

## ASSESSMENTS

# Afghanistan and Terrorism 21 Years After 9/11

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*A 9/11 commemoration on Sept. 11, 2021, in New York.*

*(ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP via Getty Images)*

*Editor's Note: In light of the 21st anniversary of 9/11, we re-feature two recent analyses on the state of Afghanistan today, and how the risk of terrorism lives on despite more than two decades of U.S. efforts to quash it including the recent killing of al Qaeda mastermind Ayman al-Zawahiri.*

*In Al-Zawahiri's Legacy, Part 1: How the U.S. Became al Qaeda's Top Enemy, we explore the July 31 death and legacy of al-Zawahiri, and how his death will impact the future of al Qaeda and jihadist ideology more broadly.*

*In Why Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan Could Be Poised for a Resurgence, we discuss how despite al-Zawahiri's killing, a survey of foreign counterterrorism action in Afghanistan over the past year demonstrates foreign states' limited abilities to counter terrorist groups in the country — which may allow for an eventual extremist resurgence.*

## *Al-Zawahiri's Legacy, Part 1: How the U.S. Became al Qaeda's Top Enemy*

*By Sam Lichtenstein, Director of Analysis at RANE, Stratfor*

*Aug 10, 2022 | 20:24 GMT*



*Ayman al-Zawahiri is seen on a television screen during a broadcast report.*

*(Maher Attar/Sygma via Getty Images)*

***Editor's Note:** This column is the first of a two-part series that explores the legacy of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was recently killed in a U.S. drone strike in Kabul, and how his death will impact the future of al Qaeda and jihadist ideology more broadly.*

*More than a week after the announced killing of al Qaeda's emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, much ink has been spilled on the*

state of the group and its likely next leader. While important questions, much less attention has been given to al-Zawahiri's key ideological contribution to al Qaeda's global brand and whether his vision for the group — and jihadist ideology more generally — will survive. Just as much as his deceased predecessor Osama bin Laden, al-Zawahiri helped mold al Qaeda into the most notorious global terrorist group of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, largely because of his advocacy for taking the fight from the Islamic world directly to the streets of the West. But al-Zawahiri is widely considered to have faded from operational prominence long ago and al Qaeda itself had in recent years turned away from this strategy, seemingly both by choice and by way of Western counterterrorism pressure. With his death, therefore, has al-Zawahiri's vision died, too?

## **From Surgeon to Mastermind**

Compared with bin Laden — who in the West came to symbolize not only al Qaeda as a group but the face of modern jihadism — al-Zawahiri is a far less known individual, even though his influence is arguably just as important. Born in 1951 into a well-educated, politically-connected, deeply conservative family in Cairo, al-Zawahiri turned to radical ideology at a young age. Influenced by the writings of the extremist thinkers of the time, in 1966, he organized a group of friends into an even more radical group that eventually became known as Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) — dedicated to overthrowing Egypt's secular government and imposing Islamic rule. While al-Zawahiri initially did not exert complete control over the group, he led a vital faction. And during this time, he did not give up on his studies, earning a master's degree in surgery in 1978.

Perhaps ironically, it was his medical career that first brought him to the battlefield. In 1980, he left Egypt for the first of many trips to Peshawar, Pakistan, to treat refugees and mujahideen fighters battling the Soviets across the border in Afghanistan. It was there that he first met bin Laden, though it would not be approximately two decades before the two formally crafted the al Qaeda we know today. In the interim, al-Zawahiri's revolutionary priorities continued to focus on Egypt — a fixation that would bring him both disappointment and eventually cement his legacy.

Arrested in Egypt in 1981 in the crackdown that followed the murder of President Anwar Sadat, for which al-Zawahiri and the EIJ were implicated, his ideological furor hardened under repeated torture while imprisoned. Upon his release in 1984, he left Egypt, eventually settling in Peshawar where he again crossed paths with bin Laden, this time at the hospital where al-Zawahiri worked. Their relationship grew as al-Zawahiri became bin Laden's personal physician, but al-Zawahiri remained focused on Egypt, which he continued to see as the key regional lynchpin. Upon gaining full control of EIJ in 1991 after an internal split, he oversaw a series of high-profile attacks against Egyptian targets that culminated with the killings of 62 people, mostly foreign tourists, at an archaeological site in Luxor in 1997. While questions remain over al-Zawahiri's precise involvement in the massacre, it outraged Egyptians, including those who had previously been sympathetic to the EIJ. The combination of a collapse in popular support and a ramped-up government crackdown forced al-Zawahiri out of the country and back to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where he once again linked up with bin Laden — this time for good.

In 1998, al-Zawahiri's EIJ joined other terrorist groups, including bin Laden's al Qaeda, to form the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders. Under the group's banner, al-

Zawahiri and bin Laden co-signed a fatwa, or religious edict, urging Muslims across the globe to kill Americans and their allies, a message that provided an early indication of al-Zawahiri's most enduring legacy: focusing on the United States as the so-called "far enemy." Driven by repeated failures to turn his native Egypt into a theocracy, al-Zawahiri had become convinced that the only way to spark change in the Islamic world was to go after what he believed to be the proverbial bottom layer of a house of cards, which, if removed, would send the rest falling.

It was this belief and al-Zawahiri's personal influence that truly transformed bin Laden's calculus. Before fusing with the EIJ and others to form the World Islamic Front, bin Laden's original fatwa in 1996 had a narrower scope in calling for the removal of foreign troops from Muslim lands. While certainly provocative and violent, this goal was still inherently focused on the Islamic world and less ambitious than al-Zawahiri's more expansive focus on directly attacking the "far enemy" as the main priority. To be sure, bin Laden had already been evaluating a similar strategy, but he was also receiving advice from other well-known jihadists who wanted to concentrate on "near enemy" countries, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Al-Zawahiri's embrace of the "far enemy" strategy, coupled with the trust he had gained from bin Laden, thus made him the key ideologue pushing bin Laden's violent vision decisively toward the West.

Working with bin Laden, al-Zawahiri quickly made good on this lethal threat. He helped plan the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the USS Cole bombing in 2000 and a score of other disrupted plots. In 2001, the EIJ formally merged with al Qaeda to create the group we know today. Later that year, the 9/11 attacks on the United States would achieve the tragic apex of the group's focus on the "far enemy" — taking the battlefield from

attacks against U.S. targets elsewhere in the world directly to the homeland. While accounts differ on al-Zawahiri's precise involvement in the operational planning of the 9/11 attacks, there is no doubt that he provided the ideological vision for them. Underscoring his desire to further strike the United States, al-Zawahiri also directly plotted a series of additional attacks on U.S. soil and even oversaw a biological weapons development program — all of which failed to materialize amid the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which forced al-Zawahiri, bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders out of the country and into hiding.

## **Between Rhetoric and Reality**

Despite the loss of its safe haven in Afghanistan, al Qaeda had built its proverbial brand on taking the jihadist fight directly to the United States and other Western countries. This meant it was incumbent on the group to make good on this threat, which in the years after 9/11, translated into successive attacks against Western targets in Muslim countries, often with the support of local groups aligned with al Qaeda. Stretching from Africa to Southeast Asia, al Qaeda oversaw a wave of destruction that left hundreds of people dead and many more wounded, not including the countless attacks in Iraq, which became the group's primary battlefield to target U.S. personnel and interests after the United States invaded the country in 2003.

But as appalling as this violence was (and as much as it kept al Qaeda in the headlines), the group carried out comparatively few successful attacks in the West itself. The 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings were of course horrifically tragic outliers, but local networks of al Qaeda supporters appear to have largely planned and conducted those attacks, even if the group's central leaders were happy to claim the credit. Notably, the United States

also did not see additional mass attacks in the wake of 9/11. But it wasn't for a lack of trying on al Qaeda's part, as all of the other most audacious plots linked to the group — like the transatlantic plane bomb plots in 2006 and 2010 — were disrupted. This left al Qaeda's biggest successes in the West as instilling plenty of fear among numerous thwarted plots, but practically speaking it managed only a series of smaller and often less strategically impactful acts of violence carried out by single individuals or small cells.

Thus, by the time of bin Laden's killing in 2011, the gap between al Qaeda's ambitions and its capabilities was already stark. Despite claiming to be the vanguard of attacking the "far enemy" in the West, a decade of relentless counterterrorism pressure had significantly curtailed al Qaeda's ability to do so. Instead, the group was left with a series of globally-dispersed franchises with varying levels of success and connection to central leadership. This was what al-Zawahiri would inherit when he took over as emir upon bin Laden's death.

In the second part of this series, we'll explore al-Zawahiri's 11-year tenure as al Qaeda's leader and whether his ideological vision will outlive him.

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# Why Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan Could Be Poised for a Resurgence

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*A Taliban fighter (L) frisks men at a checkpoint after a blast during Friday prayers Sept. 2, 2022, in Gazargah mosque in Herat.*

*(AFP via Getty Images)*

*By Isaia Galace*

*Despite the recent U.S. killing of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, a survey of foreign counterterrorism action in Afghanistan over the past year demonstrates foreign states' limited abilities to counter terrorist groups in the country, which may allow for an eventual extremist resurgence. After nearly a year of ambiguity and scant reporting regarding foreign counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, U.S. President Joe Biden confirmed Aug.*

1 that the United States conducted an unmanned aerial vehicle strike the morning of July 31 that killed al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. Al-Zawahiri was residing in the upscale neighborhood of Sherpur in the house of a top aide to Taliban senior leader and Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani. A U.S. "ground team" was reportedly present in Afghanistan to support the operation and helped confirm al-Zawahiri's killing, though few details about its activities have been publicized. The revelations surrounding the strike support assessments by the U.N. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team — responsible for monitoring and analyzing several militant groups — that al Qaeda remains present in Afghanistan, is close to the Taliban and provides advice and support to the country's de facto rulers. As of June, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency maintained "that the Taliban will probably allow legacy al-Qaeda members to remain in Afghanistan, provided they do not threaten the regime's security or autonomy."

- Though the country from which the UAV was launched has not been confirmed, the United States uses air bases in the Persian Gulf region to launch UAVs, including al-Dhafra air base in the United Arab Emirates and al-Udeid air base in Qatar, which are among the closest to Afghanistan.
- A UAV from the Gulf would likely have traveled through Pakistani airspace given restrictions on travel through Iranian airspace and the much longer route necessary to traverse Central Asian countries. Pakistan likely gave the United States permission to use its airspace to conduct the operation, potentially under a 2003 U.S.-Pakistan agreement that granted the United States permission to use Pakistani airspace to conduct flights to/from Afghanistan. This agreement has reportedly been maintained

despite officially expiring after the August 2021 U.S. and coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan.

- The United States is reportedly in talks with Pakistan to establish a more durable, formal agreement for U.S. access to Pakistani airspace to conduct counterterrorism strikes. This, along with its likely having granted the United States access to its airspace to conduct the al-Zawahiri strike, suggests Islamabad will remain an important — if controversial — partner for the United States in countering extremism in Afghanistan moving forward.

Though some observers have suggested the al-Zawahiri strike demonstrates the efficacy of the so-called over-the-horizon U.S. counterterrorism strategy, several distinct conditions gave the Biden administration the unique opportunity. Rather than clearly proving that the United States can effectively counter a potential resurgence of extremism in Afghanistan without a meaningful presence on the ground, it appears more that al-Zawahiri's decision to take greater risks and use poor tradecraft provided the proximate spur for the strike. Al-Zawahiri's recording and release of video messages were notably intermittent in recent years. Though this may have partly been due to his rumored ailing health, it was also likely driven by operational security concerns, particularly after a number of senior al Qaeda figures were killed in counterterrorism operations around the globe in 2020. Al-Zawahiri began to record and issue video messages with greater regularity and frequency after the Taliban takeover, however, particularly in early 2022, indicating a more relaxed operational security posture. Al-Zawahiri also felt comfortable enough to relocate to Afghanistan's capital sometime after the Taliban takeover and to reunite with his family, extremely risky moves that ultimately rendered him vulnerable to discovery by foreign intelligence services.

- According to a senior Biden administration official, U.S. intelligence agencies verified al-Zawahiri's presence in the capital "through multiple streams of intelligence," suggesting the United States maintains some intelligence capabilities in Kabul, likely including human assets and technical collection methods. U.S. intelligence capabilities inevitably became much reduced since the Taliban takeover of the country, and likely even weaker in more rural areas — where many extremist groups operate — due to their being less populated and typically more religiously conservative and supportive of the Taliban.
- The apparent continuation of al-Zawahiri's more relaxed behavior after his arrival in Kabul contributed to his demise. Unlike Osama bin Laden, who took several strict measures to prevent his discovery, al-Zawahiri apparently felt comfortable enough to establish a consistent routine that involved standing on a balcony in plain view despite being among the most wanted men in the world.

*The fact that it took the United States nearly a year after its withdrawal to execute its first reported counterterrorism strike in Afghanistan suggests the Biden administration has a lower tolerance for risk. Compared to its predecessors, the Biden administration appears to have a higher threshold for conducting lethal operations in Afghanistan out of concern for preventing civilian casualties. Many in the administration likely recall the strong backlash triggered by the Obama administration's reliance on UAV strikes, which resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties. The Trump administration's relaxation of U.S. rules of engagement — amid other policy changes — drove an even steeper increase in U.S. strike activity and civilian casualties. The Biden administration likely shares concerns that civilian casualties from UAV strikes alienate populations, which some have argued makes strikes counterproductive to countering terrorism. The UAV strike intended to target a suspected Islamic State Khorasan Province*

bomber that instead killed 10 civilians in the final days of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan undoubtedly underscored this risk. These concerns appear to have driven the reportedly painstaking deliberation regarding the al-Zawahiri operation, which involved months of intelligence gathering on al-Zawahiri, his suspected residence and the surrounding area, as well as the reported use of a special munition that lacked an explosive warhead to prevent collateral damage.

- Demonstrating the dramatic change in policy under Biden, the United States conducted 42% fewer strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia in his first year in office compared to Trump's last year in office, according to data obtained by Voice of America.
- Suggestive of the Biden administration's lower risk tolerance, the U.S. Defense Department on Aug. 25 announced its intent to implement unprecedented changes to how it conducts operations to reduce risks of civilian casualties. The corresponding memorandum outlined a number of directives intended to influence a cultural change in which risks to civilians would be assessed throughout the planning and execution of U.S. military operations.

Aside from a more hesitant strike posture, significantly degraded U.S. intelligence capabilities post-withdrawal have and will continue to reduce the U.S. ability to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. While the al-Zawahiri strike demonstrates some U.S. intelligence capability in Afghanistan and its ability to conduct strikes against high-value targets in the country under certain circumstances, a number of challenges will likely continue to constrain U.S. counterterrorism efforts. First, though satellites are undoubtedly being used to collect intelligence, the distance from which they operate and their more limited maneuverability necessitates additional collection methods that are more flexible

and closer to a target to establish a more comprehensive intelligence picture. This is a challenge because the U.S.' human intelligence network in Afghanistan remains significantly limited after last summer's withdrawal, and is likely particularly reduced in the more rural areas where many extremist groups operate. In addition, assuming that the United States is launching UAVs from air bases in the Persian Gulf, fuel constraints limit how long they can loiter and collect intelligence, and create potential diplomatic challenges with nearby countries over the use of their airspace. CNN reported in August that the Defense Department's Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism Task Force — a group created shortly before the withdrawal dedicated to managing counterterrorism strikes in Afghanistan — "hasn't sent a single proposed target to the Pentagon for approval," largely due to degraded U.S. intelligence capabilities in the country. Even if a target were verified and a UAV strike operation were approved, numerous further limitations exist.

- Fuel constraints limit UAVs' ability to wait for more ideal conditions or to alter an operation as necessitated by events on the ground, potentially reducing the probability of mission success and the ability to limit civilian casualties. They also limit the ability to conduct a comprehensive post-strike assessment and determine resulting casualties.
- The ostensibly nonexistent (or extremely limited) U.S. ground presence also constrains its ability to support strike operations and to collect intelligence at the target of a strike. The latter challenge could limit the longer term counterterrorism impacts of future operations given that the United States exploits intelligence collected during raids to understand extremist groups' organizational dynamics and inform future counterterrorism action — as it did with the bin Laden raid in 2011.

Compared to the United States, Pakistan has been more assertive in conducting counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, but those efforts appear to have done little to diminish the threat of cross-border militancy. The withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces and the Taliban's takeover of the country triggered a surge in anti-Pakistan extremist activity from groups based in Afghanistan. Persistent attacks over the past year by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (aka the "Pakistani Taliban") and Balochi separatist groups based in Afghanistan have triggered lethal responses by Pakistani security forces, which generally have demonstrated a high tolerance for civilian casualties. Pakistani security forces have reportedly used artillery, mortars and small arms to fire back or retaliate against TTP militants based in Afghanistan who fire at troops in Pakistan, resulting in the bombardment of villages in eastern Afghanistan where the TTP allegedly operates. Most notably, Pakistan conducted airstrikes against alleged TTP militants in April in eastern Afghanistan, which reportedly resulted in dozens of civilian casualties. Unconfirmed local reports have also highlighted attacks against senior TTP leaders in Afghanistan by suspected UAV strikes and in some cases, roadside bombs, which Pakistan is suspected of carrying out given its long-running conflict with the group. Pakistan is currently negotiating a cease-fire with the TTP mediated by the Afghan Taliban in an attempt to provide a more durable reduction in militant violence against the country, but negotiations have reportedly reached a stalemate. Judging from past precedent and fundamental disputes between the TTP and the Pakistani government, any potential cease-fire would likely eventually fail, sustaining the potential for a resurgence in TTP attacks in Pakistan.

- Pakistan also claims that Balochi separatists based in Afghanistan support their fellow militants' operations in Balochistan province targeting Pakistani security forces and Chinese nationals. Additionally, the Afghanistan-based ISKP remains active in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province; in March, ISKP claimed a bombing of a Shiite mosque in the provincial capital of Peshawar, which killed dozens.

*Other countries which have thus far avoided lethal action also face threats from militant groups in Afghanistan and may eventually be forced to take action. Some of the most prominent examples of violent threats that could worsen, and eventually spark further foreign counterterrorism intervention in Afghanistan, are listed below.*

- ISKP conducted a suicide bombing Sept. 5 at the entrance of the Russian Embassy in Kabul, killing two embassy staff members, including a Russian diplomat. ISKP has previously threatened Russia, including in a propaganda booklet it released in July in which it characterized Russians as "the murderers of Chechen Muslims" and urged supporters to "cast fear into the hearts of the sons of Putin and Russia, kill them with cars and knives."
- ISKP also has increasingly threatened China since the Taliban takeover. In the 13th issue of its Voice of Khorasan propaganda magazine published Sept. 2, ISKP devoted a section to comprehensively criticizing China for its abuse of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, its relationship with the Taliban and what ISKP characterizes as Beijing's imperial ambitions. The group has also actively sought to recruit Uyghur Muslims, and has claimed to have used Uyghurs to conduct attacks in the past, including in an October 2021 attack on a Shiite mosque in the northeastern Afghan city of Kunduz.

- ISKP claimed cross-border rocket attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in April and May, respectively. Neither country has reportedly retaliated against ISKP. According to unconfirmed reports, however, Uzbekistan scrambled military aircraft following the April rocket attack, suggesting retaliatory strikes remain possible.
- The Islamic State has also long threatened Iran given the group's anti-Shiite sectarianism. The group conducted attacks in Tehran in 2017, and has criticized Iran for its relationship with the Taliban; among other things, Iran and the Taliban have previously coordinated on countering ISKP near Iran's border.

*Growing concerns over terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan mean that the aforementioned counterterrorism challenges could allow for a resurgence in extremist threats from the country. Based on intelligence provided by several U.N. member states, the U.N. Monitoring Team has assessed that since the Taliban takeover, extremist groups in Afghanistan "enjoy greater freedom than at any time in recent history." Besides al Qaeda, ISKP and the TTP, other groups including the Uyghur extremist East Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party and the Tajik extremist Jamaat Ansarullah are present in the country. The U.N. monitoring team and U.S. intelligence community have reported these groups are actively rebuilding and developing their capabilities, and many have threatened foreign attacks; several are reportedly collaborating to augment their capabilities. Within this context, Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr., commander of U.S. Central Command, stated in March that "resultant reductions in consistent [counterterrorism] pressure potentially could enable [extremist] groups to pose increased threats to the United States and our allies, assuming the Taliban is unwilling or unable to do*

so itself." To this end, the Taliban's enduring relationship with such groups, combined with the Taliban's struggles to effectively counter ISKP, indicate that the Taliban cannot be relied upon to combat a resurgent threat from the country. The burden will thus fall on foreign countries to prevent such a resurgence, but degraded intelligence capabilities and the lack of a substantive, reliable presence or partner on the ground will challenge the efficacy of such efforts, raising the risk of future Afghanistan-based extremist threats.

- The U.S. Defense Department in March 2022 assessed that ISKP could establish an external attack capability in 12 to 18 months, and potentially sooner, while it has assessed al Qaeda likely requires 12 to 24 months to do the same. Meanwhile, the U.N. Security Council has reported that ETIM/TIP has procured more weapons, expanded its operating area and even reestablished a number of strongholds in the country in a bid to strengthen its ability to target Chinese interests in the region.