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Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda, killed in CIA drone strike in Afghanistan

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What's in News?

The United States killed al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a strike in Afghanistan, this is considered to be the biggest blow to the militant group since its founder Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011.

News Highlights:

The drone attack is the first known US strike inside Afghanistan since US troops and diplomats left the country in August 2021

Zawahiri's presence in the Afghan capital has exposed the so-called Doha Accord as a failure on all counts.

As per the Doha Accord, Taliban will take steps "to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."

Ayman al-Zawahiri had been on the run for 20 years since the 9/11 terrorist attack that killed nearly 3,000 people in the U.S.

This killing confirms the UN report that since the Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021, terrorist groups including Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) — both Pakistan-based groups targeting India — are present in Taliban-controlled parts of Afghanistan where they run terror training camps and have deep links with the Taliban.

Al-Qaida:

Al-Qaida, or "the Base" in Arabic, organized as the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan.

Hoping to capitalize on the support the mujahedeen, or the "holy warriors," received during their war against Moscow, bin Laden formed al-Qaida and became its leader.

He demanded US forces withdraw from Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam.

America deployed troops there in the lead-up to the 1991 Gulf War over Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

In 1996, bin Laden issued a formal declaration of war.

They are responsible for the September 11 attacks.

Bin Laden fled the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, only to be hunted down in Abbottabad, Pakistan, a decade later.

But al-Qaida's prominence following September 11 saw it gain affiliates across the Mideast.

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One became the Islamic State group, whose filmed beheadings and takeover of large parts of Iraq and Syria shocked the world.

Implications for India:

For India, keeping al Qaeda away, under a new leadership, will be the challenge

In April 2022, al-Zawahiri spoke on the hijab controversy in Karnataka.

Earlier, he had announced the formation of a branch of Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent.

Al-Zawahiri's killing in Kabul confirms the assessment of the relationship of al-Qaeda with the new Taliban regime.

This also shows that India needs to navigate its engagement with the Taliban carefully.

While India may continue to help Afghanistan through humanitarian assistance, it has to keep its eyes open for terrorist activities aimed at India from Afghan soil.

Hellfire R9X missile:

The US military used its 'secret weapon' — the Hellfire R9X missile – to kill Al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri

Better known in military circles as the AGM-114 R9X, the Hellfire R9X is a US-origin missile known to cause minimum collateral damage while engaging individual targets.

Mechanism and Variants:

Also known as the '**Ninja Missile**', this weapon **does not carry a warhead** and instead deploys razor-sharp blades at the terminal stage of its attack trajectory.

This helps it to break through even thick steel sheets and cut down the target using the kinetic energy of its propulsion without causing any damage to the persons in the general vicinity or to the structure of the building.

The blades pop out of the missile and cut down the intended target without causing the massive damage to the surroundings which would be the case with a missile carrying an explosive warhead.

Hellfire is actually an acronym for **Heliborne, Laser, Fire and Forget Missile** and it was developed in the US initially to target tanks from the Apache AH-64 attack helicopters.

Later, the usage of these missiles spread to several other variants of helicopters and also ground and sea-based systems and drones.

Developed by Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, the Hellfire missile has other variants such as 'Longbow' and 'Romeo' apart from the 'Ninja'.

Usage:

The Hellfire 9RX missile is known to have been in active service since 2017.

However, its existence became public knowledge two years later in 2019.

In 2017, the 'Ninja Missile' was reportedly used to kill the then No. 2 leader of Al Qaeda in Syria.

It has also been used against Taliban targets in Afghanistan in 2020 and again in 2022.

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Conclusion:

Further, the rise of the ISIS with its own brand of terror combined with its territorial ambitions put al Qaeda in the shade.

Most of the big terrorist attacks in Europe have been held to be the work of ISIS or ISIS-inspired modules or individuals.

Now the Taliban may find it even harder to win legitimacy from the international community.