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After Osama: Ayman Al-Zawahiri at the helm of Al Qaeda Professor Rohan Gunaratna

The killing of Osama Bin Laden on 2 May 2011 has raised the question whether Al Qaeda will die along with him. Ayman Al-Zawahiri was recently announced as Bin Laden's successor. Although Zawahiri lacks the global charisma and appeal of Bin Laden, his leadership is seen to add a whole new dimension to the group.

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Undated File photograph of
Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri
Photo Credit: [Andres Perez](#) on Flickr

When Ayman Al-Zawahiri's was announced as the new head of the Al Qaeda on 16 June 2011, it came as no surprise to many. Among the leaders of Al Qaeda's six committees—military, intelligence, political, information, religious, administration and finance— Zawahiri was the most qualified to lead the world's deadliest terrorist group. Indeed, he is an even more experienced terrorist leader than his predecessor. As Osama Bin Laden's deputy and the group's main theoretician, Zawahiri has long been acknowledged as the brains of the Al Qaeda leadership. A prolific communicator, he is a master at

churning out propaganda which reaches out to the global Muslim community. It goes without saying that as Zawahiri takes the helm he will shape the organization and influence the wider Al Qaeda -led global movement in planning, preparing and executing attacks against the United States, its friends and allies.

The official statement of the Al Qaeda announcing Zawahiri's appointment reiterated: *"We assure our brothers in Afghanistan that we are with them with our lives and with what we own, under the leadership of the Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid, may Allah protect him, in pushing out and expelling the American Crusader occupation from its pure and patient country."* The statement affirmed several core Al Qaeda tenets, including its pledge to fulfill Bin Laden's oaths and to remain under the Taliban, which has a much larger presence on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. A dozen terrorist and insurgent groups from Africa to the Middle East have since pledged their allegiance to Zawahiri and reaffirmed their partnership with Al Qaeda. Among the first non-Pakistani and non-Afghan groups to express support for

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Zawahiri was Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen of Somalia. Al-Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Mahmoud Ragi said the mujahideen in Somalia are “*an inseparable part of the ummah’s jihad against the Zionist Crusader invasion of the lands of Islam.*” They see Al Qaeda “*as the teacher*” in whom they find “*instructions and advice.*” They prayed that Allah “*lead Sheikh Ayman Al Zawahiri to success and to help him in his Affairs*” adding, “*Here we are, here we are, and we are waiting for your instructions.*”

But Zawahiri likely has even larger goals. While the Al Qaeda will continue as the “*pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements*” (a phrase used by Dr. Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, Al Qaeda’s ideological father), under Zawahiri it will also seek to support the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa with the intention of penetrating and Islamizing those struggles.

Zawahiri and Bin Laden

Both Bin Laden and Zawahiri have demonstrated deep-rooted hatred for the West and practiced unrestrained violence, but the differences in their personalities are vast. Unlike Bin Laden, an associative thinker, the Cairo-trained medical doctor Zawahiri has more linear thought patterns. Exceptionally well traveled and well read, and ideologically and operationally savvy, Zawahiri is six years older than his predecessor. Goal-oriented, systematic, secretive and forward thinking, Zawahiri’s attributes will continue to influence the global landscape of terrorism. Whereas Bin Laden was puritanical and archaic, Zawahiri will shape Al Qaeda into a post-modern organization. A visionary, he will introduce new technology and modern management principles both to Al Qaeda and to its broader association.

Background on Zawahiri

Born to an aristocratic family in the Cairo suburb of Maadi on 9 June 1951, Zawahiri maintained his family tradition of studying medicine. But in practice he dedicated his entire life to his passion—politics; in fact, he formed an Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) cell when he was only sixteen. A decade before the birth of Al Qaeda, he had moved up the ranks to guide the EIJ, the deadliest

Photograph of Ayman Al-Zawahiri at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Most Wanted Terrorists List. He is wanted for the murder of US nationals outside of the United States; Conspiracy to murder US nationals outside of the United States; Attack on a Federal facility causing death. Full details can be found [here](#)



Sunni group in the world at the time. On 23 October 1981, he was arrested as a suspect in the assassination of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. He was tortured and jailed for three years before he left for Saudi Arabia in 1985. He relocated to Peshawar, Pakistan in 1987, having visited the country as part of the medical team to help the Afghan mujahideen.

On 11 August 1988, the Al Qaeda was founded. Zawahiri maintained a very powerful influence over the group. There were differences in strategy: Bin Laden’s mentor Azzam wanted to fight occupiers of Muslim lands; Zawahiri was determined to use Al Qaeda reserves to mount attacks to replace “*false Muslim rulers and corrupt Muslim regimes with pious leaders and Islamic states.*” It was thus under Zawahiri’s influence that the Al Qaeda evolved from a guerrilla group fighting the Soviet army to a terrorist group attacking non-military targets. When Azzam was killed on 24 November 1989, Zawahiri joined his two sons in delivering the eulogy. Nonetheless, to this date many accuse “the Egyptians” of plotting Azzam’s death—an event that enabled Zawahiri to consolidate his control over Bin Laden and the assets of Al Qaeda. Since then “the Egyptians” have been the backbone of the group.

As leader of EIJ, he was not a formal member of the Al Qaeda. But he influenced both groups, drawing them together in significant ways. He started reassembling the EIJ after coming to lead it in 1991. He estab-

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lished a friendship with Muhammad Atef (alias Abu Hafs al-Masri) and Ali al-Rashidi (alias Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri), both of whom became founding members and successive military chiefs of Al Qaeda. In essence, Zawahiri was filling Al Qaeda's most important positions with Egyptians. Throughout its life, over 50 percent of the *majlis shura*, the ten-member council that is the organization's highest decision-making body was Egyptians. Although the bulk of Al Qaeda's membership has been Saudi and Yemeni, the Egyptian leaders and members have been the most influential and capable. Many of them came from police, military and intelligence backgrounds. Operating out of Sudan and Yemen, EIJ relied on Al Qaeda support to mount operations in Egypt and against Egyptian targets overseas.

To spawn, sustain and shape a global movement of terror against the West, Zawahiri co-created with Bin Laden the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders on 23 February 1998. Continuing in the tradition of Egyptian thinkers and writers like Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb Sayyid, Zawahiri wrote the *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, completed in September and published in October 2001. Released at a time when the Al Qaeda faced its most severe threat, the book constitutes his last will and testament. Perhaps inspired by Zawahiri, Bin Laden too wrote his will soon afterwards. Zawahiri expanded the range of targets, identifying the "tools to fight Islam" used by the West as: (1) The United Nations, (2) The friendly rulers of the Muslim peoples, (3) The multinational corporations, (4) The international communications and data exchange systems, (5) The international news agencies and satellite media channels, and (6) The international relief agencies, which are being used as a cover for espionage, proselytizing, coup planning and the transfer of weapons.

Zawahiri's text formed the blueprint for Al Qaeda's global campaign. After years of shaping—formally or otherwise—both EIJ and the Al Qaeda, Zawahiri masterminded the merging the two and the creation of Al Qaeda Al Jihad in July 2001.

Zawahiri's worldview has been molded by the trials and tribulations he has endured, from torture in Egypt to imprisonment in Russia to recurring losses of colleagues, friends and family. In Egypt and overseas, many who worked with him were killed or captured. Zawahiri was sentenced to death in absentia in Egypt in April 1999. His own brother Muhammed, also an active member of EIJ, was arrested in the UAE and deported to Egypt in 2000. He was released by the Egyptian state after the fall of Mubarak but rearrested afterwards.

Zawahiri's wife Azza Ahmed Nowari and three of his six children, including his daughter Aisha, who had Down syndrome, were killed in an air strike on Afghanistan by U.S. forces in November 2001. After relocation to tribal Pakistan, Zawahiri married a woman from the Mahmud tribe in Bajaur Agency. As such, for Zawahiri, the fight is personal. He vengefully called former US President George Bush, "the butcher of Washington" and President Barack Obama a "house slave."

Conclusion

Al Qaeda did not collapse with Osama Bin Laden's death. On the contrary, it paved the way for an even more lethal man to take control of the operational and ideological vanguard of the global movement. Under Zawahiri, Al Qaeda has returned with a vengeance. Although its active strength on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is but a few hundred fighters, it relies on its associated groups to conduct operations. The Tareek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), the group closest to A Qaeda, has staged several attacks in honor of Bin Laden. With that, Zawahiri has already commenced his campaign of relentless terror.

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New hope for the Kurdish Question Sheharyar Khan*

The results of the 12 June 2011 national elections in Turkey is seen as chance for the winning Justice and Development Party (AKP) to provide a solution to the Kurdish question. The AKP government is open to negotiations with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (KPP) and constitutional reforms to bring about peace.

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The third consecutive win of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has given rise to hopes for a political solution of Turkey's long-standing Kurdish question. In the 12 June 2011 national elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) secured 50 per cent of the votes which gave current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan his third term. Erdogan promised to change the constitution which was introduced by military coup leaders in 1980. The constitution is widely criticized because some of its provisions are seen to be undemocratic and in violation of basic human rights.

The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) also did well in the elections garnering 36 seats in the 550-member Parliament. In the previous election, the BDP got only 20 seats. The BDP was formerly known as the Peace and Democracy Party (DTP). The name change was due to the bans imposed on the DTP for its alleged links with the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The BDP's presence in Parliament is seen to give Kurds a voice within the government. It fielded its candidates as independents due to the 10 per cent threshold to the parliament. The current Turkish constitution does not allow for any party to sit in the parliament if they secured less than 10 per cent of the total number of seats. The 10 percent thresh-

old is also considered a problem for Kurdish political forces to have their say in a democratic way.

The Kurds constitute around 15 percent of Turkey's population. They live mainly in southeastern Turkey, which has borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran. There are some Kurds who are scattered in different cities. Most of them have been displaced due to the continuous conflict. Kurdish political parties often fail to make it to Parliament because of the ten percent threshold rule. There are experts who believe that denying the Kurds a political platform will force them to resort to violence.

Negotiations between the AKP and the PKK

The ruling party, AKP is under increasing pressure to solve the Kurdish problem which has beset Turkey since 1986- approximately 45,000 people have been killed in the violent conflicts since then. Prime Minister Erdogan has already initiated several bold initiatives in his term. He removed the ban on the Kurdish language and cultural festivals. He also allowed for a Kurdish language TV channel. However, on economic development for the Kurds, the progress has been dismal.

During the election campaign, Prime Minister Erdogan came down hard on the BDP and PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan, who has been incarcerated

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Collage of Political Parties who participated in the 12 June 2011 National Elections in Turkey.

Image Credit: [The Bosphorus Watch](#)

since 1998. This harshness could only be a political ploy to appeal to the nationalist segment of the voting population.

However, after winning the elections the AKP started negotiations with the PKK. The PKK had earlier given 15 June 2011 as the deadline for a unilateral ceasefire with the Turkish government. The ceasefire, which was announced and observed only by the PKK, has been in place for several months already, although there have been some sporadic incidents. Five days after the deadline, the PKK announced that the ceasefire is extended until 1 September this year. The ceasefire extension is allegedly a result of the secret negotiations between the AKP and Abdullah Ocalan. It seems that the AKP was able to convince the PKK to give it some time to form the new government and inaugurate a new Parliament. For its part, the PKK had two conditions before going into peace talks with the government.

First, Turkish security forces should stop its operations against the PKK in the southeast region. Second, Abdullah Ocalan the jailed leader of the PKK must be released. However, the AKP government is not inclined to accept these conditions. The PKK's extension of the ceasefire deadline is for them to further negotiate the terms of the peace talks with the new Parliament.

The AKP's quest for constitutional reforms

Prime Minister Erdogan's pledge to change the constitution is not an easy task as it would need a two-thirds majority vote in Parliament- which the AKP does not have. To achieve the necessary numbers, the AKP must have the support of opposition parties like the Republican People's Party (CHP), which won 26 percent of the votes, and the National Movement Party (MHP) which won 13 percent. The support of the BDP would also matter in this case, even if the party has only 36 members in Parliament.

However, the opposition parties have not supported any moves to change the constitution in past Parliament so it is unlikely that it will support the AKP's current initiatives. Political parties in Turkey are ideologically opposed with one another so they would be hard-pressed to find middle ground. The AKP has Islamist roots and is against the role of the army in politics. On the other hand, the main opposition party, CHP, is secular and Kemalist, those who want to establish and continue the ideologies of the Turkish national movement. The CHP is also closely allied with the armed forces. The two parties have disagreed on issues such as the removal of the ban on headscarves for women in universities and the workplace; and the Ergenekon case. Ergenekon is a clandestine the ultra-nationalist Kemalist organization. The group has allegedly tried to overthrow Turkey's democratic government. Hundreds of people have been arrested for their alleged involvement with the group, including officers from Turkey's armed forces.

Prospects for peace

An amicable resolution of the Kurdish question would be the hardest test for Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan. This is further hampered by different nationalist elements within the country which may not be willing to

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give any concessions to the Kurds or the PKK. The Turkish Armed Forces although cornered and under pressure, still wield powers and have a say in security matters. The Turkish Armed Forces have been accused of prolonging the conflict for its own vested interests. Needless to say, the relationship between Prime Minister Erdogan and the Armed Forces is best described cold. The Armed Forces has taken it upon itself to safeguard Turkey's secularism and it considers the AKP an Islamist party. The Ergenekon case has also increased the rift between the two.

Abdullah Ocalan is the undisputed leader of the PKK but he is not in total control of all the subgroups of the militants. Ocalan will also need to consider the internal politics before making any deal with the government.

Through the years the AKP managed to cut most of the support bases of the PKK in Syria, Iran, and Iraq. The support for the PKK has slowed down in other parts of the world, especially after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The organization has increasingly been under pressure and its support bases continue to dwindle. The Kurds, although culturally very close-knit, is not a monolithic group. Majority of them do not support the PKK nor do they approve of its terrorist tactics. However, the PKK is seen to be only group that can get the message of the Kurdish people across. Most Kurds are open to a compromise with the government and give up the PKK's demand for independence. They are willing to accept autonomy and the abrogation of laws which discriminate against them.

Much is expected from the AKP government with regards to providing a solution to terrorist violence. However, many experts on the subject believe that the PKK would not disarm and that the region will continue to experience some low-level conflicts amidst marginal violence. A positive development is that there is now political ownership of the issue on the Kurds and the PKK, rather than having the military deal with it. This is seen to inject new hope for the Kurdish question and there is much optimism that this could produce positive results for all stakeholders.

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Electronic copies of the articles (MS Word format) may be submitted to the editors at the following address: isdiane@ntu.edu.sg

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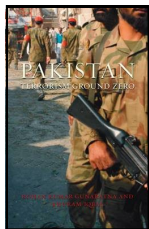
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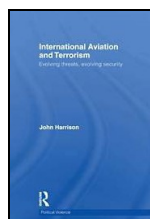
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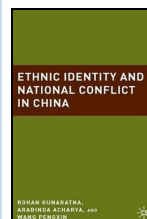
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- **Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero** (Reaktion Books, 2011) by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna and Mr. Khuram Iqbal



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