

Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the evolving militant landscape in Afghanistan

The relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is a complex one, and the future of Afghanistan following the recent killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri could be determined by the leverage the Taliban has over Al-Qaeda

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For *The Straits Times*

The killing of Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, by the United States has disrupted the chain of command in the militant movement and raised questions over its future.

As the movement does not have an established form of succession and few natural leaders around which its fighters could coalesce, there are likely to be internal debates over whether to choose someone who has been closely associated with Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri or opt for a new charismatic figure.

Afghanistan will remain central to the movement either way. Thus, Al-Qaeda's future will be intrinsically linked to its relationship with the Taliban and position in Afghanistan's evolving militant landscape.

The relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is more complex than often assumed. For one thing, both movements hold different religious ideologies and socio-political visions. They have come to be bonded by years of violent struggle against what they perceive to be a common set of enemies. Al-Qaeda needed a territorial base where it could establish training camps and have refuge. The Taliban benefited from the finances and fighters that Al-Qaeda could provide.

Moreover, as the Taliban had no administrative experience, Al-Qaeda provided bureaucratic support in captured areas. It is important to note that Al-Qaeda accepted a secondary position in this relationship. Both Osama and Zawahiri formally pledged allegiance to Taliban leaders.

But the Taliban is not a homogeneous organisation and there are differing views on the utility of maintaining its relationship with Al-Qaeda. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, several Taliban leaders had been disillusioned by their leader Mullah Omar's refusal to surrender Osama to the Americans.

More recently, to gain international legitimacy, prominent Taliban figures like



Taliban security troops standing guard in the neighbourhood where a US drone strike killed Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Kabul, Afghanistan, earlier this month. The relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is more complex than often assumed as both movements hold different religious ideologies and socio-political visions. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Afghanistan's deputy prime minister, have advocated that the Taliban distance itself from Al-Qaeda. In fact, Al-Qaeda members have suspected figures like Mr Baradar of being behind the assassination and detention of their leaders.

Osama himself warned against trusting what he described as "hypocritical strands" within the Taliban. In response, Al-Qaeda has entrenched its relationship with factions that are likely to support it. These include the powerful Haqqani network. The Haqqani network is a well-funded fighting force well placed within the diffused Taliban political structure. Its leader Sirajuddin Haqqani is the current interior minister. It is worth noting that Zawahiri was killed while living reportedly in a safe house belonging to Mr Haqqani's aide.

The fact that the Taliban is a broad coalition of factions makes it difficult for it to break with Al-Qaeda. Any move to formally reject Al-Qaeda could risk splintering the Taliban.

Furthermore, the Taliban is threatened by the rise of other militant organisations like the

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). As such, the Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda will largely be determined by its assessment of the evolving militant landscape.

Since the Taliban recaptured power a year ago, there have been reports of foreign fighters streaming into Afghanistan. This has stoked concerns over the country becoming a battleground of militant organisations.

To be sure, much of this influx is due to the Taliban's inability to control the borders rather than official support. ISIS-K is one of the movements that have been striving to consolidate their position in this context. An affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ISIS-K was established in 2015 in Afghanistan to expand its caliphate to Central and South Asia.

The ideological rivalry between ISIS-K and the Taliban is reflected in the fact that the former has denounced the Taliban as "filthy nationalists" for being focused solely on Afghanistan and unconcerned with developments in the wider Muslim world.

From 2015 to 2020, ISIS-K expanded quickly by attracting

foreign fighters and Taliban defectors. However, it was decisively weakened in 2020 by concerted strikes by the Afghan army, American forces and the Taliban.

A series of bombings targeting minorities and Taliban fighters over the last year indicates that the movement is regrouping in north-east and southern Afghanistan. It has also attracted Taliban defectors into its ranks in these areas. As southern Afghanistan has long been the stronghold of the Taliban, clashes between ISIS-K and the Taliban will only intensify.

Within this context, the Taliban's strategy vis-a-vis Al-Qaeda will be centred on countering ISIS-K. Despite the recognition that it needs to moderate its socio-political positions, at least at the rhetorical level, to gain international recognition and financial aid, the Taliban leadership is aware that a break with Al-Qaeda could splinter the movement. The Taliban is also likely to need financial, military and administrative support from Al-Qaeda.

It will, however, need to prevent Al-Qaeda from launching

international terrorist attacks in the short term. Interestingly, Amin al-Huq, an influential Taliban figure who had served as Osama's security chief and had been hiding for almost a decade, reportedly re-emerged in southern Afghanistan recently. This could signal ongoing attempts by the Taliban to manage Al-Qaeda.

Looking ahead, the future of Afghanistan could be determined by the leverage that the Taliban has over Al-Qaeda. Under Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda had adopted a policy of strategic inaction. He focused on rebuilding the organisational structure within Al-Qaeda and allowing the Taliban to re-establish itself.

It remains to be seen how Al-Qaeda's new leader will position the movement. The negotiations and the intra-militant battles that will take place in the coming months will have serious implications far beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

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