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The Killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri

Implications for US relations with the Taliban government

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 1 August 2022, US President Joe Biden announced that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had been killed in an American airstrike in the Afghan capital of Kabul. The operation came nearly two weeks before the first anniversary of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which led to the fall of the government of US ally President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban's seizure of power. The assassination increased tensions between Washington and the Taliban movement, which accused of one another of violating the 2020 Doha Agreement that paved the way for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Renewed controversy over the withdrawal

The assassination revived the debate in the US over whether Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan had limited US capacity — intelligence-related, logistical, and military — to meet the threats to US interests posed by organisations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS)¹ and left a vacuum to be filled by these groups. In April 2021, four months before the troop withdrawal, Biden said that Washington would continue to monitor the “terrorist threat” from the country and would retain military and intelligence capabilities in the region sufficient to prevent its resurgence. The US emphasised that it would hold the Taliban accountable if the movement breached its obligations under the Doha Agreement not allow terrorists to threaten the US or its allies from Afghan territory.²

For the Biden administration, Zawahiri's assassination demonstrates the success of its approach to counterterrorism in remote areas, or “over the horizon,” which does not require maintaining a military presence on the ground. In announcing the success of the airstrike that eliminated Zawahiri, Biden was careful to underline the promise he made during the withdrawal from Afghanistan last year to continue counterterrorism operations “in Afghanistan and beyond.” When he took the decision to end military operations in the country, he was certain, he said, that “the United States no longer needed thousands of boots on the ground in Afghanistan to protect America from terrorists.” He asserted that Washington would never again permit Afghanistan to become “a terrorist safe haven...a launching pad against the United States.”³ For the Biden administration, Zawahiri's assassination shows that if it has the correct intelligence, the US is capable of dealing with a specific target from afar. In addition to drones, the US has come to rely largely on networks of informers on the ground for the collection of information.⁴

For others, in contrast, Zawahiri's assassination in Kabul is proof of the failure of the Biden administration's approach. The fact that Zawahiri was living in the Afghan capital — in an upscale area favoured by top Taliban officials — demonstrates that Afghanistan has, in fact, become a safe

1 Patricia Zengerle & Jonathan Landay, “CIA Chief Highlights Loss of Intelligence Once U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, 14/4/2021, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3PfhLbl>.

2 “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” the White House, 14/4/2021, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3BUMc3m>.

3 “Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Afghanistan,” the White House, 1/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3BVF6Mf>.

4 Katie Bo Lillis, “Despite al-Zawahiri Strike, US Officials are Concerned about Tracking Terrorism Threats in Afghanistan,” *CNN*, 5/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://cnn.it/3dkcq5k>.



haven for al-Qaeda and its leaders.⁵ Responding to the Biden administration's reassurances that the al-Qaeda presence no longer poses a genuine threat to the US, critics say, as FBI director Chris Wray did recently, that after the withdrawal and the loss of many US sources and capacities on the ground, the risk of planned attacks on the US from Afghanistan has increased.⁶ Critics argue that despite the significance of the operation to liquidate Zawahiri, its success cannot be generalised. Zawahiri was a high-value target solely in symbolic terms; operations on the ground are now being led by less prominent al-Qaeda commanders,⁷ which means targeting them is more difficult.

Washington also faces logistic hurdles and challenges in the context of counterterrorism operations over the horizon. Since the withdrawal, the Biden administration has been busy drafting alternatives to boots on the ground to prevent al-Qaeda and like organisations from strengthening their presence there. These plans include CENTCOM, under whose remit Afghanistan falls, moving troops to Pakistan or Tajikistan to make a rapid response possible in the event of any emerging threat.⁸ But this has not yet happened and does not look like it will any time soon. Although the US maintains airbases in Gulf Arab states and Jordan and possesses the capabilities to fire long-range missiles from its warships stationed in nearby locations or unleash drone attacks, critics see these options as impractical and risky, particularly given the lack of direct intelligence.⁹ Sending jets from the Gulf bases, for example, requires not a little time; they also need to be refuelled mid-flight more than once. The same is true of drones. Moreover, Afghanistan is a landlocked nation, so entering Afghan airspace requires permission from a neighbouring state. Since Iran, Central Asian states, and China—which all share mountainous borders with Afghanistan—will not cooperate with the US in this respect, the only available option is Pakistan, whose relationship with the US is complicated.¹⁰ Missile strikes, on the other hand, require precise targeting on the ground; this is time-consuming, narrowing the window of opportunity.¹¹

The problematic relationship with the Taliban

The most complex issue for Washington currently is how to deal with the Taliban government in light of its perceived violation of the 2020 Doha Agreement, which requires the Taliban to take steps to prevent “any group or individual, including al-Qa’ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to

⁵ Marc A. Thiessen, “Zawahiri Was in ‘Downtown Kabul’ because of Biden’s Disastrous Afghanistan Withdrawal,” *The Washington Post*, 1/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3BQRHjH>.

⁶ Lillis.

⁷ Paul D. Shinkman & Susan Milligan, “U.S. Kills Al-Qaida Leader in Major National Security ‘Win’ for Biden,” *US News and World Report*, 1/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3BVR9cq>.

⁸ Tom Bowman, “Can the Afghan Army Hold off the Taliban Without the U.S.?” *National Public Radio*, 16/4/2021, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://n.pr/3p6a3pc>.

⁹ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff & Eric Schmitt, “Biden to Withdraw all Combat Troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11,” *The New York Times*, 13/4/2021, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://nyti.ms/3SEbtom>.

¹⁰ Hameed Hakimi, “Zawahiri’s Killing Was a Biden Play for Popularity – But It May Have Unexpected Consequences,” *The Guardian*, 2/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3JL0rd5>.

¹¹ C. Todd Lopez, “U.S. Plans to Keep Threats in Check Even after Afghanistan Withdrawal,” US Department of Defense, 20/4/2021, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3A86iGa>.

threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”¹² According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, “By hosting and sheltering the leader of al-Qa’ida 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.”¹³ But the Biden administration is attempting a delicate balance: on one hand, it is keeping the pressure on the Taliban and encouraging internal rifts within the movement; on the other, it is trying to prevent the outright collapse of Taliban rule, which would leave a vacuum that could be filled by extremist groups, particularly the Islamic State Khorasan Province.

This is the context in which to view the statements of Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security advisor, holding the Haqqani network responsible for hosting and protecting Zawahiri, rather than the Taliban as a whole: “We believe that there were senior members of the Haqqani network who are affiliated with the Taliban who did know that Zawahiri was in Kabul,” he said. “There may have been other members of the Taliban who did not know.”¹⁴ US officials say that the house in which Zawahiri was living is owned by a person close to Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban interior minister.¹⁵ According to US intelligence, there are strong ties between the Haqqani network and al-Qaeda. US officials accused the network of hiding Zawahiri’s body after his death, as well as quickly getting his family out of the house to cover all traces of their presence there.¹⁶

The Biden administration hopes that exposing Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul absent the knowledge of Taliban leaders will strengthen the hand of the group’s pragmatic wing, particularly given the movement’s aspiration to win international legitimacy for its rule in Afghanistan.¹⁷ For a year, the Taliban has been diligently attempting to secure international support to address growing humanitarian and economic crises. US and international sanctions have inflicted major suffering on 40 million Afghans, and financial support for Afghanistan fell dramatically after the US withdrawal. The US also froze some \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank funds. All of this has led to 30–40 percent contraction in the country’s economy.¹⁸

The Biden administration fears that assassinating Zawahiri in the heart of the Afghan capital will boost the legitimacy of the movement’s more extreme voices, insofar as it undermines the Taliban’s attempt to demonstrate the legitimacy of its rule to its base in Afghanistan, which is predicated on its success in uniting the country under a single strong government. Accordingly, the Biden

12 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” US Department of State, 29/2/2020, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Adrkek>.

13 Antony J. Blinken, “The Death of Ayman al-Zawahiri,” US Department of State, 1/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3SDEuk8>.

14 “WH Security Adviser Details Mission to Track Down Al Qaeda Leader,” *Today*, 2/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://on.today.com/3BTmZX0>.

15 Ellen Knickmeyer, “Explainer: Who Was al-Zawahiri — and Why Did US Kill Him?” *Associated Press*, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3bMMCyf>.

16 Peter Baker et al., “U.S. Drone Strike in Kabul Kills Top Qaeda Leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri,” *The New York Times*, 2/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://nyti.ms/3PbDG2T>.

17 Michael Kugelman, “Ayman al-Zawahiri Assassination: The Taliban’s Biggest Crisis,” *Al Jazeera*, 5/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3zLe3QV>.

18 Jonathan Schroden, “What Zawahiri’s Death Tells Us about Afghanistan’s Future,” *Politico*, 2/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://politi.co/3bKd7UQ>.



administration is attempting to maintain sanctions on the Taliban regime in order to secure more concessions while at the same time it released some of Afghanistan's frozen funds, allowing some assistance to flow to alleviate humanitarian suffering and address the food crisis.¹⁹ The Biden administration is also seeking to ensure that keeping the pressure on the Taliban and fomenting discord among its various factions does not lead to the kind of turmoil that would make it impossible for the movement to govern in the future.²⁰ In this context, some US military leaders hope that the Taliban will view it in their interest to cooperate with the US to fight their common enemy — ISIS — which has grown more active in Afghanistan since the US withdrawal and does not hesitate to target the Taliban and their rule.²¹

Conclusion

The assassination of al-Qaeda commander Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul has put the Taliban government in a difficult spot. The movement cannot claim that it did not know of his presence in the heart of the capital because it makes the group look weak. But if it affirms its knowledge of Zawahiri's presence, it will confirm its breach of the 2020 Doha Agreement. And if it is proven that some factions within the movement knew of and protected Zawahiri without the knowledge of the Taliban leadership, it will demonstrate that the movement is divided. The Biden administration understands the magnitude of the crisis facing the Taliban and is attempting to exploit it to win concessions regarding the movement's treatment of extremist organisations, its economic and investment ties with China, and women's rights. But it does not want to break Taliban rule entirely, which would leave a vacuum to be filled by extremist groups like Daesh.

¹⁹ Aamer Madhani et al., "The Downside: US Strike Shows Afghanistan Still Terror Base," *Associated Press*, 2/8/2022, accessed 10/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3djpsQm>.

²⁰ Kugelman.

²¹ Lillis.