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Analysis:
The Assassination of Ayman Al-Zawahiri

HEART OF ASIA SOCIETY

About HAS

The Heart of Asia Society (HAS) is an independent think tank working towards stability and shared prosperity in Afghanistan and the Heart of Asia region by fostering cooperation that increases connectivity and builds confidence. The Heart of Asia region encompasses Afghanistan and its immediate and extended neighbors from South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

The Heart of Asia Society works through research, dialogue, and policy analysis. It remains dedicated to a vision of Afghanistan that safeguards the rights of men and women of all ethnicities and religions, respects and values diversity, and promotes inclusivity and agency for its citizens. HAS also works with partners in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Pacific, urging them to remain engaged and advance peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

The Heart of Asia Society
House 53, Lane 3-Right
Wazir Akbar Khan
Kabul, Afghanistan
info@heartofasiasociety.org

&

1 Suite 300, 50 O'Connor Street,
Ottawa, Canada K1P 6L2

The Taliban Pledges

Zawahiri's death's method, timing, and place are bad news for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). It undermines, if not shatters, Taliban credibility in the eyes of Afghans, Al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups. For Afghanistan's neighbors and the wider international community, the impression that the Taliban had worked hard to cultivate is equally destructive.

The Taliban have devoted significant capital to building trust and credibility over the last several years. Since returning to power, the Taliban diplomatic corps led by Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi has been on a relentless charm offensive in the region and beyond to principally convince the world of the following: accept and deal with the IEA based on shared economic interests rather than political considerations, refrain from undermining the IEA, and the IEA would reciprocate by providing a conducive environment for economic and trade activities in Afghanistan and ensure that Afghanistan under their rule is kept harmless to others. To ensure that other countries fully trusted the Taliban, the Taliban has repeatedly declared that there are no foreign terrorists in Afghanistan except the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP), which is, according to the Taliban, on the verge of being annihilated by the IEA forces. The Taliban Supreme Leader recently questioned why other governments should seek to interfere in the decisions of the IEA when the Taliban is only concerned with restoring Afghanistan as a sovereign, responsible member of the international community.

So far, so good. With very few exceptions, all countries neighboring Afghanistan and the region have engaged with the Taliban massively, even as the IEA remains officially unrecognized. The range of bilateral and sometimes multilateral interest issues between the Taliban and countries in the region include almost all aspects of life and common issues of discussion between states – economy and trade, culture, education, development, humanitarian assistance, etc. And to be true to their words in the eyes of the Taliban, these countries have largely refrained from meddling in Afghanistan's internal matters, most not backing anti-Taliban political and military forces and instead resorting to harmless encouragements of respect for human rights and political inclusion of others by the Taliban.

Now, most of these countries are likely to feel threatened. The presence of a dangerous global terrorist group's leader amid the Taliban is not an issue to be taken lightly. Before the strike targeting Al-Zawahiri, some countries in the region, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China, have highlighted the dangers of foreign terrorists, mainly the ISKP, in Afghanistan and hinted at the Taliban's failure to counter them. Very recently, at the Afghanistan-centered international conference in Tashkent, the Uzbek president called on the IEA to tackle the problem of terrorism. A few days later, the Russian envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, voiced concern about the swelling number of ISKP fighters in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power.

Regional and Global Implications

Against this background, the IEA can be expected, at a minimum, to engage in another diplomatic charm offensive to control the damage. But then comes the real test – will they take action and demonstrate results in eliminating foreign terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan? Even worse for the Taliban will be the revelation of more foreign terrorist leaders or evidence of attacks in Afghanistan targeting other countries' interests. Taliban aspirations of instituting a theocratically organized political system under their firm control and enjoying an economic boom powered by internal and external economic activity will also likely fail. The decisions facing the Taliban leadership lie between a rock and a hard place. The rhetoric of sovereignty, of an ideology grounded in genuine notions of “Afghan-ness” in historical and religious terms, cannot co-exist with adherence to and support of extremist groups whose aspirations do not share that same ideology.

The foreign policy implications are likely to be the priority for the IEA, but the Taliban will also have to explain the situation to the people of Afghanistan. As the Taliban-organized gathering of religious leaders in Kabul in June 2022 indicated, the Taliban are aware that they lack legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people. Since the Doha Agreement in February 2020 and the aborted “peace settlement” negotiations, a part of the ‘change narrative’ of the Taliban has been directed at Afghans, trying to present an image of a more benign and enlightened rule as opposed to their 1990s’ version. Taliban officials inspecting construction workers filling potholes on the streets or commanders joining the fight against ISKP terrorists whenever they storm a building in Kabul (so that people’s serenity is not disturbed) are examples of what the Taliban tried to do to gain widespread acceptance. But people have learned to look beyond the rhetoric and mere show embittered by the economic collapse, drastically falling living standards, monopolization of power by the Taliban, harsh Taliban social policies, and now the presence of a prominent terrorist just around the corner. How will the Taliban hope to gain legitimacy and acceptance among the people it rules when it is seen as allied with international terrorism while failing to deliver on other expectations? Disregarding the concerns and opinions of the Afghan people have poorly ended for other Afghan leaders. Therefore, the Taliban will be under pressure to explain to ordinary Afghans why the leader of Al Qaeda – the group responsible for the invasion of 2001 – was given protection in the heart of Kabul.

The Taliban has historically allied with a myriad of foreign terrorist groups. As the news of Al-Zawahiri’s killing is settling in, these groups living under Taliban protection might start questioning the Taliban’s trustworthiness and thinking about contingency plans if and when the Taliban move against them. Whether the Taliban should make this move remains to be seen. The Taliban need to cool off tempers in Al-Qaeda, followed by allied terrorist groups and networks sympathetic to; and Al-Qaeda ideals in Afghanistan and beyond. After all, Al-Zawahiri came to Kabul with trust in the Taliban for his protection (‘seeking protection’ has deep religious and cultural undertones in

Islam and Afghanistan). As the technicalities of the strike and potential Taliban collusion (true or false and regardless of who in the Taliban) are becoming issues of public debate, the Taliban will increasingly come under pressure to placate Al Qaeda, other groups, and their constituencies. Some in Al Qaeda or other groups may even think of revenge against all or parts of the Taliban.

A more critical and urgent task for the Taliban is maintaining their internal calm and unity. There are unconfirmed reports of a blame-game unfolding between the Taliban factions from the south led by Mullah Hassan, Mullah Baradar, and Mullah Yaqub, and the Haqqani Network led by Serajudin Haqqani. It is said that Al-Zawahiri lived under the protection of the Haqqani Network, and to square internal rivalries over power, the southern Taliban may have colluded in the successful removal of Al-Zawahiri. That said, we need to wait and see how relations between these two factions evolve onward.

Internal Implications

Another critical dimension to the likely implication of Al-Zawahiri's killing for internal matters of the Taliban is the reaction of Taliban members across their hierarchy who believe in the religious sanctity of what Al-Qaeda stands for and regard Al-Zawahiri as a model Islamic leader. Here, the issue is with the mass of ideologically driven members of the Taliban who are not necessarily organized into factions but who nevertheless start asking questions about the circumstances under which the strike happened. They will likely fail to find satisfactory answers to this event. Given their experience of the difficult years of "jihad" and sacrifice, their morale will take a hit, and doubts will likely emerge on the viability of the IEA to deliver on the ideals which have motivated their sacrifices. Whether or not some of these members opt out of the Taliban in an organized or haphazard fashion to join the ISKP or some other group has a lot to do with how the IEA leadership handles the situation.

Taliban relations with the US have hit a low since the Doha Agreement and after months of failed efforts by the US to influence the regime. There are already calls in the US for more pressure on the Taliban, including a ban on their leadership's foreign trips, while hardliners within the Taliban will also press for a tougher stance towards the US. Once again, the pragmatic Taliban segments will come under increased pressure. Continued engagement with the US as in the past will cause an internal sense of betrayal among the hardliners and thus provoke more internal discord. At the same time, a complete disengagement will harm the Taliban in many ways internally and externally, including on essential matters such as releasing frozen assets and diplomatic engagement. Therefore, it is more likely that their relations will cool off and possibly also impact Taliban relations with US allies such as Qatar and European countries. The situation has evolved so that countries such as Russia and China might pause before jumping to exploit the rift between the US and the Taliban.

The Taliban have protected Al-Qaeda as a valued ally, seeing them as well trained, well-financed, extremist elite, source of funding for other groups, shunning publicity in Afghanistan, and generally not conducting operations in the country. The lesson from 2001 is not that they reject Al-Qaeda and its aspirations but that they do not want to pay the price or share the blame for their actions. Hence the presence of Al-Zawahri would have been a closely guarded secret outside those who needed to be part of the protection racket.

Lastly, so far, Al Qaeda has been silent. History shows, as in the case of Osama bin Laden's death, that when the group issues a statement, it will undoubtedly contain two points: a replacement for Al-Zawahiri to lead Al-Qaeda and a call for revenge. Given the network of affiliates and allied groups in Asia and Africa and lone wolf sympathizers in Europe and America, Al-Qaeda will promise and likely attempt revenge attacks on the US and its allies. Even Taliban members and sympathizers are gritting their teeth as they aspire to take revenge on Saudi Arabia and America. That said, a revenge attack may still not happen, whether from Afghanistan or not. The Taliban may end up cooling off Al-Qaeda tempers and dissuading it from revenge, at least out of Afghanistan.