the ethnic and interest conflicts already present in the Taliban to become much more pronounced. In addition, this means that the Taliban will have to toughen their stance on any remaining al-Qaida members and sympathisers in the country, either by deciding to expel them or by deciding to submit to total submission to Taliban postulates and decisions, which may lead to some of them, feeling this pressure on their heads, to join the ranks of the ISKP.

### **The legacy of al-Zawahiri and the future of al-Qaeda**

So, what legacy does al-Zawahiri leave behind as head of al-Qaeda and what future can the organisation expect after the death of its leader? Both are questions that some of the world's leading terrorism experts are currently trying to answer. In this way, an interesting debate has been generated on which there are different points of view on issues such as al-Zawahiri's success or failure during his decade of leadership, or whether his death will lead to an even greater decentralisation of the movement or, on the contrary, to reunification.

In terms of his legacy, al-Zawahiri has faced arguably al-Qaeda's most difficult years in its more than thirty years of existence. To begin with, he had to take over in 2011 from an irreplaceable figure, dealing with the aftermath of the biggest counterterrorism coup. Until then, the image of al-Qaeda was inseparable from the figure of Osama bin Laden. However, the disappearance of the man was far from the end of the organisation, and this was the first great success of an al-Zawahiri whose achievements have often gone unrecognised. Al-Zawahiri was able to provide the stability al-Qaeda needed after the death of its great leader in a context in which revolts were also beginning to develop in the Arab world that seemed to demonstrate how wrong al-Qaeda's foundations were when it was claimed that violence was the only way to bring down local governments. However, over time it has become clear that much of al-Qaeda's argument is still valid for a large part of the Arab world given the consequences of the misnamed Arab Spring.

In addition, it should be added that al-Zawahiri has at least managed to ensure that the organisation survived a few years in which counterterrorism efforts and the rise of Daesh forced him to step aside and work from the shadows. In this context, al-Qaeda has also changed its strategy, temporarily abandoning its objective of striking the West ("*the distant enemy*" that Osama bin Laden advocated) to focus on local conflicts from which it can benefit by increasing its support bases among the Muslim population, such as Somalia, Indonesia, or the entire Sahel area. It is precisely due in part to this social support and the ideological roots it has been building over the years that have enabled al-Qaeda to resist Daesh's onslaught in various geographical scenarios. We should also bear in mind that the construction of a decentralised structure over the last twenty years, but strengthened during al-Zawahiri's leadership, based on loyalty and commitment to the cause, has been key as the splits within its various territorial

branches in the face of Daesh's unstoppable advance have been very limited. Especially given that all the conditions and dynamics that were developing at the time were as favourable for Daesh as they were contrary to al-Qaeda.

On more than a few occasions, al-Zawahiri has been wrongly criticised for lacking charisma or long-term strategic capacity. However, and beyond the fact that this lack of charisma is undeniably evident only in the communication aspect, if al-Zawahiri had not had all the skills and capabilities necessary to exercise al-Qaeda's leadership, he would not have risen to the positions he represented and the organisation would probably be in a much weaker position than it is today. In this regard, a couple of excerpts from one of the letters that al-Zawahiri exchanged with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in July 2005 may serve as an example:



Figure 3. Original excerpts from al-Zawahiri's 9 July 2005 letter to al-Zarqawi.

*"If we look at the two short-term objectives, which are to eliminate the Americans and to establish an Islamic emirate in Iraq, or a caliphate if possible, then we will see that the most powerful weapon the mujahideen enjoy, after the help and concession of God's success, is the popular support of the Muslim masses in Iraq and the surrounding Muslim countries.*

*Therefore, we must maintain this support as best we can, and we must strive to increase it, on the condition that fighting for that support does not lead to any concessions in Sharia laws.*

*And it is very important that I expand a little bit here on this issue of popular support. Let us say:*



*(1) If we agree that the victory of Islam and the establishment of a caliphate in the manner of the Prophet will not be achieved except through jihad against the apostate rulers and their elimination, then this goal will not be achieved by the mujahideen movement as long as it is isolated from public support, even if the jihadist movement follows the method of sudden overthrow. This is because such an overthrow would not occur without a minimum of popular support and some condition of public discontent that gives the mujahedin movement what it needs in terms of capabilities in the quickest way. Moreover, if the jihadist movement were forced to pursue other methods, such as a popular jihadist war or a popular intifada, then popular support would be a decisive factor between victory and defeat.*

*(2) In the absence of such popular support, the Islamic mujahedin movement would be crushed in the shadows, away from the distracted or fearful masses, and the struggle between the jihadist elite and the arrogant authorities would be confined to the dungeons of prisons, out of public view and out of daylight. This is precisely what the secular and apostate forces that control our countries are fighting for. These forces do not wish to wipe out the Islamic mujahid movement, but are stealthily striving to separate it from the misguided or frightened Muslim masses. Therefore, our planning must strive to involve the Muslim masses in the battle and bring the mujahid movement to the masses and not lead the struggle away from them."*

*"If our intended goal in this era is the establishment of a caliphate in the manner of the Prophet and if we hope to establish his state predominantly, as it seems to us, in the heart of the Islamic world, then your efforts and sacrifices, God willing, are a great step directly towards that goal.*

*So, we must think long and hard about our next steps and how we want to achieve them, and it is my humble opinion that Jihad in Iraq requires several incremental objectives:*

*The first stage: expelling the Americans from Iraq.*

*The second stage: to establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop and support it until it reaches the level of a caliphate, in as much territory as possible to extend its power in Iraq, i.e. in Sunni areas, is to fill the vacuum that since the departure of the Americans, immediately after their departure and before non-Islamic forces attempt to fill this vacuum, either those whom the Americans will leave behind or those among the non-Islamic forces who will attempt to take power.*

*There is no doubt that this emirate will enter into a fierce struggle with foreign infidel forces, and their supporters among the local forces, to put it in a state of constant preoccupation with defending itself, to make it impossible for it to establish a stable state that can proclaim a caliphate, and to keep the jihadist groups in a constant state of war, until these forces find the opportunity to annihilate them.*

*The third stage: spreading the wave of jihad to Iraq's secular neighbours.*

*The fourth stage: It may coincide with what came before: the clash with Israel, because Israel set itself up alone to challenge any new Islamic entity.*

*The fact that I raise this idea, not pretending to be infallible, is only to emphasise something extremely important. And that is that the mujahideen must not let their mission end with the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq, then lay down their arms, and silence the will to fight. We will once again have secularists and traitors ruling over us. Instead, their mission today is to establish an Islamic state and defend it, with each generation handing over the banner to the next until the Hour of Resurrection."*

That said, al-Zawahiri can also be blamed for some errors that have directly affected the organisation and that can be understood as a sign of weakness or lack of respect for his figure and lack of leadership capacity. In this regard, the Syrian-Iraqi scenario takes on special relevance as the epicentre of the two major splits that have affected the future of both al-Qaeda and global terrorism. The first of these was the split and rupture with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) shortly after the death of Osama bin Laden. The personal rivalry between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who at the time was already the leader of AQI, developed as the trigger for the split. Al-Baghdadi was particularly opposed to al-Zawahiri, literally stating during their epistolary exchange that he was "*not a worthy successor to continue the legacy and work of the Sheik*"<sup>7</sup> (in reference to Osama bin Laden). The deterioration of the relationship between the two, coupled with numerous other differences over strategic decisions, would lead to the rupture of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and an affiliate that soon after would begin to be seen as its greatest enemy.

For his part, in July 2016, the charismatic Syrian jihadist Abu Mohammad al-Jolani decided, along with other local leaders of the movement, to create Jahat Fatah Al Sham, a new Islamist organisation to replace Jabhat al-Nusrah, then considered al-Qaeda's arm in Syria. This decision was taken under the pretext of seeking a move away from the al-Qaeda brand and the ideological extremism characteristic of jihadist Salafism, given that al-Jolani's aim with this new organisation, which has been evolving to its current name Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) since 2017, was to integrate itself into the Syrian political Islamist chessboard and gain a larger social support base. Beyond accusing al-Zawahiri of having committed "*a violation and an act of disobedience*" with his decision (Raheem, 2017), the al-Qaeda leader was unable to prevent this split, which ended up meaning a substantial setback in the influence that his organisation could exert over Syrian territory. For their part, al-Jolani and HTS<sup>8</sup> are today the Syrian Islamist group with the largest social support base, far outstripping Daesh and Hurras al-Din, a group that became al-Qaeda's local affiliate in the country, but which in June 2020 was practically eliminated by HTS (Levitt and Zelin, 2022) and some of its members were absorbed by it.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the exchange of letters between al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi and analysis of their messages, see INGRAM, J., WHITESITE C., WINTER, C. (2020), *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst Publishers.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the evolution of Hayat Tahrir al Sham and the pivotal role played by Al Jolani in today's Syrian Islamist movement, see ZELIN, A. (2022), *The Age of Political Jihadism*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Both splits, those led by al-Baghdadi and al-Jolani, during al-Zawahiri's tenure were of particular relevance and significance because they occurred in the heart of the Arab world at a time of great significance due to the events unfolding in those years. The inability and slow reaction of al-Zawahiri to try to stem these divisions ended up being a source of derision within Jihadist circles outside al-Qaeda, who took the threats he made in his sermons as a joke because of the intentions of al-Baghdadi or al-Jolani himself (Hassan 2022; Clarke, 2022). Moreover, it should be borne in mind that by then both AQI and Jabhat al-Nusrah had emerged as two of the strongest local branches of the organisation. As a result of these splits, al-Qaeda has been unable to regain its influence in both Syria and Iraq, and this is a pending task for the new emir that the organisation appoints. We can use the example of both Da'esh and HTS as an example of al-Zawahiri's partial failure. In relation to Daesh, although it is currently al-Qaeda's biggest rival, it cannot be overlooked that it is also a product of the mismanagement of al-Qaeda's own leadership, in which al-Zawahiri played a decisive role due to his poor relationship with the leaders of AQI and later Daesh. The brutality of the latter may also be a point of criticism of al-Zawahiri's role, since al-Qaeda set itself the goal of making jihadism a less violent and bloody movement, while Daesh has proven to be the opposite. The extreme brutality exercised by Daesh is one, though not the only, of the main reasons why many Salafist jihadist groups decided to align themselves with al-Qaeda, seeking a more "friendly" way to attract followers, sponsorship, or sympathisers. As for al-Jolani, focusing on a local scenario, contrary to the global jihad advocated by al-Qaeda central, while arresting and eliminating members who might be sympathetic to al-Zawahiri's cause, proved to be a smart strategy. In a way, what happened in Afghanistan can also be seen as a defeat for global terrorist strategic approaches. The focus on a local versus a global scenario is what brought the Taliban back to power.

Another major failure that can be blamed on al-Zawahiri in terms of al-Qaeda's cohesion is the loss of control of one of its most important franchises, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). With a clear lack of decisiveness in dealing with internal disputes within AQAP, al-Zawahiri allowed, or at least failed to prevent, AQAP from joining the Iranian-sponsored Houthi forces, leading to major defections that facilitated an increasingly important role for the Houthis in AQAP, and thus becoming a virtual proxy for the Iranian government.

As for the future of al-Qaeda, it will be determined first and foremost by who is elected as the organisation's new emir. The name of al-Zawahiri's successor will serve as an indicator of how al-Qaeda's leadership views the short-term future of global jihadism and what can be expected of the organisation itself, at least in the short term. When the new leader is announced, we will be able to know whether a broad continuity in this line is maintained or whether a riskier bet is placed on a leader who wants to recover centralism and exercise greater control over its various territorial branches in order to avoid the mistakes of the past.



Figure 4. Some reactions on Daesh-associated Telegram channels boasting of the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri.

What is clear is that 9/11 initiated a cycle that is coming to an end just over twenty years later with the death of the generation and the terrorists involved in its planning and execution. This period could be extended to the entire global jihadist movement and not only to al-Qaeda as during the past two decades the world has suffered the greatest jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks committed under the ideological influence of both al-Qaeda and Daesh. Cities such as Madrid, London, Paris, Kabul, Mogadishu, and Sebba have directly suffered the force with which jihadist terrorism – inspired or directed by the two major international terrorist groups and their franchises – has hit society hard in the 21st century.

However, during this same period, the fight against terrorism has also reaped its greatest achievements, being able to take down all the great leaders who have been heading these organisations, as well as their trusted men (Igualada, 2020). From the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 to the recent death of al-Zawahiri, the two caliphs of Daesh in the last three years and almost all the emirs of their respective regional franchises have also been killed, such as Qassim al-Raimi (Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula), Abdelmalek Droukdel (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) or Omar Khorasani (Islamic State of Khorasan), who was arrested in May 2020 and summarily executed by the Taliban last year after he came to power. A large number of senior members of both organisations have also been killed in counterterrorism operations in a variety of theatres from West Africa to South Asia. The latest example of this was the killing of Maher Al Agal, head of Daesh's Syrian wilayah, near the Turkish border a few weeks ago (Aguilera, 2022). Other well-known figures who have been killed recently include Ali Maychou, considered the number two and religious leader of Jamaat Nusra al Islam wallimin (JNIM), and Abu Muhammad al-Masri himself, Al-Qaeda's number two.



Another point that will be interesting to assess will be the scenario vis a vis Daesh. Although there is no indication of an improvement in the relationship, and although the idea seems remote, the renewal of the leadership could leave a small door open to a possible understanding, if not collaboration, in the future. This would allow, for example, the direct confrontations between some of its franchises in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Somalia to cease.

### **The succession dilemma**

The death of al-Zawahiri is a turning point in many ways and raises a series of questions, with multiple variables and options, which will only be answered as time goes by and based on the course of events, but which will undoubtedly mark the most immediate future of al-Qaeda in particular and of the global terrorist movement in general terms.

The question of succession is clearly the main dilemma for al-Qaeda in the wake of al-Zawahiri's death. Just over a decade ago, when the organisation's co-founder Osama bin Laden was killed, it seemed much clearer which figure would be destined to carry on his legacy. Two weeks before al-Zawahiri's elimination, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanction Monitoring Team published its 30<sup>th</sup> report<sup>9</sup>, which mentioned, in a curiously prescient manner, the issue of al-Zawahiri's possible successors, in order of seniority:

*"8. The international situation is favourable to Al-Qaida, which aims to regain recognition as the leader of the global jihad. The group now has an enhanced propaganda apparatus capable of challenging ISIL's primacy as the main inspiration for the international threat environment and could end up posing a greater number of direct threats. According to one Member State, the Hittin Committee, which coordinates Al-Qaida's global leadership, has downgraded Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula below the African branches. In order of seniority, after al-Zawahiri are Sayf-al 'Adl; Abdel-Rahman al-Maghrebi; Yazid Mebrak of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); and Ahmed Diriye of Al-Shabaab."*

While the Egyptian al 'Adl seems to be the most plausible choice, his hypothetical election as al-Qaeda's new leader would also bring with it a number of challenges that the organisation would have to face. The first of these is directly related to the exercise of leadership. Based on various reports that he would allegedly still be in semi-freedom in Iran under government surveillance, al 'Adl would find it difficult to decide on the future of the organisation from a geographical location far from a central axis that has historically brought together its major leaders between the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Everything suggests that this difficulty could be overcome by moving al 'Adl to al-Qaeda's safe zone prior to his hypothetical appointment as leader of the group. There

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<sup>9</sup> Available at the following link:

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2022%2F547&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

are even voices that place him in Afghanistan, where he would have arrived during the last year after the Taliban seizure of power. In the event that he is still in Iran, it would also be necessary to take into account the risk that such a move would entail, given that he has now become a top priority in the fight against terrorism, even more so than until recently, when he was already one of the most wanted al-Qaeda terrorists.

Related to this, but from another point of view, al-'Adl being placed as the head of al-Qaeda would also generate some internal mistrust given the influence that the Ayatollah regime might have exerted over him. It should not be forgotten that Iran stands as the main stronghold of Shia Islamism, and the deep hatred of Shia Islam by Sunni Salafist jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Da'esh is well known. For this reason, it would be more than likely that dissenting voices within the organisation would arise to a greater or lesser extent against a supposed election of al-'Adl as the new emir. Other candidates that could be put forward as successors are in the same situation: Ayman al-Zawahiri's son-in-law and al-Qaeda's communications officer, Abdel Rahman al-Maghrebi. Candidates in Iran, apparently attracted by the worldview of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, will have serious legitimacy problems, as they will be seen as either influenced by the Iranians or as collaborators willing to represent the interests of the Shia regime.

Nor is al-'Adl's potential candidacy helped by his influence in AQAP, as well as his dealings with pro-Iranian militias. Moreover, his father-in-law and ideological ally, Mustafa Hamid, proposed a different vision for the jihadists, advocating a rapprochement with the Tehran regime.

Nevertheless, if al-'Adl is ultimately chosen, it is possible that al-Qaeda's strategy will turn a corner with his arrival. Sayd-al-'Adl presents a very different profile from al-Zawahiri. While the latter spent time writing his own speeches, characterised by a strong ideological and theological component that made his lengthy and formal sermons unattractive treatises that made them less inspiring and less attractive to potential new followers (Levitt and Zelin, 2022), al-'Adl does not seem to be as interested in this work. As he himself stated first-hand in the book *الجيل الثاني من القاعدة* (al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of al-Qaeda, by Jordanian journalist Fuad Husayn), for which he wrote a chapter: *"I have never liked reading, writing, or rhetoric"*. Likewise, if al-'Adl becomes the new al-Qaeda emir, and although it is likely that in the short term we will not see major changes due to al-Qaeda's own idiosyncrasies, over time we will see a different strategy and objectives than his predecessor. According to his track record, his figure is characterised by a proactive stance that could be used to his advantage to attract a young terrorist generation that may have been disconnected from al-Zawahiri's discourse in recent years.

Beyond the candidacy representing 'Adl, there are other names that could also be mentioned as possible candidates for the leadership of Al-Qaeda. The first of these is the Moroccan Abdel Rahman Al-Maghrebi, as mentioned above, who apart from being in charge of al-Qaeda's media apparatus, As-Sahab, during his career in al-Qaeda has also previously held other important positions (Roggio, 2022). Compared to the previous

two leaders, their youth would be an effective generational change within the organisation. On the other hand, other local leaders of the jihadist movement associated with al-Qaeda, such as Yazid Mebrak, emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or Ahmed Diriye, the current leader of the Somali group al-Shabaab, could also stand a chance.

Another possible candidate, more unknown than the previous ones, is Hamza al-Ghamidi. He is one of the old guards of Osama bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, with whom he fought in Afghanistan. He also worked alongside al-'Adl and al-Maghrebi, as well as running al-Qaida safe houses in Kabul and Karachi. In a document made public in 2019, he pledged to abide by the line of succession mentioning first al-Masri (eliminated in Tehran in 2020) and then al-'Adl. This document also places him as a member of the Shura Council, which, together with his possible presence in the Af-Pak area, his combat experience, his past as a member of the Sheik's inner circle, as well as the good relations cultivated in the area with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, may position him as a serious candidate if al 'Adl and al-Maghrebi remain in Iran.

In a recent interview, Saleh al-Hamwi, former founder and leader of Jabhat al-Nusrah, commented that although al-'Adl is the "logical" candidate to succeed al-Zawahiri, the Shura Council would never approve his nomination or lend or accept *bay'ah* to him while he remains under house arrest in Iran. In his view, none of the names from the Islamic Maghreb could be appointed emir given their distance from each other, as well as their lack of a long track record. Likewise, he indicated that, in his opinion, al-Qaeda Central "died" in 2014, and that he does not understand why the West continues to insist otherwise, because communication is only symbolic and each local group has its own Shura Council that makes decisions independently<sup>10</sup>.

Regardless of who is chosen to become the new emir of al-Qaeda, what does seem clear is that his name will not be known immediately. Al-Qaeda has historically been known for proceeding cautiously and conducting all internal processes with measured secrecy so that the external environment and actors have as little impact as possible on decision-making. Even more so in vital decisions such as the election of a new leader. The form and manner in which the succession decision is carried out may lead to an orderly and stable transition or, on the other hand, generate a crisis between different factions that may affect the immediate future of the organisation (Clarke, 2022). Be that as it may, the dilemma seems to be at a point where it will be key and decisive to choose a natural candidate, as would be the case of al 'Adl, with a consolidated and recognised track record that allows him to have the approval of a large part of the organisation's upper hierarchy, or to take a riskier gamble and opt for someone younger and removed from the central structure who can provide the freshness that the organisation needs to attract the generation of tomorrow's jihadists once again.

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<sup>10</sup>The full interview, published on August 5<sup>th</sup>, can be read here: <https://www.militantwire.com/p/what-is-al-qaedas-future-an-interview>

## SOME OF THE POTENTIAL CANDIDATES TO BE APPOINTED AS THE NEW EMIR OF AL-QAEDA



NAME: Mohammed Salahaldin Abd El Hakim Zidane  
KUNYA: Sayf-al 'Adl  
BORN: Egypt  
AGE: 59-62 years old  
LOCATION: Iran (possible location, under house arrest)  
OTHER: Member of the AQ's Shura Council

NAME: Mohammed Abaytah  
KUNYA: Abdel Rahman al-Maghrib  
BORN: Morocco  
AGE: 51-52 years old

LOCATION: Iran (possible location, under house arrest)  
OTHER: son in-law of al-Zawahiri, AQ's Shura Council member,  
in charge of As-Sahab, the official media branch of AQ



NAME: Yazid Mebrak  
KUNYA: Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi  
BORN: Argelia  
AGE: 53 years old  
LOCATION: Argelia  
OTHER: Emir of AQIM, AQIM's Shura Council member,  
leader of the AQIM's Notables Council

NAME: Ahmed Diriye  
KUNYA: Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah  
BORN: Somalia  
AGE: 49-50 years old  
LOCATION: Somalia  
OTHER: Emir of Al-Shabaab



NAME: Salih Sa'id Aal Batih al-Ghamidi  
KUNYA: Hamza al-Ghamidi  
BORN: Saudi Arabia  
AGE: Unknown, born in the late 50's  
LOCATION: Khorasan (possible)  
OTHER: AQ's Shura Council member, brother in arms of  
Osama bin Laden since 80's

Figure 5. Some of the possible candidates to become al-Qaeda's new emir. Source: Own elaboration.



## Renewals of allegiance

Leaving aside the question of succession, another element that requires our attention is how al-Qaida's various territorial branches and affiliated groups will respond to the appointment of a new leader. The formal process obliges these groupings to renew their *bay'ah* in which they swear allegiance to the new emir, thereby expressing their respect, commitment and subordination to him. While this procedure remains a mere formality, it is intrinsically associated with great importance and significance, given that after the death of the leader of a jihadist organisation the bond of allegiance is severed until a new *bay'ah* is pronounced. The current moment will therefore serve as a good thermometer to measure the degree of loyalty and trust in the relationship between al-Qaeda Central and the other groupings under its ideological umbrella. Once the new al-Qaeda emir is named, we will see how these renewals of allegiance by the organisations connected to al-Qaeda will largely take place, but we should also not rule out the option that some of them do not decide to do so and opt to consider other options, studying the possibility of becoming an independent group, something that we are seeing more and more frequently within the terrorist worldview, or trying to come closer to Daesh, something that in principle seems more difficult.

In the same vein, it will also be more than interesting to see whether the new al-Qaeda leader swears allegiance to the Taliban mullah, as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have done in the past<sup>11</sup>. This point is particularly important because it should not be forgotten that theoretically the relationship between the two organisations is marked by al-Qaeda's subordination to those who have protected them and facilitated the creation of their sanctuaries in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the current situation is marked by a different context in which, in principle, the Taliban government would have signed the Doha agreements not to give shelter or support on Afghan territory to any terrorist organisation that could pose a threat or plan terrorist actions against the West. An oath of allegiance by al-Qaeda in this context would challenge the Taliban, who would be forced to either accept their relationship with al-Qaeda before the international community, even though they have never publicly shunned it or sever their historical ties (Clarke, 2022). In this regard, following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said of whether there had been an oath of allegiance by al-Zawahiri: "There is no *bay'ah*", thus affirming al-Zawahiri's growing irrelevance. All of al-Zawahiri's efforts to point to the Taliban emir as his supreme leader were thus publicly undermined. In any case, all this must be understood from a theoretical point of view, since in practice, as is well known, events unfolded differently. In any case, in this situation, the decision that the Taliban may take will surely have immediate consequences in terms of international recognition of the Islamic Emirate of

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<sup>11</sup> The mechanisms and content of the *bay'ah* borrowed by Osama bin Laden and other members of al-Qaeda can be consulted in: IGUALADA, C., YAGÜE, J., The Use of *Bay'ah* by the Main Salafi-Jihadist Groups, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 15, No. 1.

Afghanistan as a legitimate actor, favouring or damaging its image depending on the stance they take.

## Conclusions

Without doubt, the death of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri marks the end of a cycle. Many questions remain to be answered in the wake of his death, not least the implications for al-Qaeda of the arrival of a new leader in both the short and long term. The decisions taken by the new figure responsible for leading the terrorist organisation will be decisive in determining both al-Qaeda's relationship with its allied groups and with its enemies. Likewise, the strategy adopted by al-Qaeda will provide insight into the way in which the historic terrorist organisation views the future of the global Jihadist movement.

Another interesting point to know will be how the relationship between al-Qaeda and Daesh evolves, bearing in mind that the strong personal rivalry between al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi, which marked the parting of the ways between the organisations they led, no longer exists. The arrival of new leaders could represent a turning point in terms of a possible understanding between the two, but not cooperation, let alone a hypothetical merger. The latter option seems somewhat unrealistic, at least in the short to medium term.

Finally, the Taliban's response to al-Zawahiri's death will become clearer in the coming months. Many doubts and questions surround them, both as to whether or not they were aware of the existence of the al-Qaeda leader on their territory and as to their protection of al-Qaeda. To a large extent, how they deal with this uncertainty will be key to achieving their desired goal: recognition by the international community. Therefore, they will be very meticulous when it comes to acting on this event, taking the measures they deem appropriate so as not to convey the image, once again, of being an actor that supports terrorism. Furthermore, if it is indeed true that they did not know of al-Zawahiri's existence, they will have to carry out a rigorous internal investigation to find out who was responsible for harbouring him and whether they are among their allies.

In recent years we have witnessed a decentralisation of terrorism, with the emergence of different groups and actors of a local nature, who have preferred to focus on a jihad close to home. They have defended interests in their area of influence, with independence in terms of funding, communication campaigns, strategic and tactical planning, and internally-decided operations. The death of al-Zawahiri, marking the end in some way of a generation of jihadism, may be either a revival of the movement or its final judgement as a global movement. It is possible that the death of al-Zawahiri, together with the Daesh debacle, and the location contained within the geographical scope of action of most of the franchise or satellite groups of al-Qaeda and Daesh, will end up proving right one of al-Zawahiri's great "enemies", Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, when decades ago he defended his main mantra "*Nizam, the Tanzim*" (the system, not the organisation) as the path to follow to carry out a global jihad.

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