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Al Qaeda under Ayman Al Zawahiri: Still a Lethal Organisation

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Synopsis

Al Qaeda's new leader Ayman Al Zawahiri pledged to continue its war against the West in partnership with its associates beyond the Afghan-Pakistan theatre. Will they also support the revolutions in the Arab countries to Islamise those movements?

Commentary

THE APPOINTMENT of Ayman Al Zawahiri as the new leader of Al Qaeda, following the death of Osama bin Laden in early May, heralds a new phase in the development of the multinational terrorist group. As Osama's deputy and the group's main theoretician, Dr Zawahiri has long been acknowledged as the brains of Al Qaeda's core leadership. Though sharing Osama's deep hatred for the West and penchant for unrestrained violence, Zawahiri will shape the organisation and influence the global movement of Al Qaeda according to his ideas, now that he has taken the helm.

In announcing Zawahiri's appointment, Al Qaeda reaffirmed its core tenets such as the pledge to fulfil Osama's oaths and to remain under the Taliban in Afghanistan. Besides continuing the war against the United States and its allies, Zawahiri is likely to have even larger goals. While pursuing its role as the "pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movement" Al Qaeda under Zawahiri is likely to seek to support the "Arab Spring" revolutions in the Middle East (West Asia) and North Africa with the intention of penetrating and Islamising those movements.

Differences in Strategy

Since the establishment of Al Qaeda in 1988 under the banner of the "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Crusaders and Jews", Zawahiri has expanded the range of targets to include "tools to fight Islam" used by the West, such as the United Nations, rulers of Muslim nations, international relief agencies as well as multinational corporations and communications systems and media organisations. Zawahiri's 2001 tract formed the blueprint for Al Qaeda's global campaign. Indeed it was Zawahiri who master-minded the creation of Al Qaeda al Jihad with the merging in July 2001 of the rudimentary Al Qaeda and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad which he had led from the 1970s. After several years in Russian and Egyptian prisons, Zawahiri left for Saudi Arabia in 1985 and then relocated to Pakistan in 1987.

Within Al Qaeda there were differences in strategy. While Osama's mentor Abdullah Azzam wanted to fight occupiers of Muslim lands, Zawahiri was determined to use Al Qaeda reserves to attack "false Muslim rulers and corrupt Muslim regimes". Under Zawahiri's influence, Al Qaeda evolved from a guerilla group fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan to a terrorist group attacking non-military targets.

After Azzam's death in November 1989, Zawahiri consolidated his control over the assets of Al Qaeda and filled its most important positions with other Egyptians including the founding members of Al Qaeda who became its successive military chiefs - Mohamed Atef a.k.a. Abu Hafs al-Masri and Ali al Rashid alias Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri. Consequently over half of the 10-member Shura Council, the organisation's top decision-making body, have been Egyptians; they headed its military, intelligence, political, information, religious and administration and finance committees.

Zawahiri's worldview

Zawahiri himself was a prolific communicator turning out propaganda via the electronic media to reach out to the global Muslim community. A Cairo-trained medical doctor, Zawahiri was well-read, well-travelled, ideologically strong and operationally savvy. Six years older than Osama, he was said to be secretive, goal-oriented, systematic and forward-thinking – attributes which equip him to influence the landscape of terrorism. Unlike the puritanical and archaic Osama, Zawahiri is likely to shape Al Qaeda into a more modern organisation, based on latest management principles and using new technology.

Though born into a wealthy family and maintaining the family tradition of studying medicine, Zawahiri dedicated his life to politics and formed a cell of the EIJ when only 16 and moved up the ranks to guide the EIJ a decade before joining Al Qaeda. Zawahiri's worldview had been moulded by the trials and tribulations he underwent from torture and imprisonment in Egypt and the Soviet Union to the recurring losses of colleagues, friends and family.

New Campaign

After Osama's death, Al Qaeda has not collapsed. Instead it continues to be a lethal organisation with Zawahiri as leader. A dozen terrorist and insurgent groups from Africa to West Asia have pledged their allegiance to Zawahiri and reaffirmed their partnership with Al Qaeda. They include the Harakat al Shabaab group of Somalia. Though its strength on the Afghan-Pakistan border numbers a few hundred fighters it relies upon its associate groups to conduct operations.

In Pakistan, the Tarek e Taliban, the group closest to Al Qaeda, has unleashed several attacks on civilian, military and security targets in retaliation for the death of Osama. They signal that Al Qaeda under Zawahiri has embarked on a new campaign of terror with a vengeance.

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