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Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Corruption; India; Middle East; Southeast Asia

MEET THE NEW (AL-QAEDA) BOSS

Following the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in a U.S. airstrike in Kabul last year, al-Qaeda has apparently settled on a new chief. A United Nations report has indicated that the group's new leader is notorious Egyptian-born extremist Saif al-Adel. Al-Adel, a former member of the Egyptian Special Forces, is believed to be residing in Iran. The prevailing view among UN member states, the report lays out, is that al-Adel is now the "de facto leader of al-Qaeda, and represents the continuity of the organization for the time being. But his leadership cannot be declared because of Al-Qaida's sensitivity to Afghan Taliban concerns not to acknowledge the death of [Zawahiri] in Kabul and the fact of Saif Al-Adel's presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

For his part, al-Qaeda's new chief is likely to be concerned with organizational matters, at least in the near term. According to London's Guardian newspaper, al-Adel's mission is currently focused on unifying the organization after years of fragmentation, and restoring it to its prior position of prestige in the jihadist milieu. (The Guardian, February 14, 2023)

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS AND MOROCCO'S ISLAMIST OPPOSITION

In December of 2020, the Kingdom of Morocco joined the ranks of countries like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in normalizing relations with Israel. At the time, the move was a controversial one, with an Arab Barometer survey taken that month finding just 9 percent of the population in favor of such a step. However, Moroccan officials have consistently defended the move, arguing that the Kingdom's stance on the Palestinian issue remains unchanged, and that better relations with Jerusalem provide Rabat with more leverage to shape Israeli policy. On a practical level, the more-than-two years since have brought the country significant dividends in the form of increased trade, greater tourism and stepped-up military coordination.

However, the new coalition government in Israel, which has embroiled Israel in an acrimonious domestic debate over judicial reform, as well as worsening relations between Israel and the Palestinians, have fanned discontent in some of the country's quarters. Last month, the Abdelilah Benkirane, the secretary-general of Morocco's largest Islamist party, the PJD, publicly blasted cooperation with Israel and accused Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita of "defending the Zionist entity" in meetings with European and African officials. According to Benkirane, "the religious, historical and humanitarian duty requires doubling efforts at this critical stage in defending Palestine and Jerusalem in facing the escalation of provocations and aggressive Zionist practices." Benkirane's comments drew the attention of the country's palace, which has demanded the PJD tone down its public criticism of normalization. (Reuters, March 13, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: While foreign policy remains the purview of the country's monarch, Mohammed VI, the Moroccan "street" remains staunchly pro-Palestinian and Morocco is the most prominent member of the OIC's Al-Quds Committee. As a result, Morocco's strategic decision to normalize normalization with Israel has emerged as a means for the country's Islamists to undermine the authority and popularity of the Moroccan Crown.]

A CRACKDOWN ON ISLAMISTS IN INDIA

The government of Narendra Modi is increasingly concerned about rising radicalism throughout India, and is moving to clamp down on extremist elements active in the country's regions. India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has reportedly been conducting country-wide raids in recent weeks, rounding up elements believed to be radicalized by Islamic State ideology as well as separatist sentiments. In mid-March, the NIA filed two chargesheets against a total of 68 members of the Popular Front of India in separate cases in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The radicals were said to be raising funds in order to perpetrate terror activities and establish Islamic rule in India by 2047, according to the official complaints. (Hindustan Times, March 17, 2023)

AN ISIS MEDIA PRESENCE IN MALAYSIA

The Islamic State terrorist group has officially launched its first media platform in Malaysia. Dubbed the Al Malaka Media Centre and linked to ISIS media outlets in both Indonesia and the Philippines, the outlet was identified by the Nordic Counter-Terrorism Network's (NCTN) Cyber Counter-Terrorism Division. Al Malaka is said to be active on the dark web, and has reportedly shared content seeking to undermine the administration led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur. (The Star, March 5, 2023)

