

Profile: Ayman al-Zawahiri

Ayman al-Zawahiri, now America's most wanted terrorist, took over as the head of al-Qaeda in June 2011 after the killing of erstwhile head Osama bin Laden.

Backgrounder by Jayshree Bajoria and Lee Hudson Teslik

Last updated July 14, 2011

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Who is Ayman al-Zawahiri?

Ayman al-Zawahiri assumed the leadership of al-Qaeda in June 2011, six weeks after U.S. forces killed top leader Osama bin Laden in his hideout in Pakistan. Until then, Zawahiri was regarded as second-in-command of the terrorist network. He served as the chief ideologue of the group and was suspected to be the "operational brains" behind the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in. Following bin Laden's killing, he became the most wanted terrorist on the FBI's list (until then he was second to bin Laden on the list), and the U.S. State Department offers a \$25 million reward for information leading to his capture.

How did Zawahiri become involved with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda?

Zawahiri and bin Laden's collaboration began in the city of Peshawar, in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, in 1980. Zawahiri, a surgeon, was working for the Red Crescent Society, the Islamic affiliate of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Bin Laden had come to Peshawar to raise money. The city, a haven for Afghani refugees fleeing Soviet occupation and the home of a relatively open black market for weapons and narcotics, was bristling with militant Islamist sentiment.

Zawahiri had been active organizing Islamic extremists since he was fifteen, when he became the leader of a small group of student militants dedicated to overthrowing

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Gamal Abdel Nasser's secular Egyptian government. Upon meeting bin Laden, he at once understood the wealthy Saudi's potential usefulness to his personal ambitions. In 1980, experts say, bin Laden was politically motivated but ideologically malleable. And he was very wealthy.

In 1981, Zawahiri was arrested and imprisoned, along with dozens of other radicals, for collaborating in the assassination of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat. Prison time only redoubled Zawahiri's fervor. Not long after his release, he took over leadership of the terrorist organization Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which the United States believes helped to organize the August 7, 1998, bombings of U.S. Embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya. In 2001, according to widely accepted accounts, Zawahiri formally merged the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. The group is now officially named Qaeda al-Jihad.

What is Zawahiri's role in al-Qaeda?

Before taking over as al-Qaeda's top boss, according to U.S. intelligence agencies, Zawahiri functioned as the group's most important ideological leader, and perhaps also the main operational leader of the network's activities. Many counterterrorism officials believe Zawahiri was more instrumental in the tactical planning of the September 11, 2001, attacks than bin Laden himself.

How will Zawahiri affect al-Qaeda's future?

Many experts disagree on how bin Laden's death affects al-Qaeda's future. While some argue that his death is unlikely to weaken the group given the appeal of al-Qaeda's ideology, the growth of its decentralized networks, and the regrouping of its leadership, others are more skeptical.

Several experts say Zawahiri lacks bin Laden's charisma or effectiveness and has often been a divisive figure within the jihadist movement. "Zawahiri's persona makes a real difference to the future of al-Qaeda, whose members have sworn a personal religious oath of obedience to bin Laden," writes Peter Bergen, the director of national security studies at the New America Foundation. "It's far from clear how many of them will automatically transfer that oath to Zawahiri."

The aggressive U.S. drone campaign along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan where Zawahiri and the al-Qaeda leadership are believed to reside puts further pressure on the group and Zawahiri's ability to cement his position, writes Daniel Byman of Georgetown University in *Foreign Affairs*.

The pro-
democracy
movements
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the spring of 2011,
which some
experts say have
discredited al-
Qaeda's ideology,

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add their own complications. Zawahiri might attempt to "exploit the regional chaos to achieve his central goal: establishing a new haven for al-Qaeda," Bergen writes, but "given his personal shortcomings, questionable leadership skills, and deteriorating institutional brand, there is little reason to suppose" he will succeed.

Where is Zawahiri?

He is believed to be hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas, along the border with Afghanistan. He reportedly survived a U.S. missile strike in January 2006 in Pakistan's tribal areas that killed more than a dozen people. After bin Laden was found in a garrison town only sixty-seven miles from Islamabad, many Western analysts question whether Zawahiri too, is hiding in a Pakistani city (*Atlantic*) outside the lawless borderlands.

Where did Zawahiri's militant ideology originate?

Zawahiri grew up in the Egyptian town of Maadi. Maadi's residents were notably moderate in their religious practices, but Zawahiri was the product of an unusually strict, and unusually illustrious, home. His father's uncle, Rabi'a al-Zawahiri, was the grand imam of Cairo's al-Azhar University, a position that has been described as being of "papal" importance within the Muslim world. His mother's family was also prominent. Her father, Ayman's grandfather, served as the president of Cairo University and founded King Saud University, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Despite their social prestige, the Zawahiri family refused to participate in Maadi social life, which they perceived as immoral. Some experts have posited that this dynamic, when combined with his cloistered academic upbringing, caused Ayman always to consider himself as an outsider.

In terms of the origins of Zawahiri's militant ideas, he was an admirer of Sayyid Qutb, a radical Islamist whom Zawahiri has quoted glowingly in his own writings. Qutb, an Egyptian who lived in the United States in the early 1950s (NPR), believed the country to be impure and spiritually unstable. He felt the only escape from the West's heavy influence was Islamic fundamentalism, holy war, and martyrdom. A true Muslim, according to Qutb, should fight to topple not only Western countries and Westerners, but also Western sympathizers in Egypt and other Muslim nations. Qutb was arrested and imprisoned in 1954 for plotting to kill Nasser, then arrested again and executed, in 1966, for his involvement in a Muslim Brotherhood plot to overthrow the Egyptian government.

Qutb's writings guided Zawahiri's Salafist interpretation of Islam. Salafism stresses a dogmatic reading of the Quran which does not recognize any Islamic tradition that has arisen since the time of the prophet. Zawahiri, in his writings, has called for militant opposition not only to Christians and Jews, but also to Muslims who break with Salafist practice and are thus "infidels."

Source:

Bajoria, Jayshree, and Lee Hudson Teslik. Profile: Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Council on Foreign Relations, 0AD, www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/profile-ayman-al-zawahiri. Accessed 13 Mar. 2018.