

# Afghanistan: assassination of al-Qaida chief reveals tensions at the top of the Taliban

Thursday 4 August 2022, by [GROPPI Michele](#) (Date first published: 3 August 2022).

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The [killing of the al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), in Kabul by a US drone strike on July 31 raises some crucial questions. It appears the ruling Taliban were aware of, and gave their blessing to, al-Zawahiri staying in one of the residential areas in Kabul. But did someone in their hierarchy turn him in to the US – and if so, who and why?

It's worth thinking about what this means for the relationship between the two groups: one an ailing global terror network, the other an insurgent group trying to gain international legitimacy for its takeover in Afghanistan.

A little recent history is enlightening. In February 2020, a [peace deal signed in Doha, Qatar](#) between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Taliban) and the US paved the way for Washington to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan after 20 years. The Americans were promised a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan which pledged not to “allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies”.

The US hoped to use the Taliban to counter ISIS-K's growing threat in the region. Desperate for cash and international recognition, this sealed the deal on the Afghan part.

But even if they were publicly praised, the Doha accords were [not accepted and honoured by all](#). The pledge to sever ties with al-Qaida created friction inside the Taliban. This was largely a generational divide. On one side was a younger, more technologically savvy and English-speaking leadership group which saw the opportunity to rebuild the group's image and attract vital funds to rebuild civil society. On the other side were older Taliban fighters.

A faction of these older fighters are loyal to [Abdul Ghani Baradar](#), who was appointed deputy leader after the Taliban takeover. The Mullah Brothers group mostly hail from the Taliban heartland around Kandahar in the south of Afghanistan, and represent a hardline jihadist viewpoint. Also opposed to the Doha accords is the militant [Haqqani network](#), which is thought to have been instrumental in installing al-Zawahiri in Kabul in a house owned by Sirajuddin Haqqani, now the interior minister in the Taliban government in Kabul.

The Mullah Brothers and the Haqqani network represent a more militant wing of the Taliban that feel that the Doha agreement not to aid or support al-Qaida sets them against a group which is ideologically close to them, in breach of the [Pashtun code](#) which forbids betrayal.

This instability within the Taliban surfaced even as the last US airplane left the country in August 2021, and the various factions began to jockey for primacy in the new administration. Haqqani's

appointment as interior minister is thought to have been a sop to his faction but this has not eased the tension, according to a high-ranking official of the disbanded Afghan Army, who told me:

*Sirajuddin Haqqani has never obeyed the Quetta Council of the Taliban, for he considers himself the conqueror of Kabul. So there is little doubt that created a safe haven for Ayman al-Zawahiri – keep in mind, that was a Haqqani guesthouse.*

Another Afghan intelligence officer told me: “The truth is, in spite of their promise, the Taliban – and the Haqqani network in particular – have never really cut ties with al-Qaida, going against what was agreed with the US.”

### **Did the US have local help?**

It is still too early to know what happened – and the whole truth might never emerge. The drone strike had reportedly been planned for months. It may well have been planned and executed without any local assistance, and might just have been down to first-rate intelligence work. But the kind of surgical operation carried by a US drone in a heavily guarded area suggests at least some help in tracking al-Zawahiri’s precise location.

And, in an area of the world torn by poverty, food insecurity and rampant corruption, the [US\\$25 million \(£20.5 million\) reward](#) to uncover al-Zawahiri’s safe house would have been a strong incentive.

Let’s assume that someone will claim that reward for assisting the US. There are two possible scenarios. Despite being close to al-Qaida, the Mullah Brothers group had much to gain by revealing al-Zawahiri’s location. In addition to the rewards, they could advance their own influence by dealing a blow to Haqqani’s credibility while advancing their own political position.

The second scenario deals with regional dynamics. Traditionally, members of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have enjoyed fairly [strong ties with the Afghan Taliban](#). These connections are reportedly still solid – particularly with the Haqqani network.

Both of the Afghan officers who spoke with me said that Pakistani intelligence would have come under strong political pressure to cooperate with the US. The intelligence officer told me that not only did Islamabad give Washington permission to use its airspace to carry out the attack, but “members of the ISI may have disclosed and/or confirmed al-Zawahiri’s location to avoid economic collapse in certain areas”.

### **Bracing for the fallout**

Regardless of all this, al-Qaida has suffered a tremendous blow. Al-Zawahiri was there from the beginning – the most important figure after Osama bin Laden, inspiring and galvanising jihadists around the globe. He was considered a tactical genius, instrumental in planning spectacular attacks – including 9/11 – as well as in the identification and infiltration of new theatres of operation.

It will not be easy to replace an element of his calibre. But al-Qaida has previously shown a strong capacity for regrouping, and al-Zawahiri’s departure could represent a chance to bring in a younger and more technologically savvy leader who can speak to the next generation of aspiring jihadists

around the world.

As for Afghanistan, al-Zawahiri's death may have dire implications. Accusations of cooperating with the Americans will affect the already divided Taliban leadership – which could lead to bitter internecine fighting within it. And the presence of a terrorist as prominent as al-Zawahiri supposedly under the protection of senior Taliban cadres will not help US-Taliban relations. It is a direct breach of the Doha accords.

Any rift at the top of the Taliban would also allow other terror groups operating in Afghanistan, such as [ISIS-K](#), to expand their influence and operations, with terrible consequences for ordinary Afghans. <http://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines> —>

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- The Conversation. Publié: 3 août 2022, 17:44 CEST.

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