Summary

- Al-Qa‘ida supporters initially denied the news of the death of al-Qa‘ida’s global leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, when it broke on 1 August. In time, however, a general feeling of acceptance was adopted by the community, one that was paired with calls for violence.

- Most supporters initially warned that the reports were disinformation geared towards distracting the world from the weakness of the United States (US) in general and President Joe Biden’s ill health in particular.

- After President Biden’s address on the evening of 1 August, however, al-Qa‘ida’s support base accepted what had happened, generally attempting to hail it as a “good thing” for al-Zawahiri to have been martyred on the basis that martyrdom is understood to be desirable within the Salafi-jihadist interpretation of Islam.

- Crucially, acceptance of the validity of the news came with calls for revenge attacks against both US interests and the Afghan Taliban, the latter of which some consider to have betrayed al-Zawahiri by leaking the location of his safehouse.

- Generally, most al-Qa‘ida supporters seem to think that Sayf al-‘Adl is the most likely successor to al-Zawahiri.

Context

On 30 July 2022, the US launched an attack on a residential building in the Afghan capital, Kabul. After the raid, speculation was rife as to the identity of its target. Taliban officials confirmed that the strike had occurred, but they provided no details regarding the identity of the building’s occupant.
Two days after the strike, US President Joe Biden eventually confirmed that the individual targeted was al-Qa’ida’s global leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. He held that the success of the strike had been corroborated by post-attack intelligence gathered by a CIA ground team in Kabul.

In the immediate aftermath of the operation, a relatively small number of al-Qa’ida supporters speculated momentarily about it. However, due to absence of any additional detail from the Afghan Taliban and, until yesterday, the US government, it was dismissed as “just another” attack on ISKP, Daesh’s affiliate in Afghanistan. That position—which, importantly, appeared to have emerged organically with no direct or overt input from al-Qa’ida—changed with Monday’s statement from the White House.

Based on insights gleaned from ExTrac’s ongoing real-time analysis of al-Qa’ida supporter networks, this report gives an overview of the three principal ways its supporters have been navigating through the news of the death of their leader—denial, acceptance, and incitement.

**Denial**

Just before President Biden’s statement on Monday, after it had been leaked that it had been an al-Qa’ida, not Daesh, leader targeted in Kabul, al-Qa’ida’s online supporters rushed to quash any speculation and deny any and all “unsubstantiated” reports on the matter.

For a time, this was the go-to position for al-Qa’ida influencers across their ecosystems on Telegram and Rocket.Chat. Initially, it saw key figures in the pro-al-Qa’ida community assuring their audiences that it was ISKP operatives that were the focus of the operation. One noted that, logically speaking due to the prior focus of US counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan, “the strike had to have targeted the irhabiyyin [lit. ‘terrorists’; here a pejorative label for Daesh].” Others agreed, generally expressing their doubts that “the shaykh would have returned to Afghanistan so quickly [after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul],” and citing the fact that al-Zawahiri had been reported killed “literally ten times before now.”

Predictably, much of this early denialism was grounded in the community’s scepticism regarding the sourcing of the news. Like in the context of Daesh, conspiratorial thinking and, consequently, suspicion regarding anything...
other than “official news sources” is baked into the worldview of al-Qa’ida’s supporters. On that basis, the fact that the news of al-Zawahiri’s death did not come from one of its media offices was reason enough to deny its validity. In turn, several influencers openly expressed their belief that the news was false, posting things like, “There’s been no confirmation from al-Qa’ida media, brothers,” and, “The only reason this is a ‘story’ is to distract from Biden’s COVID infection.”

Acceptance

It was not long, however, before the news of al-Zawahiri’s death began to sink in amidst al-Qa’ida’s online supporter networks. As this happened, many of its proponents appeared to be thrown into a state of panic. Some responded with unguarded emotion, clearly indicating the extent of the setback they considered this to be. They appealed to the heavens, writing things like “Oh God, this has to be a lie,” and “Oh God, let this be fake news.”

With time, after the initial shock of the news (and its apparently truthful nature) had sunk in, the tone changed once more as al-Qa’ida proponents sought to reframe al-Zawahiri’s death as an act of martyrdom, not a strategic setback.

President Biden’s statement was a critical intervention in this regard. It hastened the evolution of the community’s response from a sense of denialism and/or panic to one of acceptance. This was because, while al-Qa’ida’s supporters generally disbelieved the initial media reporting, they seemed to consider a statement from the US president to be a credible source of news. As one wrote, “If Biden came out and said it himself, the news is true. Not because we believe the kuffar—we would never do that—but because there is precedent for this, like when the pig Obama killed Shaykh Usama.”

In any case, as this new framing swept across Telegram and Rocket.Chat in particular, numerous expressions of the need for support, solidarity, and steadfastness in the face of adversity emerged. These were invariably pinned to the idea that al-Zawahiri’s death was a good thing in the grand scheme of things, something that should be welcomed not rejected. Supporters wrote things like, “Brothers, if Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri has indeed been killed, this is an honour bestowed on him by God and we ask God to bequeath the same unto us,” and, “Thanks be to God, he [al-Zawahiri] got what he asked for.”

Figure 3. Al-Qa’ida munasirin accepting the news of the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri.
Incitement

Hand-in-hand with this notion of acceptance were calls for al-Qa’ida’s global network to double down in its war on the US and seek immediate revenge for his death.

Through this lens, al-Zawahiri’s demise was framed as a “good thing” not just for him personally (on account of the fact that martyrdom is desirable within al-Qa’ida’s reading of Islam) but for Muslims everywhere, because it was “sure” to reinvigorate al-Qa’ida’s jihad against the “Crusaders.” Some kept their assessment of the situation simple, noting that the only reasonable response from Muslims was “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Several noted that “dark days await America.”

Others, interestingly, appeared to turn on the Taliban, which they appeared to see as responsible for al-Zawahiri’s death. They wrote that “this breaks the armistice in Afghanistan,” perhaps alluding to the basis on which al-Qa’ida’s network in the country is operating while under Taliban rule. Others were more overtly aggressive, declaring that “we condemn the Taliban as we condemn the tyrannical Arab regimes,” implicitly ruling that jihad against it was now a requirement.

Conclusion

The death of al-Zawahiri is sure to have significant implications for al-Qa’ida moving forward, both locally in South Asia and globally across Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. What those implications are, however, remains to be seen—perhaps the network of al-Qa’ida franchises will fragment, or perhaps it will coalesce under a new leader, potentially deploying a campaign to avenge al-Zawahiri and make its new leader’s mark.
Whatever the case, this will likely be determined by whomever it is that is selected to replace al-Zawahiri. While several names have been thrown into the hat by supporters claiming to be informed—among them Abu ‘Ubayda al-‘Annabi, Khabib al-Sudani, and ‘Abdulrahman al-Maghribi—one is appearing with much greater frequency than the others, that of Sayf al-‘Adl. Whoever it is that takes al-Zawahiri’s place, it will likely become clear in the coming weeks or perhaps months, as, consequently, will the impact of this development on al-Qa’ida’s kinetic and strategic trajectory.