**[A kill in Kabul](https://www.dawn.com/news/1703002/a-kill-in-kabul)**

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THE targeted [assassination](https://www.dawn.com/news/1702723/al-qaeda-leader-zawahiri-killed-in-us-drone-strike-in-afghanistan-biden) in Kabul on Sunday morning of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has predictably been hailed by the perpetrators as a tremendous triumph. Echoing three of his recent predecessors, US President Joe Biden declared that “justice has been delivered and this terrorist leader is no more”.

Yup, congratulations. Buried deep inside many American newspaper reports is the ack­nowledgment by counterterrorism expe­rts that Zawahiri’s death will make no perceptible difference to the operations of the remaining Al Qaeda franchises. What goes unacknowledged is the possibility of revenge plots.

The concept, surely, shouldn’t be alien to American consciousness — the revenge theme extends well beyond Hollywood blockbusters. Arguably, it’s one of the guiding principles of US foreign policy. Just like terrorism, which is considered objectionable only if it isn’t sanctioned by America or one of its allies.

There can be little doubt that Zawahiri was a “malicious actor” — and not just from an American perspective. He was pinpointed long ago as Al Qaeda’s chief operating officer, second only to chief executive Osama bin Laden, whose ascendancy relied not just on his relative charisma but also his access to finances.

**Read:** [*Zawahiri is Al Qaeda's real leader, says official*](https://www.dawn.com/news/393754/zawahiri-is-al-qaeda-s-real-leader-says-official)

America should look in the mirror before executing anyone.

Notwithstanding more than one effort to target him in Pakistan’s northern areas, Zaw­a­hiri emerged as the successor after Osama bin Laden was [killed](https://www.dawn.com/news/625466/osama-bin-laden-killed-in-pakistan-says-obama) in Abbottabad (when he could have been captured instead), but there is little evidence of his efficacy as a guiding star.

That was true even in his past as an Egyptian Salafist, who reportedly had visited Pakistan before he was arrested in his homeland for a possible role in the assassination of Anwar Sadat — who, before repressing it, had flirted with the Islamist fringe as a weapon against Nasserites and communists. The torture that Zawahiri underwent, and the obligation he felt to betray some of his colleagues, only served to harden his ideology.

He technically wasn’t supposed to leave Egypt after his release, but nonetheless managed to make his way to Jeddah, and then back to Peshawar. It’s unclear whether he encountered Bin Laden in Jeddah, but they bonded in Peshawar — where one of Zawahiri’s key projects was to wean the Saudi millionaire away from the influence of his Palestinian mentor Abdullah Azzam.

**Read:** [*How the CIA identified and killed Al Qaeda leader Zawahiri*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1702851/how-the-cia-identified-and-killed-al-qaeda-leader-zawahiri)

The clash of fundamentalists eventually worked out in favour of Zawahiri — it has never been entirely clear who was behind Azzam’s 1989 assassination in Peshawar — but nonetheless he eventually felt obliged to merge his Islamic Jihad with Al Qaeda. Well before that, though, he is believed to already have masterminded the 1995 attack on the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad.

A dozen years later, he is believed to have been involved in the disastrous Lal Masjid affair — this despite considering Pakistan “a second home”, not just on account of his sojourns in Peshawar, but also because he had enjoyed his time in this country as a kid, when his maternal grandfather was the Egyptian ambassador here.

It’s unclear whether he felt the same way about Sudan or Afghanistan, his other two countries of exile. A couple of attempts to target him in Waziristan went awry more than a decade ago, and in Kabul he was apparently under the protection of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the head of a Taliban-affiliated network with a history of supposedly strong Pakistani connections.

His American killers have highlighted Zawahiri’s role as a key architect of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That may be so — although, as they say, success has many fathers. More broadly, there can be little doubt about his passion for targeting Americans, which appears to have evolved as the diligent young doctor’s Salafist am­­bitions were thwar­t­­ed in his native land.

But whatever he may have been guil­­ty of — the charge sheet would likely be fairly long — the overriding point is whether it’s acceptable that the US shou­­ld be free to play jud­­ge, jury and executioner on the international chessboard. Try to imagine a foreign equivalent of the CIA targeting a suspected terrorist in the suburbs of Washington.

Martin Luther King’s designation of his na­­tion’s government as the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world” has never ceased to hold true in the 55 years since that charge was levelled. And lest anyone should latch on to this as a celebration of freedom of speech, let’s not forget that Dr King was assassinated exactly a year after he uttered those words.

There is a distinct lack of self-awareness evident when the US designates other countries as state sponsors of terrorism — a description that never encompasses obvious culprits such as Israel or Saudi Arabia.

No respectable state can point to the indubitably despicable violence perpetrated by outfits like Al Qaeda, Islamic State or Boko Haram as an excuse for their own deadly excesses. So, in this week’s context: no tears for Zawahiri, but also decidedly no applause for his executioners.

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