



# Zawahiri Killing Exposes Biden's Foreign-Policy Contradictions

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President Joe Biden's announcement that the U.S. military had successfully eliminated al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri this week is unquestionably a major milestone in the conflict once known as the "Global War on Terror." The Egyptian-born Zawahiri had been al-Qaeda's intellectual heavyweight ever since he folded his own militant outfit, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, into Osama bin Laden's network in 1998. In the wake of bin Laden's death at the hands of U.S. special-forces operators in 2011, Zawahiri assumed the terror group's top post, serving as its operational and strategic head. In that capacity, he guided al-Qaeda through a pitched power struggle with its offspring and jihadi competitor, the Islamic State, and expanded the group's beachhead in Africa, among other accomplishments.

Zawahiri's killing is timely proof that the U.S., though preoccupied with other foreign-policy priorities and plagued by domestic political divisions, is still committed to the counterterrorism mission. But it also serves to highlight the bankruptcy of the Biden administration's foreign-policy agenda on at least two other fronts.

The first is Afghanistan. Zawahiri was killed by an airstrike in Kabul, where he had holed up in a safe house under the protection of a Pakistan-linked branch of the Taliban known as the Haqqani Network. That the al-Qaeda chief was able to find safe haven in the Afghan capital is proof positive that the country's Islamist rulers had no intention of severing their longstanding links to al-Qaeda, despite the fact that they promised to do so last year.

That pledge, and a corresponding commitment to govern in less repressive fashion, had been among the things the Biden administration relied on heavily in selling its withdrawal from Afghanistan to the American public. But the Taliban hasn't lived up to its side of the bargain, as the White House itself now acknowledges. According to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the Taliban "grossly" violated the terms of their deal with the U.S. — known as the Doha Agreement — by giving Zawahiri refuge on Afghan soil. Blinken and other administration officials have been less forthcoming about what practical consequences the United States is prepared to impose on the Taliban now that the group's double-dealing has been exposed.

The second front is Iran. With Zawahiri out of the picture, the most likely candidate to assume leadership of al-Qaeda is Saif al-Adel, the reclusive former Egyptian army officer who has long served as the group's military capo. Al-Adel, though, isn't at large: U.S. intelligence experts and counterterrorism practitioners concur that he and other members of the group's leadership have spent most or all of the past two decades in Iran. There, though nominally under "house arrest," al-Adel has continued to coordinate the terror group's global activities and plot its campaigns.

All of that should matter a great deal in the context of the Biden administration's preferred policy of engagement with Iran. For the past year and a half, the administration has doggedly pursued a diplomatic strategy designed to get the Islamic Republic back on board with the 2015 nuclear deal known as the JCPOA. Even now, despite persistent rejection, White House functionaries continue to hold out hope that Iran might still be induced to accept some sort of new bargain over its nuclear program. But maintaining that hope has required the administration to mostly turn a blind eye to the Iranian regime's regional troublemaking, and its extensive support for international terrorism.

Such an approach has already become an exceedingly hard sell in Congress, where skepticism over Team Biden's prevailing Iran strategy is mounting, even among members of the president's own party. It will become totally untenable as more and more connections are drawn between Iran's clerical regime and al-Qaeda's top leadership, leading to hard questions about why, precisely, America should empower Tehran's terror-supporting regime — and what might happen if it does.

Zawahiri's killing should be celebrated for what it is: a resounding success for U.S. counterterrorism. But that success shouldn't blind us to the contradictions baked into the Biden administration's foreign policy, and the dangers associated with them.