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Research Notes

Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives

by Sajjan M. Gohel

Abstract

This research paper explores the current strategic and ideological agenda of al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. To better understand how al-Zawahiri aims to retain international relevance, survival and sustainability, the paper assesses al-Zawahiri's speeches and actions in recent years that articulate his world-view objectives. Importantly, this paper will argue that although the "Far Enemy" remains a priority, and will not be abandoned by al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri has renewed the terrorist group's emphasis on the "Near Enemy" and seeks to create safe bases across the Islamic world for al-Qaeda and its affiliates to function and grow. This paper will also illustrate that it would be naive to dismiss al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda's relevance as a global threat as the Egyptian is laying the foundations for al-Qaeda's future. The paper also compares and contrasts al-Zawahiri's historical motivations and how that fits into his current doctrine. Lastly, this paper dissects al-Zawahiri's paradoxical nature and mixed messaging which could impact on al-Qaeda's attempts to replenish the terrorist group's ranks.

Introduction

More than fifteen years after the September 11, 2001, attacks and more than five years since succeeding Osama bin Laden as head a of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri has been seen as an increasingly marginalised figurehead of rickety terrorist franchise organization. Lacking bin Laden's charisma, failing to maintain unity within the al-Qaeda affiliates, and unable to launch major international attacks, al-Zawahiri also failed to take full advantage of the security vacuum created by the Arab Spring. In addition, al-Qaeda's current leader appears unable to match the pulling power of his arch-nemesis, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State terrorist group.

Between September 2014 and August 2015, al-Zawahiri did not make any public statements, creating uncertainty as to the direction he was taking al-Qaeda. His 11-months silence was unprecedented, especially as many key figures within al-Qaeda's core and with its affiliates died in counter-terrorism operations. Most notably, this included al-Zawahiri's designated successor Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who headed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the U.S.-born al-Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn.[1]

Despite all this, it would be unwise to write off al-Zawahiri, whose cunning is unmatched and for more than forty years has been plotting terrorist attacks.[2] Al-Zawahiri has always prioritised his own self-preservation whilst trying to keep al-Qaeda afloat. Despite having a $25 million bounty placed on him, that leads to his apprehension or conviction, al-Zawahiri remains at large, and has survived several targeted strikes over the years. [3] Furthermore, the trail to locate his whereabouts in Pakistan has gone cold since 2007.[4]

In August, 2015, al-Zawahiri ended his period of silence by affirming his allegiance to the then new head of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Mansour.[5] Since then, al-Zawahiri has displayed a sense of practicality, pragmatism and willingness to adapt to the changing circumstances in the Arab and Islamic world. An

analysis of his statements demonstrates that he has strategically calibrated al-Qaeda's priorities and managed to formulate a plan of action that may allow him to retain relevance amongst jihadists globally.

Far and Near: Al-Zawahiri's Priorities

On 9 September, 2016 – two days before the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks – al-Zawahiri released his speech *The Defiers of Injustice*, stating that al-Qaeda would "focus on…America and its allies, and to strive as much as possible to transfer the battle to their lands", calling this "the first priority in the armed jihad today."[6]

The Defiers of Injustice reinforced a message al-Zawahiri had already issued shortly after the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in 2015. In the second instalment of his Islamic Spring series, al-Zawahiri had stated "*I call on all Muslims who can harm the countries of the crusader coalition not to hesitate. We must now focus on moving the war to the heart of the homes and cities of the crusader West and specifically America.*"[7]

Al-Zawahiri appeared to be calling for lone actor attacks and instructed his followers to take inspiration from "the brave knights of the Paris invasion"–a reference to the Kouachi brothers, Cherif and Said, who had been responsible for the shootings at the Paris office of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, on January 7, 2015. [8] The Kouachis claimed to have carried out the attack on behalf of AQAP.[9] Al-Zawahiri's mentioning of them dovetailed with AQAP's reference of the brothers in the 14th edition of its Inspire magazine which featured a "military analysis" of their attack on Charlie Hebdo by Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP's chief bomb maker.[10] It appears somewhat opportunistic for al-Zawahiri and AQAP to closely associate with the Charlie Hebdo attack, several months after the incident and as one of the Kouachi brothers last had contact with AQAP in 2011 when Said trained there.[11]

Since the Arab Spring there has been only limited evidence of al-Qaeda directing or planning attacks on Western soil, with a few possible exceptions such as a nebulous plot by the Khorasan group in Idlib, Syria, in 2014, apparently planning to target Western aviation.[12] Currently, if the West features high on al-Zawahiri's target list, then it would be more about hitting them where al-Qaeda and its affiliates have an operational presence. For example, AQAP's intention to attack U.S. embassies in the Persian Gulf in the summer of 2013 and a string of attacks in recent years by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Murabitoun (The Sentinels) on hotels frequented by Westerners in the Sahel region.[13]

In order to understand what al-Qaeda is openly calling for in operational terms, one has to turn to al-Zawahiri's video entitled Carrying the Weapon of the Martyr, Episode 3, which was issued on 23 July 2016. [14] In it, al-Zawahiri called on all al-Qaeda branches to kidnap Western civilians and soldiers in the Arab and Islamic world so that these could be traded against jihadists jailed in the West. This clearly contrasts with the practice of Islamic State of executing hostages and videotape their decapitations.

Amongst several well-known individuals that al-Zawahiri called to be released from Western prisons, is the blind Egyptian sheikh, Omar Abdel-Rahman, who is currently serving a life sentence in the United States for being behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York. The fact that al-Zawahiri would openly call for Abdel-Rahman's release is odd, given their past differences. Both men had spent time together in prison in Egypt, following the massive round-up of members of al-Jihad, the group responsible for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. While al-Zawahiri and Abdel-Rahman shared jail time at the notorious Mazra'ah Turrah prison, they argued intensely about the best way to advance the cause of al-Jihad in Egypt and who should become its new leader.[15] Personal and strategic differences eventually caused a permanent and consequential split within al-Jihad.[16] Al-Zawahiri would move on and be instrumental in the creation of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) while Abdel-Rahman took control of a faction belonging to al-Gama'a al-Islamiyah (The Islamic Group) and became its spiritual leader.[17] There has never

been any public indication that al-Zawahiri and Abdel-Rahman had healed their rift, especially as Abdel-Rahman died on February 18, 2017.

There are several ways to interpret al-Zawahiri's open threats against the West. Firstly, the al-Qaeda leader might be renewing his intention of wanting to launch directed attacks within the United States and Europe as part of his ongoing competition with Islamic State to capture the jihadist mainstream. Secondly, al-Zawahiri is advocating attacks on Western targets in third countries where al-Qaeda and affiliates have a functioning infrastructure. Thirdly, al-Zawahiri's threats might serve as a warning that in the long-term al-Qaeda will want to target the West, when he deems that the operational conditions are restored, but in the meantime he encourages his followers to carry out lone actor attacks. Lastly, al-Zawahiri's messages could be more rhetorical, aiming to satisfy his customary followers while seeking to unify the jihadist ranks in an effort of connecting the Far Enemy with the problems nearer to home in the Islamic world.

Although it would appear that al-Zawahiri and bin Laden had a common strategic outlook, internal correspondence captured during the Abbottabad raid on Osama bin Laden's Pakistani compound in 2011, presents glimpses of cryptic differences of opinion between the al-Qaeda leaders over the group's direction in the post 9/11 environment. In one of the documents written by al-Zawahiri to bin Laden in August 2003, the al-Qaeda leaders appear to be discussing a draft speech on the ideological justification for jihad, accompanied by an explanation of their moral position. Al-Zawahiri wrote, "*The author does not greedily intend to add to his predecessor's works, but rather seeks to clarify several points.*" [18] Al-Zawahiri, albeit very politely, appeared uncomfortable with bin Laden's version of the speech and wanted to rephrase parts of the narrative.

Al-Zawahiri's editing efforts on bin Laden's original text include lengthy verses from the Quran to justify his suggested changes. He goes on to say "*This meaning is very important to highlight to the righteous people of this time, for their hearts to be reassured that they are engaging in the same battles that were conducted by God's messengers and their followers of the faithful people for all time….We hope that this message would enlighten the connection between the internal and external enemies in their goals and in their soldiers.*"[19] The reference to "internal and external enemies" appears to be a reference to the Near Enemy (internal to the Islamic world) and the Far Enemy (external, principally the West) and for al-Zawahiri to ensure that there is a religious justification for al-Qaeda's doctrine and rationale for potential future actions.

Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri first established a co-dependent relationship between their two factions, Maktab al-Khadamat (Services Office) and the EIJ, amongst the melee of the Arab mujahedeen camped in Pakistan in the 1980s.[20] Following the retreat of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, al-Zawahiri tried to convince bin Laden, as a matter of priority, to focus on the need for regime change in the Arab world. However, in the mid-to-late 1990s bin Laden persuaded al-Zawahiri that targeting the United States, and removing its influence from the Arab world, was key to creating the caliphate (Islamic state).[21] Bin Laden was pushing to fight the Far Enemy in both actions and doctrine. More than half of his speeches focused on the Far Enemy compared to a fraction that was directed at unseating Arab regimes, the Near Enemy.[22] On the other hand, al-Zawahiri's communiques reflect a greater emphasis towards the Near Enemy, although the Far Enemy was by no means excluded from his invective.[23] In other words, al-Zawahiri was not so eager to prioritise attacking the U.S. mainland as bin Laden. Instead he opined that it would be more effective for al-Qaeda to focus its resources on U.S. targets in Afghanistan and Iraq.[24] This was more in line with al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 position and its bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the maritime suicide attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in the year 2000.

While al-Zawahiri, publicly called for attacks in the West, privately, his instructions to affiliates gives evidence of more flexibility. In a May 2015 interview with al-Jazeera, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front for the People), al-Qaeda's then affiliate in Syria, revealed that al-Zawahiri had ordered him not to use Syria to plot against the West but instead focus on the Near Enemy. Al-Golani recalled, "We received clear orders not to use Syria as a launching pad to attack the US or Europe in order to

not sabotage the true mission against the [Bashar al-Assad] regime."[25] Al-Golani's disclosure indicated for the first time that al-Zawahiri was steering al-Qaeda away from Osama Bin Laden's primacy of targeting the West.

Safe Bases and Un-Coupling

In September, 2013, al-Zawahiri issued his General Guidelines for Jihad wherein he emphasised the need for self-discipline and restraint, noting that al-Qaeda's strategy "is a long one, and jihad is in need of safe bases."[26] He added, "If we are forced to fight [local regimes], then we must make it clear that our struggle against them is a part of our resistance against the Crusader onslaught."[27] Although al-Zawahiri explicitly delineated Western targets as the first objective, which should never be abandoned, he also believed that until that is attainable, implementing a more developed local strategy against the Near Enemy would help al-Qaeda's long-term policy against the Far Enemy. However, al-Zawahiri also cautioned that would only be the case as long as the operational space to grow and function, without being under duress or attack, could be safeguarded.[28]

In July, 2016, when Abu Mohammad al-Golani announced that Jabhat al-Nusra was un-coupling from al-Qaeda and changing its name to Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria). Al-Zawahiri's trusted Egyptian deputies, Abu al Khayr al-Masri and Saif al-Adel, helped formalise the de-linking.[29] Saif al-Adel's voice, carries special weight as he was one of the few al-Qaeda leaders who strongly opposed the September 11attacks because these would, in his view, would put al-Qaeda in the direct crossfire of the United States.[30] Even after 9/11, al-Adel was critical of bin Laden and the main organiser of the attacks on the United States, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, for continuing to plot against the 'Far Enemy'.[31]

In Syria, al-Qaeda approved Jabhat al-Nusra's un-coupling so that its forces could concentrate on their fight against the al-Assad regime and form closer bonds with other Islamist groups fighting in Syria.[32] Jabhat al-Nusra is allied with Ahrar al-Sham, an organization that previously had been cautious when it came to develop closer links with Jabhat al-Nusra because of the al-Qaeda connection.[33]

The decision by Jabhat al-Nusra to cease fighting under al-Qaeda's banner was months in the making and overseen by al-Zawahiri himself. In May, 2016, he released an audio recording saying Jabhat al-Nusra leaving al-Qaeda would not be an obstacle to "the great hopes of the Islamic nation."[34] Al-Zawahiri's message was an explicit clearance that enabled Jabhat al-Nusra to un-couple from al-Qaeda without breaking the bay'a (oath of allegiance) to al-Zawahiri.[35] In real terms, Jabhat al-Nusra's un-coupling from al-Qaeda was more about organisational practicalities and public relations management than based on any ideological conflict. However, there was also a caveat entailed as al-Zawahiri also urged Syria's jihadists to unify to create a "real caliphate," in direct opposition to the one of the Islamic State, calling it "a matter of life and death." [36]

A lesson appears to have been learnt by al-Zawahiri in the amicable way the un-coupling with Jabhat al-Nusra was managed, at least in comparison to his obtuse way in dealing with jihadist issues in Syria in the past. To recall, in April 2013, al-Baghdadi had claimed that Jabhat al-Nusra was subordinate to him. Yet its leader, al-Golani refused to acknowledge al-Baghdadi as his leader and instead swore allegiance to al-Zawahiri. At that time, al-Zawahiri had sent a confidential edict, ruling that al-Baghdadi was wrong not to consult with al-Golani who, in turn, should not have pledged allegiance to al-Zawahiri without first obtaining the green light from al-Qaeda.[37] Al-Zawahiri was ill-prepared to deal with the unfolding events in Syria as became fully apparent by the end of June 2014 when Islamic State, without prior consultation with al-Qaeda, announced the establishment of a global caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph (Muslim ruler).

Despite the name change, the US-led coalition has not relented in its air strikes against the renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, killing dozens of its fighters, including senior leaders like Abu Ibrahim al-Tunsi, Abu Omar al-Turkistani, Abu Afghan al-Masri, Abu Faraj al-Masri, and Abu Omar Saraqeb.[38] Furthermore, between

February 3-4, 2017, U.S. drone strikes killed several al-Qaeda core members in Syria including the Egyptian Abu Hani al-Masri, in Idlib, where the Khorasan group has been imbedded. [39]Abu Hani al-Masri was a close ally of al-Zawahiri and helped him to establish the EIJ Egypt in the 1980s.[40] In the 1990s, he facilitated the creation of terrorist training camps for the EIJ and al-Qaeda and was tied to the disrupted plot to target the US Embassy in Tirana, Albania, in 1998, which was timed to take place shortly after the U.S. embassy bombings by al-Qaeda in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998.[41] The elimination of Abu Hani al-Masri illustrates al-Qaeda's continuing presence in Syria and signifies the U.S. intention to target individuals that it believes could potentially plot and direct global attacks. How this impacts on al-Zawahiri's strategic calculus remains to be seen especially as he has lost a key Egyptian supporter. If the past few years are to serve as an exemplar, when close allies of al-Zawahiri have been killed in U.S. operations, the al-Qaeda leader has refrained to comment or resort to fiery rhetoric without following it up with terrorist activity.

An Egyptian Obsession and AfPak Sanctuary

Before he was declared to be one of the most wanted terrorists by the United States, al-Zawahiri had been the most wanted man in Egypt. Whether it was his role in the 1974 plot by the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation) to take over the Military Technical College near Cairo, the 1981 assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, or the EIJ's series of direct attacks against the Hosni Mubarak regime in the 1990s, al-Zawahiri managed to absolve himself, avoid capital punishment and ultimately escape to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[42]

On August 13, 2016, al-Zawahiri issued the first of a series of Brief Messages to a Victorious Ummah.[43] In the first episode, Who Protects the Mus'haf (compiled pages of the Qur'an), al-Zawahiri argued that the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to take advantage of the Arab Spring symbolised its inability to create an Islamic state in Egypt and across the wider Arab world. Al-Zawahiri stated, *"…[Egypt] represents the flagrant pattern of the Muslims' failure if they are disabled and deviated, and it demonstrates the truth of the Crusaders' enmity if they are transgressed upon. What is drawn from Egypt can be applied elsewhere."* [44]

Al-Zawahiri argued the Muslim Brotherhood failed Egypt because its leaders kept cooperating with various Egyptian governments and participated in elections which neglected and weakened its founder Hassan al-Banna's original mission of creating an Islamic state. [45] Al-Zawahiri's goal behind his message was to illustrate that Egypt remained a strategic and ideological priority which al-Qaeda would never abandon and they represented a more viable alternative in establishing an Islamic state than the Muslim Brotherhood.

Citing Egyptian colonial history to justify a current ideological position, al-Zawahiri also lays into al-Banna for showing support *"for King Fuad [1922 – 1936], who was not only a corrupt ruler…but was also a subservient tool in the hands of the English, the occupiers of Egypt."*[46] Ironically, al-Zawahiri ignores the fact that his paternal grandfather, Shaykh al-Aḥmadi al-Zawahiri, who was an Imam of Egypt's historic al-Azhar seminary, was very unpopular because he was seen as a close ally of King Fuad.[47]

In the second episode of *Brief Messages to a Victorious Ummah*, subtitled Be Not Divided Among Yourselves, al-Zawahiri focused on, and reiterated his support for, the Taliban and called on all jihadists in the world to "rally around the emirate," referring to the Taliban's 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' where al-Qaeda had a safe base before 9/11. [48] On the surface, al-Zawahiri's staunch support for the Taliban is not surprising, as al-Qaeda is still dependent on the Taliban for protection and sanctuary in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet, al-Zawahiri's relationship with the Taliban is complex. Prior to 9/11, he was reluctant to endorse bin Laden's pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to Mullah Omar.[49] Al-Zawahiri did not believe that his strategic or ideological priorities were in Afghanistan but instead his eyes were always on the situation in Egypt.[50]

On 12 July, 2015, Islamic State issued an audio statement followed by an article in its *Dabiq* magazine, claiming that the Taliban's leader Mullah Omar was dead. This forced the Taliban to confirm officially Mullah

Omar's death on 29 July, 2015.[51] Noticeably silent was al-Zawahiri, especially when three of al-Qaeda's franchises, Jabhat al-Nusra, AQAP and AQIM, issued a joint eulogy praising the late Mullah Omar.[52]

Eventually in August, 2015, after almost one year of silence from commenting on any issue, al-Zawahiri resurfaced and not only affirmed his *bay'ah* to the new head of the Taliban, Mullah Mansour, but also described him as the *Emir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful) instead of usurping the honorific title for himself and thereby challenging Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim of *Caliph* directly. [53] Mansour accepted al-Zawahiri's *bay'ah* and reciprocated by describing him as "the leader of international Jihadi organization."[54]

Al-Zawahiri's speech was dated August 1, 2015, and had been recorded only two days after Mullah Omar's death was finally confirmed by the Taliban on July 30, where they admitted that Mullah Omar had died on April 23, 2013, over two years before the public announcement of his death.[55] The Taliban claimed that they kept the death of Mullah Omar a secret for tactical reasons. Al-Zawahiri did not comment on the sensitive issue whether or not he knew that Mullah Omar had died long ago. Had he done so, it could have been interpreted as evidence that he had been deceiving his followers for years, pledging *bay'ah* to a dead person. If al-Zawahiri was not among the few insiders who knew that Mullah Omar had passed away long ago, this would have indicated that he was not as close to the leadership of the Taliban as bin Laden had been. Following Manosur's elimination in a U.S. drone strike on 21 May, 2016, al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to his successor, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, in the hope that this would strengthen the relationship with al-Qaeda.[56] However, it is interesting that as of yet, Akhundzada has not accepted al-Zawahiri's pledge in public.

Al-Zawahiri supports the Afghan Taliban, partly out of necessity to maintain a safe base, but also because the Afghan Taliban is experiencing competition from Islamic State's Afghan affiliate, Wilayat Khorasan (Khorasan Province), a group that has concentrated its attacks in a few districts in the country's eastern provinces, including Nangarhar.[57] Another reason why al-Zawahiri is keen on maintaining a close connection with the Taliban is to strengthen the affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). [58] AQIS is developing a sanctuary in the Pakistani port city of Karachi and in the Helmand province in Afghanistan which form part of a logistical thread. From Karachi, AQIS can transfer fighters, funds and messages through to the border city of Quetta, which is also where elements of the Taliban are based. From there they can easily cross Afghanistan's porous borders and access its southern provinces.[59] Previously, in July 2015, U.S. forces dismantled an al-Qaeda camp in Kandahar province.[60] Within this context, AQIS could be utilized to revitalise al-Qaeda locally which is why al-Zawahiri was calling for *Ghazwa al-Hind* (Battle to Reunite India) a generic term for all of South Asia. [61]

The Safavids and Opaque Relationships

In the third part of his *Brief Messages to a Victorious Ummah*, al-Zawahiri urged Sunni Muslim fighters in Iraq to regroup and launch a protracted insurgency against what he described as the conspiratorial "Safavid-Crusader occupation" that supports Shiite militias.[62] In his speech, titled *Allah, Allah in Iraq,* al-Zawahiri claimed that Iran and the United States have a "scheme" to eliminate Sunni Muslims in Iraq under the excuse of fighting Islamic State.[63] The Safavid dynasty was one of the most significant Shiite Persian empires during the 16 and 17th centuries. Al-Zawahiri's use of the term 'Safavid' therefore implies Iran has imperial ambitions to subjugate Sunni Muslims. [64] Al-Zawahiri would later again repeat the "Safavid" reference in *The Defiers of Injustice*.[65] In dealing with Iran, al-Zawahiri was building on his earlier *General Guidelines for Jihad*. In that text he had ordered al-Qaeda to "avoid fighting the deviant sects," a reference to Shiite Muslim civilians.[66] This separates al-Qaeda's policy from the one of Islamic State which has a policy of deliberately attacking unarmed Shiite civilians.[67]

Al-Zawahiri's *Allah, Allah in Iraq* is also a renewal of an idea he had previously articulated in 2009 in an "interview" with as-Sahab, entitled *The Facts of Jihad and the Lies of Hypocrisy*. [68] In that text he had railed against Iran and Shiite scholars for not only failing to issue *fatwas* (authoritative legal opinion) against the "invading Crusaders in Iraq and Afghanistan" but also for choosing to become their "preferred partner". [69] Despite such public rhetoric, al-Qaeda has an ambiguous relationship with Iran's theocratic regime. Al-Zawahiri's deputies Abu al-Khayr al-Masri and Saif al-Adel, were both held under house arrest in Iran until being released in March 2015 in a prisoner exchange for an Iranian diplomat who had been abducted in Yemen.[70] This would suggest that there are still direct channels of communications between Tehran, al-Qaeda and its affiliates. There are other pieces of evidence supporting such a view. In July 2011, the U.S. Treasury Department designated six members of an al-Qaeda network as terrorists. Abbottabad also highlighted the importance of Iran to al-Qaeda. One document revealed that bin Laden had sent a message to one of his operatives called Kareem in 2007, telling him not to threaten Iran because "*You know that Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication, as well as for the matter of hostages.*"[71]

In 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the then head of external operations of Islamic State, issued a message entitled *Iran's Heavy Debt to al-Qaeda*, during which al-Adnani attacked al-Zawahiri, for preventing jihadists from targeting Iran in the past in order to preserve al-Qaeda's strategic interests.[72] Al-Adnani stated, "Islamic State followed the guidance of al-Jihad sheikhs and symbols, so it did not strike the Shiites in Iran since its inception, and left Rafidis [rejectionists] safe in Iran. It reined back its infuriated soldiers despite their ability, at the time, to fill Iran with pools of blood. It swallowed its anger all these years bearing accusations of treachery for not targeting its worst enemies, leaving the Rafidis enjoying security pursuant to al-Qaeda's order to maintain its interests and lines of supply in Iran." [73] Ironically, some years before, when al-Zawahiri succeeded bin Laden in 2011, he had been given the honorific title of "wise man of the *ummah*," by al-Adnani.[74]

Another significant figure who had resided in Iran following the 9/11 attacks was bin Laden's son, Hamza, also known as Abu Moaz.[75] Al-Zawahiri is utilizing the bin Laden brand name to recover al-Qaeda's appeal by summoning Osama bin Laden's charisma through his son whom he appears to be grooming. Together, they have coordinated the simultaneous release of some of al-Qaeda's messages in recent years where they have threatened revenge against the United States for the death of Osama bin Laden.[76] However, there is also a much more personal motive for al-Zawahiri to cultivate bin Laden's son. Hamza is married to al-Zawahiri's daughter and he has two children from her, Khairiah and Saad.[77]Al-Zawahiri is therefore able to keep the bin Laden legacy firmly attached to his own doctrine through a strategic marriage alliance.

In a 2015 speech, Ayman al-Zawahiri presented Hamza bin Laden as "son of the lion of jihad," before calling on al-Qaeda's followers to fight against the "Americans, Jews, and the rest of the West." [78] Hamza bin Laden's speeches have revived the image and words of his father when he said "We [al-Qaeda] will continue striking you and targeting you in your country and abroad." [79] He was eerily direct when he threatened America and the West and promised to avenge the death of his father. Hamza bin Laden has subsequently also been listed as a 'global terrorist' by the United States.[80]

The Solid Structure

On 29 August, 2016, al-Zawahiri released his fourth, and what appeared at the time to be the final message, in the series *Brief Messages to a Victorious Ummah*, entitled *The Solid Structure*.[81] Opportunistically, it was released on the 50th anniversary of the execution of the Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb.[82] Qutb had a close connection to al-Zawahiri's family and also an ideological bearing on him. Al-Zawahiri would often cite Qutb in al-Qaeda's propaganda statements and described him as "the most prominent theoretician of the jihadist movement."[83] Al-Zawahiri's maternal grand uncle, Mahfouz Azzam, had been one of the defence lawyers for Qutb, following his arrest in 1965 after the publication of his provocative treatise *Milestones* which

spoke about the need for violent revolutions through jihad.[84] Azzam was given Qutb's power of attorney when he was sentenced to death for plotting against Egyptian President Gamal Nasser.[85]

In *The Solid Structure*, al-Zawahiri took a page from Qutb's seminal book *Milestones,* by speaking of the need for the "revival" of a *Sharia* (Islamic law) body to arbitrate differences and disputes, and a *Shura* (consultative) Council that would "harness the power of the *Ummah* against the tyrants and invaders."[86] In doing so, al-Zawahiri was asserting the importance of consistency behind the jihadist ideology. However, he did not provide details on how such a *Sharia* body would practically function.

Al-Zawahiri has also viscerally attacked *Islamic State* and al-Baghdadi, accusing them for causing divisions and fragmentation amongst the jihadists with their "innovated *caliphate*."[87] Al-Zawahiri described them as "*neo-Kharijites*" based on the term *Khawarij* (Outsiders), a historical and derogatory reference to a sect, active during the first century of Islam, which had mutinied against the fourth *caliph* Ali whom they assassinated.[88] In labelling Islamic State as *Khawarij,* which he had done before on several occasions, al-Zawahiri was effectively calling for their *Qatl Ad* (total extermination).[89]

The historical *Khawarij* pursued *takfir*, the excommunication and killing of Muslims accused of lacking faith or abandoning Islam, a tactic *that Islamic State* currently uses against Iraqi and Syrian Muslims. This strategy was forged by Islamic State's predecessor entity, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) whose infamous founder, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had introduced excessive brutality towards the Iraqi population as a tool to control and subjugate them.[90] In a 2005 letter to al-Zarqawi, al-Zawahiri had criticized him for killing Muslims, urging al-Zarqawi to stop because his actions were toxifying the al-Qaeda brand and would reduce AQI's support base.[91]

Nevertheless, in August 2015, when al-Zawahiri came out of his 11-month period of public silence, in addition to affirming his *bay'ah* to Mullah Manosur, the al-Qaeda leader also chose to describe al-Zarqawi as one of the "good martyrs."[92] By doing so, al-Zawahiri was offering a veiled criticism of Islamic State. Despite his strong differences with al-Zarqawi, al-Zawahiri was claiming the former AQI leader died for al-Qaeda and al-Zawahiri's ideological platform, thereby implying al-Baghdadi has betrayed the original cause.

Not Bowing to Islamic State

Since 2014, the rivalry between al-Qaeda and Islamic State has not only been based on ideological disputes but was based also on strategic priorities, particularly regarding the question of what are permissible levels of violence against Shiites and other religious minorities, and the order of priorities when it comes to fighting Arab regimes and the West. During this period, al-Zawahiri's doctrine has been plagued by contradictions and shifts. This surfaced again on 5 January 2017, when al-Qaeda released a message from al-Zawahiri, *To Other Than Allah We Will Not Bow*, which was primarily aimed at asserting his jihadist credentials and restate al-Qaeda's operational priorities, whilst at the same time denouncing *Islamic State.* [93]

Curiously, this message was Part Five of al-Zawahiri's *Brief Messages to a Victorious Nation*. Part Four had been issued back on 29 August, 2016, leaving a significant gap between them. It is likely that Part Five was more a defensive reaction by al-Zawahiri who was preoccupied with stemming what he called a campaign to "discredit, intimidate and alienate" al-Qaeda, conducted by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Islamic State.[94] Al-Zawahiri, referred to al-Baghdadi as a "liar" and as being "blasphemous", trying to counter a litany of allegations from Islamic State, including claims that al-Qaeda did not condemn un-Islamic regimes; had been praising ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood; willing to let Christians share power as partners; not practicing *takfir* against Shiites and critically, abandoning the goal of targeting the United States.[95]

This appeared to unnerve al-Zawahiri, who aggressively defended his choices and his own reputation, which further implies that Part Five could have been an unintended sequel to the "*Brief Messages to a Victorious Nation.*" Regarding Shiites, al-Zawahiri stated, "*The liars insist upon their falsehood, to the extent that they claimed we do not denounce Shiites*".[96] Al-Zawahiri claimed that al-Qaeda's condemnation of the Shiites was reflected in the *General Guidelines for Jihad* which had been sent to Islamic State before it was officially published. Al-Zawahiri also denied he had said that Christians could be partners in the governance of a future Islamic caliphate, "What I have said is that they are partners in the land, such as agriculture, trade, and money, and we keep their privacy in it, in accordance with the laws of our *Sharia*".[97] Al-Zawahiri insisted he had not called for Shiite Muslims to be spared, but believed there should not be random attacks against civilians but instead attacks should focus on Shiite-led Iraqi forces described by al-Zawahiri as *rafidah* (rejectionists).[98]

In the battle against what he described as the "Secular-Crusader-Safawi-Chinese-Hindu campaign," al-Zawahiri laid out eleven directives for al-Qaeda, some of which reiterated the group's original doctrine as well as other aspects that had been revised by al-Zawahiri following bin Laden's death in 2011:

1. Al-Qaeda is not infallible and can occasionally make mistakes and must listen to advice to establish the correct methodology and methods to support Islam and jihad;

2. Prioritizing the jihad against the United States whilst adapting to the practical reality of the situation based on consensus;

3. Obeying *Sharia* law and uniting the *Ummah* around monotheism;

4. Liberate Muslim lands from indigenous disbelievers and apostate agents;

5. Freeing Muslim prisoners;

6. Stop the systematic looting of Muslim wealth;

7. Support and aid Muslims in their revolutions against the corrupt oppressive tyrants;

8. Uniting the different *mujahedeen* groups and promoting cooperation, collaboration and coordination;

9. The pursuit of a *Caliphate*;

10. Refrain from harming Muslims through bombings, killings or kidnappings;

11. Give victory to oppressed and weak Muslims.[99]

Al-Zawahiri's message concluded with a piece of polemic prose, reiterating al-Qaeda threats against the United States and blaming the Americans for all the problems across the Middle East.[100] However, despite reiterating to Islamic State and the world that the United States was a priority target, what was significantly missing from al-Zawahiri's message is that there was no explanation why al-Qaeda had not again in recent years successfully targeted the West, and in particular the United States. It is clear there remains a strong aspirational goal to target the West but aside from the ideology, there is no mentioning by al-Zawahiri of tactics or targets. This stands in stark contrast to Islamic State which clearly lays out its strategy, often through new media, for followers to pursue.

Conclusion

Al-Zawahiri has shown pragmatism by not only tailoring his remarks to current realities on the ground but also on the realistic will, capabilities, and nature of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This is why he has prioritised

on courses of action that are local to the Arab and Islamic world, including countering the Iranian sponsored Shiite militias in Iraq, despite the ambiguous relationship; Support the Taliban in Afghanistan, partly out of necessity; Counter and challenge Islamic State and oppose "apostate" regimes like those in Egypt and Syria. All of these strategic priorities have been interspersed by al-Zawahiri with calls for attacks against the West and, in particular, the United States.

However, to achieve these objectives, al-Zawahiri believes that it is not enough to successfully carry out trans-national attacks, which al-Qaeda cannot currently sustain, but there has to be a strategy to win battles which are based on the requirement that al-Qaeda and its affiliates possess safe bases in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world. Despite the fact that Islamic State has similar ideological goals as al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri is eager not only to condemn Islamic State, and on occasions to be on the defensive, but also present a viable alternative for jihadists that see al-Baghdadi's project slowly start to wane.

Many of the doctrines about the Near Enemy from al-Zawahiri's recent speeches are an updated revision from those he had developed in his EIJ days. Consequently, while there is some disconnect between al-Zawahiri prioritising the Near Enemy over the Far Enemy, with his frequent use of the 'Crusader' label, it is a small gap in terms of the jihadist community that he is attempting to galvanise because it still serves a purpose in connecting the Far Enemy with the problems in the Islamic world.

Therefore, in al-Zawahiri's mind, the ensuing battle against the "apostate regimes" of the Near Enemy cannot be considered an entirely regional struggle if the Far Enemy is acting as their security guarantor. For him, the Far Enemy will not change in the near future and therefore the conflict against them can be revisited if the primary objective against the Near Enemy is unsuccessful. This could include targeting the remaining Western military presence in Afghanistan that supports the Kabul government. Equally, if the violent road to regime change is impeded in pro-Western countries, such as Egypt, under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, or if Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and al-Qaeda find their operations in Syria stymied by Western air-strikes, al-Zawahiri may advocate taking the battle to the West once again.

Although it is likely that al-Zawahiri will ideologically react towards U.S. President Donald Trump's administration with fire and brimstone, on practical terms, the al-Qaeda leader is unlikely to operationally steer away from his cautious approach towards the Far Enemy until he feels al-Qaeda is able to endure any potential backlash. One successful attack in the United States may only result in severe repercussions that could permanently disable al-Qaeda which has still not fully regenerated. Above everything else, al-Zawahiri is obsessed in his self-preservation. After over 40 years of jihadist activity, he has developed a knack for staying alive and despite his desire to die as a 'martyr', he will not voluntarily sacrifice himself. Furthermore, al-Zawahiri has a vested interest in cultivating his family ties to Hamza bin Laden, and to use the name to further the agenda and brand of al-Qaeda whilst ensuring his ideological thumbprint remains attached to the group's next generation.

In recent years, Islamic State has been more of a threat to al-Qaeda than the West. It is Islamic State that has challenged al-Qaeda's doctrine, recruited more fighters, expanded its territorial base, exposed al-Zawahiri's inconsistencies and highlighted al-Qaeda's opaque relationships with countries like Iran. Therefore, al-Zawahiri will gladly let Islamic State face the focus and brunt of the international coalition in Iraq and Syria, whilst at the same time hoping that any potential breathing space will enable al-Qaeda to reconstitute its infrastructure and networks across the Islamic world.

Al-Qaeda has not abandoned its plans to target the West, but it is not the only priority. In the short-term, al-Zawahiri's global relevance will remain, albeit in an understated way, which potentially makes him more dangerous in the longer-term, especially as his priority on survival and operational security remains paramount and this longevity enables him to outlast his rivals from Islamic State.

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