



The road ahead for Al-Qaeda: The role of Ayman Al Zawahiri

By Siddharth Ramana, Research Officer, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

The death of Osama Bin Laden at the hands of American Special Forces in May 2011 has left a major void in the leadership of Al-Qaeda Central, or the base group to which numerous splinter outfits have pledged their allegiance. Bin Laden's death is significant as it comes as a time when the senior leadership of the organization has been severely dented through extraordinary intelligence efforts resulting in capturing and killing senior functionaries including Khaled Sheikh Mohammad, the chief architect of the Sept 11 attacks, and Mohammed Atef, the military head of Al-Qaeda.

Traditional watchers of Al-Qaeda have already asserted that as per hierarchical ascension Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri would have to handle the reins of a group[1] which is a shadow of its former self, and having to deal with a cadre who would be disoriented and demoralized after the death of their charismatic leader.

The problems which Zawahiri will inherit are many; firstly, to elude the fate of his predecessor, second to avenge the death and capture of his colleagues, and thirdly, and equally importantly, shoring confidence among his cadre and sympathizers by successfully attacking mainland USA.

This piece analyses the growth of Dr. Zawahiri among jihadist ranks and tries to forecast the future direction of Al-Qaeda under his aegis. This essay concludes that Zawahiri's present weakness among jihadists is an initial irritant to the wider plans of Zawahiri, which would include re-focusing efforts towards the Arab world's unrest before returning to target the West.

Personal life

Zawahiri's personal upbringing provides a cursory glance into the origins of his radical behaviour. Developing his growing years, we can map avenues which have



played an important role in Zawahiri's psyche and elucidate upon his behavioral patterns in the future.

Zawahiri was born on June 19, 1951, and he grew up in an upper-class neighborhood in Cairo, Egypt, the son of a prominent physician and grandson of renowned scholars. He boasted of an impressive lineage in the Arab world, with his grandfather, Rabi'a al-Zawahiri, being the grand imam of Cairo's al-Azhar university, a centre of Islamic learning in the Arab world, his father Rabi, a professor of pharmacology and his great maternal uncle the first Secretary of the Arab league[2]. His maternal grandfather, Abdul-Wahab Azzam, was a professor of Oriental literature, president of Cairo University and Egyptian Ambassador to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen[3].

His interest in Islamist thought and ideology could have been influenced by his family's background, his grandfather was known for his piety, and encouraged Zawahiri's active interest in attending Islamic sermons. According to an uncle of Zawahiri, "He was known as a good Muslim, keen to pray at the mosque and to read and to think and to have his own positions"[4].

Zawahiri pursued his educational interests in medicine, graduating from Cairo University's medical school in 1974, obtaining a masters degree in surgery four years later. During his college days he was heavily influenced by leading Islamic scholars including Syed Qutb, whose ideological writings he incorporated into his own interpretations on Jihad and Sharia in Egypt[5].

This influence would prove to be the cornerstone of jihadist thought in the man.

Syed Qutb's influence on Zawahiri

The influence of family in Zawahiri's earliest tryst with Islamism is both documented and obvious in their professional and ideological leanings. Zawahiri's uncle, Mahfouz Azzam, a lawyer, was associated with Syed Qutb[6], and regarded him as a teacher. The role of Qutb in shaping the early vestiges of Islamism in Zawahiri is important to understand since it offers a glimpse into the



psychological thinking of Zawahiri, and indeed many other jihadists who have been influenced by the works of Qutb.

According to Lawrence Wright, the author of "The Looming Towers: The Road to 9/11", Azzam signified the close relationship he held with Qutb, describing how "He (Qutb) taught me Arabic in 1936 and 1937. He came daily to our house. He held seminars and gave us books for discussion. The first book he asked me to write a report on was "What Did the World Lose with the Decline of the Muslims?"[7]'

Qutb's radical thought led the opposition against the Egyptian government led by Gamel Nasser. What had riled Qutb was the assassination of Hasan al Banna, and Egypt's perceived subservient behavior to the West[8]. When a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954, the state machinery cracked down on the group, imprisoning and torturing Qutb.

Qutb's influence on radical Islamist thought was presented in his seminal piece called Ma`alim Fil Tariq (Milestones/ Signposts), written while in prison. The book was published in 1964, and reflected Qutb's distrust of Western influences in the Arab world.

His views on Jihad were exemplified by his interpretation of Takfir and Jahiliya. The Arab world according to him was divided into Islam and Jahiliyya. Jahiliya, in traditional Islamic discourse, refers to a period of ignorance that existed throughout the world before the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad. Qutb classified the entire world under Jahiliyya.

As Qutb saw it, "Europeans, under Christianity's influence, began to picture God on one side and science on the other - Religion over here, intellectual inquiry over there. On one side, the natural human yearning for God and for a divinely ordered life; on the other side, the natural human desire for knowledge of the physical universe - "The church against science and the scientists against the church". Everything that Islam knew to be one, the Christian Church divided into two. And, under these terrible pressures, the European mind finally split asunder. The break became total - Christianity, over here; atheism, over there. It was the



fateful divorce between the sacred and the secular[9]”. One of the reasons for Qutb’s growing critical view of the west was also based on his interpretations of how the Western culture had sidelined religion for scientific research. This was a sacrilegious division which resulted in decadency and primitive actions of the west.

According to him “The Muslim community has long ago vanished from existence”. “It is crushed under the weight of those false laws and customs which are not even remotely related to Islamic teachings.” “Humanity cannot be saved unless Muslims recapture the glory of their earliest and purest expression. We need to initiate the movement of Islamic revival in some Muslim country” [10]. Qutb’s reinterpretation of the concept of jahiliya is a “subtle reworking of the traditional Islamic division of the world into two spheres, dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam), and dar al-harb (the abode of conflict, i.e., an imperfect, non-Islamic social order). While a Muslim might ignore conditions in the dar al-harb, it was his duty to combat the threat to Islam posed by the jahiliya”. By painting the whole world in a state of jahiliya, he threw open the floodgates for his followers to embark upon his notion of Jihad against secular, western and communist regimes[11]. “The most subversive aspect of Milestones, from the point of view of secular, multicultural governments and peoples, is its insistence that personal belief in and worship of God is insufficient to avoid Jahiliya. You can be as devout as you like, but if you tolerate and obey jahili institutions, you are defying God”[12].

Images of an ill Qutb being dragged to prison, and his fiery sermons during court sessions served to galvanize a whole new generation of young Islamists, among them was Zawahiri, who started to idolize Qutb’s position against an anti-Islamic government. In an incident which reflects his following, Zawahiri in the mid-sixties had famously refuted an offer to ride with Hussein al-Shaffei, the Vice-President of Egypt and one of the judges in the 1954 roundup of Islamists. His rebuttal was punctuated with the argument that “We don't want to get this ride from a man who participated in the courts that killed Muslims”[13].

When Qutb was executed in 1966, it had a profound effect on Zawahiri who earnestly took up the cause of Jihad against the Egyptian government, and



became a part of an Islamic underground movement working for a violent takeover the government. In 1967, the six day war with Israel occurred, which strengthened Zawahiri's belief in Qutb as a prophetic intellectual.

Egypt's rout in the war destroyed its standing as a major Arab military power, and demoralized Egyptian citizens into looking for a way to cope with the loss of Arab face. Qutb's writings played a role for Zawahiri in assessing that the reasons for the defeat lay in the immoral ways of the present Egyptian regime. For Zawahiri, the idea was to reinvigorate the country. According to him "Our first task is to change society in deed, to alter the jahiliyah reality from top to bottom. We must get rid of this jahiliyah society; we must abandon its values and ideology"[14].

Zawahiri viewed events in a case-effect relationship with an Islamist spin to it. He argued that the far enemy (Israel) can only be defeated when the near enemy (The Egyptian republic) is defeated. To do this, a jihad must be declared on them. Thus according to Zawahiri, the road to Jerusalem lay through conquering Cairo[15].

Prison and international Jihad

In pushing for his goal of overthrowing the Egyptian government, he was facilitated inadvertently by Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat. Sadat sought an electoral alliance with the Islamists and released them en masse from prisons, in hopes to befriend them. What followed thereafter was a sociological coup by the Islamists in universities and trade unions, pushing forward an increasingly non-liberal and non-secular outlook, which provided more cadres to the underground Islamist movement. The subsequent defeat of Egypt in the Yom Kippur war of 1973, served to further rile up the Islamists into believing that the revolution should occur at the earliest, lest their society was further denigrated.

Zawahiri as a result of his imprisonment, state sponsored torture and collective humiliation at having lost to Israel, started following a more radical interpretation of Islam described as Salafist, which shunned any religious practices which were adopted after the death of Prophet Muhammad. During the 1970s-1980s, the two



main operating jihadist groups in Egypt were Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) under the leadership of Zawahiri and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya headed by the blind Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman. Ideological differences between the two leaders had prevented the groups from merging, with Zawahiri focused on Egypt, & his rival advocating pan-Islamism[16].

According to Zawahiri's memoirs, "My connection with Afghanistan began in the summer of 1980 by a twist of fate". Zawahiri visited the country and Pakistan, on the invitation of a senior physician, and was deeply moved by stories of heroism by the Afghan Mujahideen who were fighting the Soviet invaders. On his return, he became a part of the plot to assassinate Anwar Sadat, who had the previous year signed a peace treaty with Israel. He was convicted for possession of arms, and sentenced to three years, escaping the more serious charge of conspiracy to murder[17].

In prison, Zawahiri with his charisma and fluent English, emerged as an international spokesman for the imprisoned Islamic activists. "We want to speak to the whole world," he said in 1983. "We are Muslims who believe in our religion. ... We are here, the real Islamic front and the real Islamic opposition"[18].

Zawahiri succumbed to torture while in prison, and betrayed his accomplices including his friend and hero Al-Qamari. With information from Zawahiri, there was a massive security clampdown on the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and following his release in 1985, Zawahiri fled to Saudi Arabia and from there to Afghanistan[19], where during his visits to the region he met Osama Bin Laden.

Relationship with Bin Laden

According to some, the first meeting between the two was cordial but meek, but it bloomed under the tutelage of Palestinian mentor Abdullah Azzam. Some skeptics of the relationship call it an alliance of convenience, based on a symbiotic relationship which could have allowed either leader to carry a movement based on their thought process. Others have suggested that the relationship was strong from its initial years, including the possibility that the actual idea of Al-Qaeda was Zawahiri's as early as 1988[20].



What made Bin Laden attractive to Zawahiri was his financial status as the heir to a multi-billion dollar construction company in Saudi Arabia, while Bin Laden was impressed by Zawahiri's organizational skills and superior jihadist credentials. This allowed for an alliance wherein Bin Laden would be operating as the CEO of Al-Qaeda, while Zawahiri would be architect of the organizational build up of the group.

According to Wright, Lawrence, "Zawahiri is cunning and experienced; he knows how to run underground cells, from his clandestine experience in Egypt. But he's not Bin Laden -he's not charismatic, and he's not a natural leader. People don't want to give up their lives for Zawahiri in the same way they want to for bin Laden[21]."

While Bin Laden and Zawahiri parted ways at the end of the Afghan Jihad, they were soon reunited in Sudan, where both Bin Laden and Zawahiri had taken refuge from state prosecution from their respective countries[22]. Zawahiri's theological expertise provided a base for Bin Laden to further hone his worldview, but in many ways there was a sense of dependency which came from Zawahiri's leadership skills and organizational capability- Key elements when forming any revolutionary outfit.

Merger with Al-Qaeda

The merger of Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad faction with Al-Qaeda in 1996 is unique since it highlighted one of the earliest instances of Zawahiri compromising on his principled stand on how to conduct an Islamic revolution. Zawahiri was of the firm belief of prioritizing the downfall of the Western backed regime in Egypt, while Bin Laden, had his focus on Saudi Arabia. What the two groups eventually agreed upon was to prioritize their attacks on the United States. While a strong opposition to the United States was based on the ideological teachings of Qutb, what would have cemented vitriol hatred for the United States was the American role in pressuring European states in extraditing Islamic Jihad members from Europe.



According to Khalil Gebara, a Lebanese researcher, there were three reasons surrounding the Bin Laden-Zawahiri alliance. Firstly, the massive crackdown of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak led to a divided and disoriented self of the group. Zawahiri would have found it difficult to manage affairs being on the run from security forces, and being based outside Egypt. Compounding woes for him was international assistance extended by the United States, in pushing for a crackdown on his interests in Europe. This led to a trove of information leading to further arrests back home, which further weakened him.

Secondly, the move by Egyptian Islamic groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood[23], to condemn violence and work within a political framework isolated Zawahiri's ideological followers. His reaction was to lash out at peers, in a book titled "The Bitter Harvest" (1991), a powerful critique of the Muslim Brotherhood. This move forced him to look elsewhere for a refuge, and he turned towards Bin Laden for assistance.

The third reason for Zawahiri to turn to Bin Laden was financial. As with every terrorist outfit, access to financial capital is not forthcoming, and having Bin Laden as a potential bankroller would have considerably eased matters for Zawahiri. According to Lawrence Wright, Zawahiri confided to a close associate that joining Bin Laden was the "Only solution to keeping the Jihad organization alive"[24].

But while Bin Laden provided financial succor to Zawahiri, the latter's role in propping up the organizational structure of Al-Qaeda and providing it with significant cadres from Egypt needs to be acknowledged. Important Egyptian members of Al-Qaeda are/were Mustafa Ahmed Hamza, a chief adviser to bin Laden, Mohammed Islambouli, the brother of Sadat assassin Khaled Islambouli; and Rifie Ahmed Taha, another military leader of Gamaat al-Islamiyya. Additionally, Egyptian jihadists like the late Abu Hafs (Head of Security), Saiid Al-Masri (Finance), the captured Mohammad Omar Abdul Rahman (Operations and Training), and Midhat Mursi (Weapons and Research), were all handpicked Egyptian Islamic Jihad members[25].



The role of Egyptians in Al-Qaeda was documented by risk analysis company STRATFOR, which in an analysis dated 18 October 2001, mentioned "it is the Egyptians that bring a cohesive agenda and operational focus. Many are former military, intelligence and police officials, and their unique experience is clearly reflected in the organization's far-flung networks and operational capabilities. More important, perhaps, is the influence that they have over Al-Qaeda's agenda. Much like bin Laden himself, most of the Egyptians are dissidents. Their ultimate goal is not war with the United States or the West but the overthrow of their own governments"[26].

While the merger seemed to be mutually beneficial, many cadre of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad were averse to the idea of joining Bin Laden, whom they viewed as a publicity hungry leader. In an attempt to scuttle the relationship, Zawahiri as the leader of Islamic Jihad was ousted and replaced with Tharwat Shehata, who wanted to limit the relationship with bin Laden and concentrate the group's fight against Egypt, not America. However, as finances were running low and significant strides were made by security forces against the group, Zawahiri regained control of the faction[27].

Role in Al-Qaeda

For Bin Laden, Zawahiri was not only a personal doctor, and a friend, but an ideological mentor who filled the gap left behind from the death of Abdullah Azzam. Zawahiri's strong outlook helped shape many facets of how Bin Laden was to mould his organization. This in turn leads to assessments that Zawahiri was the true force behind Al-Qaeda, and managed to successfully navigate this marriage of convenience. According to El-Zayat, Zawahiri "was able to reshape Bin Laden's thinking and mentality and turn him from merely a supporter of the Afghan Jihad [against the Soviet Union] to a believer in and export[er] of the Jihad's ideology"[28].

Zawahiri in his stint with Al-Qaeda has additionally donned the role of deputy leader, spokesman, military strategist, liaison manager and even financial scout.



These roles, which run concurrently, display the utility and importance of Zawahiri in the smooth functioning of the outfit.

Zawahiri's official designation in Al-Qaeda was being deputy leader to Bin Laden. His most notable role however, was to become the face of Al-Qaeda during the last few years when Bin Laden went into hiding. It can be speculated that this was to provide the religio-ideological justification which Al-Qaeda needed to counter increasing criticisms directed against the group.

Zawahiri understood the importance of the role of the media in promoting Al-Qaeda, and he was instrumental in incorporating media management into Al-Qaeda. One of the earliest influences on Zawahiri was the Iranian revolution of 1979, wherein cassette tapes were smuggled into Iran to foment a revolution. For Zawahiri, his role as spokesman for the Egyptian Islamic Jihad members during their incarceration in Egypt also furthered his interest in using media as a tool against the enemy[29]. His role as spokesman in Al-Qaeda came to the fore with the 1998 terror attacks against the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. At the time of the bombings, a reporter in Pakistan, Rahimullah Yusufzai, said he received a call from Zawahiri, who identified himself as a spokesman for Bin Laden and said, "I have nothing to do with the bombing of American embassies in Africa, but I urge the Muslims all over the world to continue their jihad against the Americans and Jews"[30]. Media outreach was further developed with Al-Qaeda's active use of technology including sophisticated computer graphics and dissemination of (propaganda or information) through the internet. Zawahiri was seen as the face of Al-Qaeda's ideological tutorship, appearing in over 40 videotaped messages, and even replaced Bin Laden as the face of Al-Qaeda leadership in recent years. His last media appearance was in April 2011.

Zawahiri played a strong role in developing the military capability of Al-Qaeda, and was a proponent for Al-Qaeda to use weapons for mass destruction. In 1998, Zawahiri took time out from his travels to create some computer documents describing his biological and chemical program, which he code-named "Curdled Milk."[31]. Confiscated computer hard drives have indicated that Mohammad Atef in an email to Zawahiri wrote "a) The enemy started thinking about these



weapons before WWI. Despite their extreme danger, we only became aware of them when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concerns that they can be produced simply with easily available materials ...b) The destructive power of these weapons is no less than that of nuclear weapons. c) A germ attack is often detected days after it occurs, which raises the number of victims. d) Defense against such weapons is very difficult, particularly if large quantities are used. I would like to emphasize what we previously discussed—that looking for a specialist is the fastest, safest, and cheapest way [to embark on a biological- and chemical-weapons program]. Simultaneously, we should conduct a search on our own...[32]”

Zawahiri’s may also have been Al-Qaeda’s liaison officer with other jihadist groups. He offered reasoned advice to other groups, and also worked with other groups towards securing financial benefits for Al-Qaeda. For example, Zawahiri’s role can be inferred in the correspondence he held with Tawid ul Jihad, turned Al-Qaeda in Iraq, head Abu Musab Zarqawi. In his letter dated 9 July 2005, he tried to moderate Zarqawi’s notorious anti-Shiite attacks arguing that “The majority of Muslims don't comprehend this[33] and possibly could not even imagine it. For that reason, many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of these questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases more when the attacks are on the mausoleum of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib, (may God honor him) (sic). My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue”[34]. Another instance of Zawahiri playing intermediary is his reported contacts with Hezbollah leader Imed Mugniyeh, among others, to move fighters loyal to Bin Laden from Afghanistan to Iraq, through Iranian territory in 2006[35].

Zawahiri’s letter to Zarqawi also brings to fore his efforts to help facilitate additional funding for the group. In the letter he writes to his counterpart for a loan until the Al-Qaeda leadership was able to re-establish links with its financiers, which had been severed with the arrest of Al-Qaeda’s operational commander in Pakistan, Abu Farj al-Libi[36].



Zawahiri's primary benefit to Al-Qaeda would have to be his resourcefulness in identifying cadre to help facilitate the groups operations. One such example was in the recruitment of Mustafa Abu Al Yazid, or Mustafa Ahmed Mohamed Osman Abu Al Yazid. Yazid was an Egyptian member of the Islamic Jihad, who had served in prison with Zawahiri. He was named by the 9/11 commission as the man responsible for funding the operation via accounts based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)[37].

Relationship with Iran and Shiites

Are Zawahiri's ideological diatribes against Iran are a ruse to avoid focus on what has been described as an 'unnatural alliance' in some quarters[38]? Indications are that it is. It can be speculated that the anti-Shiite rhetoric of Zawahiri, is associated with attempts to rally support of extreme Salafist outfits, which would be averse to dealing with groups operating with Al-Qaeda. Alternatively, it may just be a change of heart from Zawahiri, who realizing his own group's floundering capabilities needs to rely on state patronage which can only come from Iran. According to Samuel H. Brown VI and Norman T. Lihou, the relationship with Iran needs to be seen from the twin leadership perspectives of Osama Bin Laden being open to the idea of working with Iran, while Zawahiri is opposed to it[39].

Zawahiri's relationship with Iran is evidentiary of his outlook towards the Shiite question. Iran being the most populous and powerful Shiite country, his outlook to the country and the Islamic sect is an important component of understanding his outlook towards West Asia. Belonging to the Salafist School of Islamic thought, in his writings, he has called for militant opposition not only to Christians and Jews, but also to Muslims who break with Salafist practice and are thus "infidels". This would include Shiites who are viewed as heretics by the Salafist school of thought. Zawahiri on repeated occasions has spoken about the rationality in attacking Shiite centers, and it was elucidated upon in his letter to Zarqawi as well.



However, as the letter to Zarqawi observes a degree of political consideration does go into evolving a militaristic view against the Shiite community. This has led to circumstances wherein, despite pronounced differences, there has been cooperation between Shiite groups and Iran, with Al-Qaeda. For Zawahiri, the earliest form of cooperation was during his early day in working with the Iranian government in attempting to foster an Islamic revolution in Egypt. According to the testimony of EIJ operative Ali Mohammed, Zawahiri had received from Iran \$2 million and training of members of al-Jihad in a coup attempt that never actually took place[40].

This cooperation highlights the complex relationship which Al-Qaeda's holds with Hezbollah as well. Despite strong statements against Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda is known to have a degree of collaboration, including using Hezbollah units in Saudi Arabia to target expatriates. Cooperation however has not resolved the rifts between the two camps, which do come out in the open[41].

In April 2006, for example, an Al-Qaeda cell in Lebanon tried to assassinate Hassan Nasrallah, the spiritual head of Hezbollah. Furthermore, in an interview to the Washington Post in July 2006, Nasrallah condemned the September 11 attacks in New York and the Taliban regime which was harboring Bin Laden[42].

Interestingly, in a videotaped message delivered on 17 December 2007, Zawahiri alluded to previous collaboration saying "In the past, the emphasis had been on jointly fighting the Zionists-Crusader alliance against the Muslim ummah, but that Iran had surprised Al-Qaeda by collaborating with the U.S. in its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and had even come to an agreement with the Americans before they entered Iraq, over the division of that country"[43].

In 2008, Zawahiri came out with a more pronounced criticism of Iran, including calling it a part of the "Iranian-Crusader alliance" against Islam[44]. This pronounced opposition to Iran comes at a time, when Iran's power has been growing in the region, concerning many Arab regimes, over its influence in significant states and its covert nuclear program. This reflects Zawahiri's own



fears of the Islamic ummah being usurped by the Shiite revolutionary thought. Such a move is seen as sacrilegious by Salafist groups.

Zawahiri's criticism has not been limited to Iran itself, but has been extended to Hezbollah as well, accusing Hezbollah's channel Al-Manar of promoting a lie that Israel, and not Al-Qaeda, was behind the 9/11 attacks. According to him "The purpose of this lie is clear - [to suggest] that there are no heroes among the Sunnis who can hurt America as no-one else did in history"[45].

Opposition to Iranian backed groups has not been limited to Shiite groups such as Hezbollah alone, but clashes have also been reported with Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas which subscribes to a Sunni-Salafist ideology has, since its electoral victory in 2005, been supported financially by Iran[46][47]. Zawahiri has repeatedly criticized Hamas's political approach with Israel and, while it is not clear if the central leadership provided any inputs to Al-Qaeda affiliates in the territories, the incidents of violent clashes between the two clearly indicate divisions between the two[48].

Ties between Iran and Al-Qaeda, however, continue to be surrounded in a large degree of uncertainty, especially since Iran, it is reported by American intelligence agencies, is closely working with Al-Qaeda officials in plotting attacks. The Wall Street Journal quotes US Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell as saying, 'The release or escape (by Iran) of bin Laden's son, Saad bin Laden, suggests possible collaboration between Iran and Al-Qaeda and the potential that Saad bin Laden is a go-between for the two'[49]. Saad bin Laden, is alleged to have assisted in communicating between Zawahiri and the Iranian Qods Force after an Al-Qaeda attack on the US embassy in Sana'a in 2008[50]. This was the same year when Zawahiri's public strictures against Iran had come. Even more curiously, Zawahiri, in a letter to Iran's Revolutionary Guards in November 2008, thanks Iran for "monetary and infrastructure assistance" to establish new bases in Yemen after al-Qaeda was forced to abandon much of its terrorist infrastructure in Iraq and Saudi Arabia[51].



These continuing contradictions reflect Zawahiri's standing to use relations with Iran as an unnatural alliance which shares a degree of common goals. The future partnership between the two groups would continue to be dependent on the financial and military resources which Iran can extend to Al-Qaeda, and this is the reason why Iran and Zawahiri would be looking for opportunities in the aftermath of Bin Laden's death.

Is there a reality disconnect?

The Al-Qaeda leadership has, since October 2001, been under intense surveillance from intelligence agencies worldwide. A consequence of this has been Al-Qaeda's inability to adequately follow news developments and analyze how it should respond. Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi reflects the difficulties when he speaks about "following your news, despite the difficulty and hardship"[52].

Monitoring political developments in the Arab world is a must for Zawahiri, for his sermons to the Arab world are determinate on a sound understanding of the political ground realities of the audience he is trying to reach out to. His efforts to foster a violent revolution in the Palestinian territories against Israel, for example, have met with mixed results, with both Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority choosing to dismiss his rhetoric[53].

Al-Qaeda attempts to lend a face to every development in the Arab/Islamic world in an attempt to gain supporters among disgruntled cadre in affected regions. This has led to Al-Qaeda widening its target list and pushing forward a violent agenda which is bound to backfire. One only needs to have a look at the downfall of the Algerian Islamist movement in 1994-1995 as indication this. The Islamists failed to take over the government owing to alienation of people and increasing infighting[54]. These signs of alienation were indicated when the Arab media gave short shrift to Zawahiri's 17 June 2005 message which praised Al-Qaeda's efforts in Iraq. Zawahiri's message was met with scorn across the Arab world, with one editorial in the Jordanian paper, al-Arab al-Yawm describing Zawahiri as a "leech for the blood of Iraqis, as well as haughty, stupid and lacking any connection to reality, just like George Bush junior"[55].



Zawahiri's declining appeal was also reported in a 2006 study done by West Point. In its study, it was reported that among Al-Qaeda's ideologists, Zawahiri and Bin Laden come to be seen more as propagandists than strategic thinkers[56]. In a further indication of a reality disconnect, the response to Zawahiri's videotape on the 'Jasmine revolution' in Egypt is telling. In the video, Zawahiri claimed that the country's rule has long "deviated from Islam" and warned that democracy "can only be non-religious", in an attempt to shift focus from the secular-liberal demands of the protestors[57].

His opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, the most organized and disciplined underground opposition was particularly stinging. In his message, he sarcastically said, "Today you are winning 80 seats and after five years you will win 100 seats. Hence, at whatever time your behavior improves, we will offer you more. Once you become secular and falsely affiliated with Islam...we will let you assume power provided that you forget about the rule of Sharia, welcome the Crusaders' bases in your countries, and acknowledge the existence of the Jews who are fully armed with nuclear weapons, which you are banned to possess"[58].

This message was refuted in a statement from Issam al-Aryan, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, who retorted, "The Muslim Brotherhood opposes a religious state that creates fear in the West, because Islam is against such a state. We support a secular state because Islam believes in freedom of religion and does not want anyone to impose his faith on someone else"[59].

The difficulties which Zawahiri faces are also ideological, and being the religious face of the organization, his credibility is even more at stake when counter-terrorism tactics include de-legitimization. For example, when former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and chief ideologue of al-Qaeda, Dr. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif criticized Al-Qaeda and Zawahiri in particular in his book 'Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World', it created serious ripples among jihadist cadre[60]. For example, in a discussion between Richard Barrett, Frank J. Cilluffo, Daniel W. Sutherland and Mona Yacoubian[61], it was mentioned that al-Sharif's renunciation, was far more significant in undermining support for groups like Al-Qaeda than anything the United States or the United Kingdom can do or have



done[62]. Al-Sharif in his book provides a detailed rebuttal to the theological argument of Jihadism. For example, he concludes that the attacks on Sept. 11 were “treacherous acts” and that calling them a “Ghazwa”[63], is mocking the prophetic tradition of Muhammad[64].

Additionally, the book suggests “We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that”. Adding, “There is a form of obedience that is greater than the obedience accorded to any leader, namely, obedience to God and His Messenger,” claiming that hundreds of Egyptian jihadists from various factions had endorsed his position[65].

In addition to theological arguments against Zawahiri, al-Sharif also engages in a smear campaign, arguing that Zawahiri was an agent for the Sudanese intelligence agencies, and had personally told him of receiving one hundred thousand dollars to create unrest in Egypt. He furthermore condemns Arab fighters in Afghanistan of not observing Sharia law, and being more concerned about matters of military dominance[66].

As the de-facto military and ideological head of Al-Qaeda, Zawahiri was the in-charge man, for the involvement of Arabs worldwide in Afghanistan. In an email sent in the early years of Al-Qaeda, to jihadists worldwide, he described the country as “the lions den of jihadists”. However, Arab fighters were quite condemning of conditions they experienced, and their differences with the Taliban nearly resulted in their expulsion[67].

According to Sajjan Gohel, Director for International Security, Asia-Pacific Foundation, “Afghan Taliban resented people like Ayman Zawahiri and his Egyptian brigade. Zawahiri was very overbearing in the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and it created problems in the relationship”[68].

Persistent rumors of Zawahiri being an Arab supremacist, who discriminates against South Asians and other ethnicities within Al-Qaeda, has cast aspersions on his ability to hold the organization together. In mid 2009, an internet post on the Hanein Forum cited the diminishing readership of Zawahiri's posts. It lamented that Zawahiri’s writings had a significantly diminished readership



compared to previous years. Zawahiri, in an attempt to effuse praise of his outfit, also ended up stepping on the toes of affiliates such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which too resulted in differences between him and his cadre[69].

These differences can be attributed also to an inflated ego perception which Zawahiri holds of his position. On 7 December 2007, Zawahiri invited questions from individuals and media outlets to be submitted to Jihadi websites, for him to answer. The online session was to be an alternative to Al-Jazeera, which was denounced as a “station of infidels”[70]. In the interview session which followed, Zawahiri selectively chose questions, and in his discourse promoted his new book ‘The Exoneration’[71] on fourteen occasions. While attempting to engage in operational secrecy, he avoided any questions which dealt with the future strategy of Al-Qaeda, but this was perceived to be an indicator of poor outlook. Combined with the constant references to his new book, the entire exercise came across as one of self aggrandizement, and failed to address the motives behind the interaction[72].

Rebuttal of criticism

Since al-Sharif’s book was released, Zawahiri has been at pains to defend his position. He has repeatedly attempted deflecting criticism of Al-Qaeda, against the then Mubarak regime in Egypt, and the Israeli blockade of Gaza. In March 2008, he published a 188-page Arabic book online titled ‘The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness’.

To insulate himself from the criticisms, he takes a dig at the apparatus behind al-Sharif’s treatise, suggesting the obvious role of the Egyptian state in allowing for the release of such an acrimonious document. In a videotaped message which followed the release of al-Sharif’s work, he said “Do they now have fax machines in Egyptian jail cells?”[73] Adding in similar sarcasm, “I wonder if they’re connected to the same line as the electric-shock machines”[74].

In his book Zawahiri acknowledges that he was forced to respond to al-Sharif, and share in public, “an exercise in mutual recriminations in full sight of the world



against brothers”, with whom he otherwise exchanges sincere amity and friendship[75]. He argues against al-Sharif, in favor of the killings of innocent people by saying, “Those who claim that killing innocent persons is absolutely forbidden are in a position of accusing the prophet, may God's peace and prayers be upon him, his companions, and the generation following them that they were killers of innocent persons, as they see it”[76].

He further argues “If a Muslim’s family is threatened by an oppressive regime or foreign power, why would he adopt nonviolence to protect them?”[77] “If a Muslim never attacks the enemy for fear of killing fellow believers or innocent people, how can he put pressure on a much more powerful enemy?”[78] Whereas Al-Sharif maintains that fighting on in a hopeless situation, claiming innocent Muslim lives in greater proportion to those of the infidel, with no tangible benefit is unacceptable, till such time as a parity is reached, Zawahiri believes that it is especially in this situation, that Muslims have no choice but to fight on since anything else would imply an acceptance of apostasy and heresy[79].

Zawahiri argues vehemently that attacking targets in the United States and Israel provides for an increase of Muslim support for Al-Qaeda after the inevitable U.S. reprisals, and argues that the western ploy to use clerics to defame the group are bound to fail, owing to a significant number of supporters he cites in his treatise. Interestingly, as a measure of added support, he includes Taliban leaders including Jalaluddin Haqqani as a show of solidarity with the Taliban[80]. The inclusion of Taliban leaders, and Taliban allied warlords, is an important facet because of their reportedly strained relationship with Al-Qaeda in recent years. According to a brief in Foreign Policy, this can be attributed to the close relationship between the Haqqani group, and Pakistan’s intelligence agencies, which Al-Qaeda is opposed to[81].

Zawahiri’s close equations with Haqqani are also important since it helps in Al-Qaeda’s future operational capabilities, and safe sanctuary which the Haqqani network can offer.

Is Zawahiri’s time up?



The death of Bin Laden places a great load of expectations over Zawahiri. It can be speculated that the initial silence of Al-Qaeda forums on officially naming the successor to Bin Laden may be because of the initial confusion in circumstances surrounding his death, and opposition which Zawahiri has been facing from Jihadist circles. It has also been argued by a Saudi newspaper that Bin Laden may have been betrayed by his friend, in order to expedite the processes of Zawahiri leading Al-Qaeda[82] and this could be a cause of silence among supporters. These reports have sought to expand the anti-Zawahiri ranks in Al-Qaeda. These elements are most likely to be found among the Yemeni-Saudi elements of Al-Qaeda, owing to their belief of superiority in race belonging to the Arab Peninsula.

These features reflect the underlying tensions, which the death of Bin Laden has resulted in, and initiate a review of how Zawahiri's policies will take Al-Qaeda forward. Alternatively, it may be another ploy by intelligence agencies in capitalizing on Bin Laden's death in widening the internal rifts in the organization.

For Zawahiri to lead the group, he would need to re-focus his efforts in countering the government agencies which have weakened Al-Qaeda within the safe sanctuaries. However, what is working against his operational capability is his thought process. Zawahiri believes in the theory of revolutionary vanguards. This theory posits that "a small, revolutionary elite uses violence to rouse the people to fight against the government"[83]. However, the converse of this belief is that is that terrorism usually diminishes the support of both the government as well as the terrorist organization. This is because of the repressive reaction of the government, and the civilian casualties caused by terrorists[84]. This has led to declining popularity of Al-Qaeda in important countries across the Islamic world, including Pakistan[85].

Zawahiri's beliefs and resultant actions mark him out to be a self thinking leader who refuses to think beyond his own beliefs and chooses not to negotiate a possible solution.



This was particularly documented when he strongly condemned the transitional government formation in Egypt. Such an attitude is an intelligence boon for agencies seeking to further isolate and track down the Al-Qaeda leader.

An added aspect which would help security forces in tracking down Zawahiri would be the traditional hostilities which Zawahiri held with the Taliban. If the Taliban were to choose to continue negotiations in private, the beliefs of Zawahiri would be deemed incompatible, and despite Pashtun traditions, can find a way to disclose his whereabouts to security forces.

The road ahead

It is widely expected that Zawahiri will overcome the internal schisms which surround Bin Laden's successor, and will herald his leadership with a refocusing of priority away from the United States, despite its arch rival status, and towards the transitional environs of West Asia. Zawahiri, having learnt the bitter lessons of having lost territorial sanctuary on three previous occasions (Egypt, Sudan and Afghanistan), would most likely seek to re-establish an Islamic caliphate in the Arab world. This was suggested as much in the letter to Zarqawi, where he spoke of Iraq being only a foothold for establishing a greater Islamic caliphate to include Syria and Egypt[86].

Zawahiri's statements in the aftermath of the Jasmine revolution in Egypt indicate that he is still very much interested in carving a role for himself in post-revolution developments. According to Mike Schuster, "Egypt has been central to al-Qaida's narrative of repression and political change in the Arab world"[87], and this reflects Zawahiri's need to re-focus efforts on his home country. To do so, Zawahiri would need to rely on his contacts within Egypt and a rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood. An additional challenge which faces him is the belief that the Jasmine revolutions have made the violent coup ideology of Al-Qaeda obsolete[88].

The most disturbing aspect for Zawahiri would be the irrelevance of his position if the Muslim Brotherhood were to take control of the state through electoral means. It would make Zawahiri's claims of the need for a violent takeover



moribund. On the other hand, Islamist groups can enforce their way into the legislative system in accordance with the existing legal systems. For example, we can look at the situation in Gaza in 2005, when Hamas won the elections, or the case of Lebanon wherein elections have resulted in Hezbollah being king maker in a coalition political setup[89].

Zawahiri's faces an even more uphill task since even his former group the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, has done a volte-face on the use of violence, in light of the revolution. According to Abboud al-Zumar, a founding member of Islamic Jihad, who too was sentenced to prison for his role in Sadat's assassination, "The revolution created a new mechanism: the mechanism of strong, peaceful protests" adding that "[t]he coming period does not at all require armed struggle with the ruler" [90].

However, the seeds of militant unrest continue to reside in the region, with salafism deeply embedded in majority of the Arab and North African world[91]. In the case of Egypt, this can be seen for example in the increasing attacks on Coptic Christians in the country. It is worthy of noting here that in the days preceding and post-revolution, Egypt has seen an increasing Salafist view from sections of society[92]. It could be possible for Zawahiri to re-develop his roots to his home country by rallying these dissipated forces together. Tying this aspect to an electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood[93], it can be expected that Al-Qaeda styled Salafist groups will come out in open conflict with the elected leadership of Egypt. This open conflict and view to a violent coup is the only way for Zawahiri to take this view forward.

To develop these links however, Zawahiri needs to build his credentials once more among a new generation of jihadists. To do so, he would need to align himself with Islamic leaders in the region who have gained ideological following and are seen to be more pragmatic. In this light, the successes of Imam Anwar al-Awlaki[94] need to be viewed with greater scrutiny. Awlaki's response to the Jasmine revolutions, was seen as both calm and composed[95] which contrasts with Zawahiri's need to lend an Al-Qaeda face to every happening in the Muslim



world. This self-confidence may be important in gaining renewed following in the Arab world.

Conclusion

Zawahiri's main interest will be in upgrading the franchisee status of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to a full-fledged organizational role without endangering his own constituency. This is because, in recent years, AQAP has been much more successful in staging attacks against American interests than Al-Qaeda central has been. It has resulted in Awlaki being declared, by some accounts, as enemy number one for the United States over Zawahiri[96]. A crucial vote of support to Zawahiri was extended by Rashad Mohammad Ismail, a top commander of (AQAP), when he described Zawahiri as the "best candidate and right person" to lead Al-Qaeda[97]. Yemen's importance to Al-Qaeda has been well documented and even Zawahiri has on repeated occasions identified Yemen as one of "our most important fronts" in the global war on terrorism[98].

In addition to developing credibility among jihadists, Zawahiri's role would also be dependent on his skills in managing to secure financial resources. Analysts suggest that the group is presently in dire financial condition as well and terrorist recruits were charged for their training[99]. These indications firmly place Zawahiri in a far weaker position than his predecessor and would require his collaboration with wealthier jihadist outfits or adopting the more inexpensive plans of AQAP.

With Zawahiri's present shaky control over Al-Qaeda, it would be prudent for him to act through the shadows in the interim period till he gains complete allegiance. This could be the reason behind naming Saif Al-Adel as the new interim leader of Al-Qaeda. While Adel and Zawahiri are known to have had differences, it can be argued that these differences will be glossed over in the overall scheme of Al-Qaeda's operations. For example, Adel is known to have opposed the 9/11 attacks against the United States, an operation which Bin Laden held in high regard, but yet was considered a close associate of the slain terror leader[100].



The future for Al-Qaeda under Zawahiri therefore indicate a short term return to the West Asian political dynamics, which would be prudent on the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood, and any overtures made towards it. Zawahiri's need to keep an international cadre based support will come in his way during this period, and therefore will continue to plot attacks against the West for larger credibility.

Notes:

[1] Jihadist forums have announced on 18 May 2011, that Saif Al-Adel, an Egyptian militant is Al-Qaeda's new temporary leader. It is believed that this is a phase wherein Zawahiri will be testing the waters of support among cadre and potential members. This paper takes forward the assumption that Zawahiri will be the new head of Al-Qaeda.

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