



Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Killed in U.S. Drone Strike in Afghanistan

August 3, 2022

On August 1, 2022, President Biden [announced](#) that two days earlier, a [U.S. drone strike](#) had killed [Al Qaeda](#) (AQ) leader Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul, Afghanistan. Congress may consider whether Zawahiri's death may lead to changes in Al Qaeda's organization, operational capacity, and the threats it poses to U.S. interests. Congress also may examine the operation and the circumstances of Zawahiri's presence in Afghanistan in considering U.S. policy in [Afghanistan](#), including U.S. relations with the ruling Taliban government and U.S. [over-the-horizon](#) counterterrorism capabilities.

Zawahiri's Life and Death

[Ayman al Zawahiri](#), born in Egypt in 1951, was AQ founder Osama bin Laden's deputy for over a decade, and served as Al Qaeda's leader (or *emir*) after Bin Laden's [May 2011 killing](#). Zawahiri was [indicted](#) for his role in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in east Africa, and was "[deeply involved](#) in the planning of 9/11" and other major attacks. Zawahiri [lacked](#) Bin Laden's charisma, and under his leadership, Al Qaeda experienced the internal dispute that led to the founding of the rival [Islamic State \(IS\) organization](#) that arguably overshadowed Al Qaeda after 2014. Some analysts [argue](#) that Zawahiri's decentralized and "less flashy" approach was an asset, allowing AQ affiliates to establish a durable presence in local communities while the Islamic State group bore the brunt of U.S.-led counterterrorism [efforts](#).

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IN11976

Figure 1. Ayman al Zawahiri

Pictured in November 2001

**Source:** [Reuters](#), via *Dawn* (Pakistan)

In his August 1 [statement](#), President Biden said, “Our intelligence community located Zawahiri earlier this year” in Kabul. The President indicated that there were no civilian casualties in the strike on Zawahiri, attributing the “total success” of the mission to “the painstaking work of our counterterrorism community and key allies and partners.” He added that his administration had kept “key congressional leaders” informed of developments leading up to the strike.

Implications of Zawahiri’s Death

Al Qaeda After Zawahiri

The question of who might succeed Zawahiri, who was said to [be ill](#) and whose precise role in leading Al Qaeda was not clear, remains open. The deaths of Zawahiri’s former deputies in [Syria in 2017](#) and [Iran in 2020](#), and that of Bin Laden’s son Hamza (whose killing in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region President Trump announced [in 2019](#)), leave longtime AQ operative [Saif al Adel](#) as Zawahiri’s likely successor. Al Adel has [reportedly](#) been in Iran under varying forms of house arrest for some [twenty years](#), though United Nations sanctions monitors reported member state views [in early 2022](#) that Al Adel is likely to relocate to Afghanistan if he succeeds Zawahiri.

In the longer term, analysts and policymakers are likely to follow closely the broader impacts of Zawahiri’s death on Al Qaeda. The killing of one of the organization’s original founders could weaken the group and its claim to leadership of the global Islamist extremist movement. A prolonged or contested succession might prompt attrition from and divisions within the group. Alternately, under a more assertive and effective leader, Al Qaeda could become more aggressive operationally, and the group’s standing could rebound if that of the Islamic State continues to appear [uncertain](#). Members of Congress may consider whether and how Zawahiri’s death and its effects on Al Qaeda might merit changes to U.S. national security resources and authorities (including the [2001 AUMF](#)).

U.S. Policy in Afghanistan

2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement and Taliban Reaction

The State Department said Zawahiri’s presence in central Kabul was proof that the Taliban “[grossly violated](#)” the [February 2020 U.S.-Taliban Agreement](#), in which the Taliban committed not to allow Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups “to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States.” Zawahiri had called for attacks against Western targets as recently as [2021](#); it is not clear to what

extent, if at all, he was involved in planning operations. According to a July 2022 [U.N. sanctions monitors](#) report, while Al Qaeda enjoys safe haven under the Taliban, it “confines its activities to advising and supporting” the Taliban, given Al Qaeda’s desire to not “cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment” as well as Taliban “restraint” on Al Qaeda. For their part, the Taliban, via a [spokesperson](#), “strongly” condemned the U.S. strike as a “clear violation of international principles and the Doha Agreement,” without acknowledging Zawahiri’s death. The circumstances of Zawahiri’s residence in Kabul and what they might reveal about internal Taliban dynamics beyond continued AQ ties are not yet clear. Members of Congress may also examine how either the fact that Zawahiri was living in the capital or the strike itself will or should affect [ongoing](#) tentative [diplomatic engagement](#) between the United States and the Taliban.

Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism

President Biden [asserted](#) the mission vindicated his decision to complete the removal of U.S. ground forces from Afghanistan and pursue counterterrorism operations from over-the-horizon. In Congress, some [echoed](#) the President and praised the strike; one Member called it a demonstration that “the U.S. still has the capacity and capability to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.” Another [cited](#) “the Taliban’s willingness to harbor senior terrorists” and criticized Biden Administration Afghanistan policy as a “total failure,” while noting that “the U.S. government still has the capability to target these terrorists.” Still [another](#) pointed to the strike as evidence that “the threat of global terrorism has not gone away” and that the United States “must remain vigilant.” With no U.S. military or diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, and the nearest U.S. military bases hundreds of miles away, the United States is [reportedly working](#) to increase its intelligence-gathering capabilities in the region.

The U.S. strike against Zawahiri appears to be the first such operation in Afghanistan since an [August 2021 strike](#) that the Pentagon [originally said](#) targeted IS figures but [later acknowledged](#) was a “mistake” that killed ten civilians. Section 1212 of H.R. 7900 would add assessments of “the ability of the United States to detect emerging threats emanating from Afghanistan” and other counterterrorism-related items to the annual Afghanistan report originally mandated in P.L. 117-81 (Section 1069). Members of Congress may consider further amending reporting requirements in the wake of Zawahiri’s death.

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