

## International

# Afghans cast doubt on Kabul killing of Al-Qaeda chief

## Justice has been delivered to the Egyptian with a \$25 million bounty on his head

KABUL: Many Afghans expressed shock or doubt Tuesday that Al-Qaeda's chief had been killed in Kabul by a US drone strike, saying they couldn't believe Ayman al-Zawahiri had been hiding in their midst. "It's just propaganda," Fahim Shah, 66, a resident of the Afghan capital, told AFP.

Late Monday, US President Joe Biden announced Zawahiri's assassination, saying "justice has been delivered" to the Egyptian with a \$25 million bounty on his head. A senior US official said the 71-year-old was on the balcony of a three-storey house in the upmarket Sherpur neighbourhood when targeted with two Hellfire missiles shortly after dawn Sunday.

"We have experienced such propaganda in the past and there was never anything in it," Shah said. "In reality, I don't think he was killed here." The Taliban admitted earlier Tuesday that the US had carried out a drone strike, but gave no details of casualties-and did not name Zawahiri, who was considered a key plotter of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

On Sunday, the interior ministry had denied reports of a drone strike, but Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said Tuesday that was because an investigation was underway. Kabul resident Abdul Kabir said he heard the strike Sunday morning, but still called on the United States to prove who was killed.

"They should show to the people and to the

world that 'we had hit this man and here is the evidence,'" Kabir said. "We think they killed somebody else and announced it was the Al-Qaeda chief... there are many other places he could be hiding-in Pakistan, or even in Iraq."

The strike is sure to further sour already bitter relations between Washington and the Taliban, which pledged to stop Afghanistan from being a sanctuary for militants as part of the agreement that led to the US troop withdrawal last year. University student Mohammad Bilal was another who thought it unlikely Zawahiri had been living in Kabul.

"This is a terrorist group and I do not think they will send their leader to Afghanistan," Bilal said. "Leaders of most terrorist groups, including the Taliban, were either living in Pakistan or in the United Arab Emirates when they were in conflict with former Afghan forces," he said.

A straw poll, however, found some believers in the capital. Kabul housewife Freshta, who asked not to be further identified, said she was shocked to learn of Zawahiri's killing. "It's so uncomfortable to know that he was living here," she said.

A shopkeeper who also asked not to be named said he too wasn't surprised. "Any terrorist group can enter our land, use it and get out easily," he told AFP. "We don't have a good government. We are unable to protect ourselves, our soil and our property." — AFP



WASHINGTON: This photo released on August 2, 2022 by the White House shows US President Biden meeting with his national security team to discuss the counterterrorism operation to take out Ayman al-Zawahiri. — AFP

## Iran steps up Bahai persecution with arrests

PARIS: Iranian authorities have stepped up persecution of the Bahais with a wave of arrests of prominent members of the country's biggest non-Muslim minority, leaving the battered community in shock, activists said on Monday.

The Bahais in Iran, who have been subjected to harassment ever since the inception of the Islamic republic in 1979, had already complained that dozens of community members had been arrested, summoned or subjected to house searches in June and July.

But the intensification of the persecution reached a new peak on Sunday when 13 Bahais were suddenly arrested in raids on the homes and businesses of 52 Bahais across the country, Diane Alai, the representative of the Bahai International Community (BIC), told AFP.

She said those detained included prominent Iranian Bahai figures Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi and Afif Naemi who had previously each served a decade in jail and been part of a now disbanded Bahai administrative group known as the Yaran.

"This is an outrageous move," Alai told

AFP. "It is an escalation." "We did not want to believe that this was going to happen but we could see it in the making," she said, noting a "campaign of incitement to hatred" in pro-government media.

James Samimi Farr, of the Bahais of the United States, added: "For whatever reason there is an emboldened effort to persecute our community and test the waters of what can be done against us."

Iran's intelligence ministry said Monday it had arrested members of the Bahai minority suspected of spying for a centre located in Zionist entity and of working illegally to spread their religion. They had been instructed to "infiltrate educational environments at different levels, especially kindergartens across the country", it said.

Bahais are used to accusations by Iran of links to Zionist entity, whose northern city of Haifa hosts a centre of the Bahai faith established due to the exile of a Bahai leader well before the State of Zionist entity was established.

Such allegations contain "not one shred of proof," said Alai. Samimi Farr said: "The government has felt emboldened to persecute us on flimsy pretexts that have been disproved again and again". The Islamic republic recognises minority non-Muslim faiths including Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism but does not extend the same recognition to Bahaim with followers estimated to number 300,000 in Iran. — AFP

## Did US use secret 'flying ginsu' missile?

WASHINGTON: Notorious Al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by two missiles fired at his Kabul home-but pictures showed no sign of an explosion, and US officials say no one else was harmed. That points to the use again by the United States of the macabre Hellfire R9X, a warhead-less missile believed equipped with six razor-like blades extending from the fuselage that slices through its target but does not explode.

Never publicly acknowledged by the Pentagon or CIA-the two US agencies known to undertake targeted assassinations of extremist leaders-the R9X first appeared in March 2017 when Al-Qaeda senior leader Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was killed by a drone strike while traveling in a car in Syria.

Photos of the vehicle showed a large hole through the roof, with the car's metal, and all of the interior, including its occupants, physically shredded. But the front and rear of the car appeared completely intact. Up until then, Hellfire

missiles-fired by drones in targeted attacks-were known for powerful explosions and often extensive collateral damage and deaths.

Since 2017, a handful of other finely-targeted attacks show similar results. Details of the mysterious weapon leaked out, and it was dubbed the "flying ginsu," after a famous 1980s television commercial for ostensibly Japanese kitchen knives that would cut cleanly through aluminum cans and remain perfectly sharp.

Also called the "ninja bomb," the missile has become the US munition of choice for killing leaders of extremist groups while avoiding civilian casualties. That is apparently what happened with Zawahiri.

A US official told reporters that on the morning of July 31, Zawahiri was standing alone on the balcony of his Kabul residence, when a US drone launched the two Hellfires. Apparent photographs of the building show windows blown out on one floor, but the rest of the building, including windows on other floors, still in place.

Members of Zawahiri's family were present in the home, but "were purposely not targeted and were not harmed," the official said. "We have no indications that civilians were harmed in this strike," the official added. — AFP

## Ayman al-Zawahiri

Al-Qaeda leader



Key ideologue behind the global terror network for several decades

- ▶ Born in Egypt in 1951
- ▶ Studied medicine in Cairo, becoming an eye surgeon
- ▶ Became involved with Egypt's radical Islamist community at a young age
- ▶ Later linked up with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, becoming Al-Qaeda's main strategist

Had central roles in Al-Qaeda's 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the Sept 11, 2001 attack on the US

Took command of Al-Qaeda after bin Laden's death in 2011

July 31, 2022  
Killed in a US high-precision drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan

AFP

## France, England see driest July on record

LONDON: France and parts of England saw their driest July on record, the countries' weather agencies said, exacerbating stretched water resources that have forced restrictions on both sides of the Channel. In France, where an intense drought has hammered farmers and prompted widespread limits on freshwater use, there was just 9.7 millimeters of rain last month, Meteo France said.

That was 84 percent down on the average levels seen for July between 1991 and 2022, and made it the second driest month since March 1961, the agency added. Meanwhile swathes of southern and eastern England recorded the lowest rainfall in July on record, the UK's Met Office. The whole of England recorded an average of 23.1 mm of rain-the lowest figure for the

month since 1935 and the seventh lowest July total on record, it said.

The Met Office has been compiling records since 1836. The low rainfall in both countries has been coupled with a summer of unprecedentedly high temperatures, which topped 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in England last month for the first time ever.

Climate scientists overwhelmingly agree that carbon emissions from humans burning fossil fuels are heating the planet, raising the risk and severity of droughts, heatwaves, and other extreme weather events. Analysis by an international team of researchers released last Friday found climate change caused by human activity made the recent record-shattering UK heatwave at least 10 times more likely to occur.

Water companies on both sides of the Channel are struggling to respond to the parched conditions. Nearly all of France's 96 mainland regions have imposed water use restrictions, also a record. The country is bracing for its third heatwave this summer, beginning in the southeast on Monday before heading north toward Paris. — AFP

pendence declaration by Taiwan or a forceful takeover by China. Meanwhile, Moscow said it was "absolutely in solidarity with China", calling the prospect of a Pelosi visit "pure provocation". China has refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has been accused of providing diplomatic cover for the Kremlin by blasting Western sanctions and arms sales to Kyiv.

Pelosi left Kuala Lumpur Tuesday after meeting Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri and Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah. So many people were tracking the US military plane ferrying her on FlightRadar that the website said some users experienced outages. The plane took a circuitous route that studiously avoided the South China Sea - which Beijing claims - before heading up the east coast of the Philippines. Press access around Pelosi has been tightly restricted so far and limited to a handful or short statements confirming meetings with officials.

Her itinerary includes stops in South Korea and Japan - but the prospect of a Taiwan trip had dominated attention. Taipei's government remained silent on whether she would visit even as local media published reports showing her presence was all but guaranteed. The capital's famous Taipei 101 skyscraper was illuminated with the words "Speaker Pelosi... Thank You" on Tuesday night before her plane had arrived.

Taiwan's 23 million people have long lived with the possibility of an invasion, but that threat has intensified under Xi, China's most assertive ruler in a generation. The island's military on Tuesday said it was "determined" to defend it against increased threats by China over the potential Pelosi visit. — AFP

## US kills Qaeda chief in Afghan...

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Al-Qaeda's operations-including the 9/11 attacks-as well as bin Laden's personal doctor.

A senior administration official said the 71-year-old Egyptian was on the balcony of a three-storey house in the Afghan capital when targeted with two Hellfire missiles after dawn Sunday. "We identified Zawahiri on multiple occasions for sustained periods of time on the balcony where he was ultimately struck," the official said.

The house is in Sherpur, one of Kabul's most affluent neighborhoods, with several villas occupied by high-ranking Taliban officials and commanders. The Taliban's interior ministry previously denied reports circulating on social media of a drone strike, telling AFP a rocket struck "an empty house" in Kabul, causing no casualties.

Early Tuesday, however, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid tweeted that an "aerial attack" was carried out. "The nature of the incident was not revealed at first," he said. "The security and intelligence agencies of the Islamic Emirate investigated the incident and found in their preliminary investigations that the attack was carried out by American drones."

Although Biden did not mention the Taliban in his televised address, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said "by hosting and sheltering" Zawahiri, the Islamist group had "grossly violated the Doha Agreement" which paved the way for America's withdrawal. Zabihullah, in turn, accused Washington of breaking the 2020 deal.

"Such actions are a repetition of the failed experiences of the past 20 years and are against the interests of the United States of America, Afghanistan, and the region," he said. Zawahiri, who grew up in a comfortable Cairo household before turning to violent radicalism, had been on the run since the 9/11 attacks. He took over Al-Qaeda after bin Laden was killed, and had a \$25 million US bounty on his head.

News of his death comes a month before the first anniversary of the final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, leaving the country in the hands of the Taliban insurgency that fought Western forces for two decades. Under the Doha deal, the Taliban promised not to allow Afghanistan to be used again as a launchpad for international jihadism, but experts believe the group never broke ties with

Al-Qaeda. "What we know is that the senior Haqqani Taliban were aware of his presence in Kabul," the senior US official said.

Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani also heads the feared Haqqani Network, a brutal subset of the Taliban blamed for some of the worst violence of the past 20 years and which has been described by US officials as a "veritable arm" of Pakistani intelligence. In Sherpur, locals told AFP they long thought the targeted house - surrounded by high walls and barbed wire, and now with green tarpaulin covering the balcony where Zawahiri was believed to have been killed-was empty.

"We have not seen anybody living there for almost a year," said an employee of a nearby office. "It has always been in dark, with not a single bulb lit." Some residents found it hard to believe that Zawahiri had been hiding in their midst. "It's just propaganda," Fahim Shah, 66, told AFP. "They should show to the people and to the world that 'we had hit this man and here is the evidence,'" added Abdul Kabir.

Zawahiri lacked the potent charisma that helped bin Laden rally jihadists around the world but willingly channelled his analytical skills into the Al-Qaeda cause. Still, the group is believed to have been degraded since the US invasion of Afghanistan, and the White House official said Zawahiri was "one of the last remaining figures who carried this kind of significance". The organization is "at a crossroads", said Soufan Center researcher Colin Clarke. "Despite Zawahiri's leadership, which minimized AQ's losses while rebuilding, the group still faces serious challenges going forward. For one, there's the question of who will lead Al-Qaeda after Zawahiri's gone."

Zawahiri's father was a renowned physician and his grandfather a prayer leader at Cairo's Al-Azhar institute, the highest authority for Sunni Muslims. He became involved with Egypt's radical Islamist community at a young age and published several books which came for many to symbolize the movement. He left Egypt in the mid-1980s, heading for Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar where the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was based.

Thousands of Islamist fighters were flooding into Afghanistan at the time, setting the stage for Zawahiri's first meeting with bin Laden. In 1998 he became one of five signatories to bin Laden's "fatwa" calling for attacks against Americans. Jihadist monitor SITE said some militants were questioning the veracity of the report he had been killed, while others believed Zawahiri had achieved his desire of "martyrdom." — AFP