

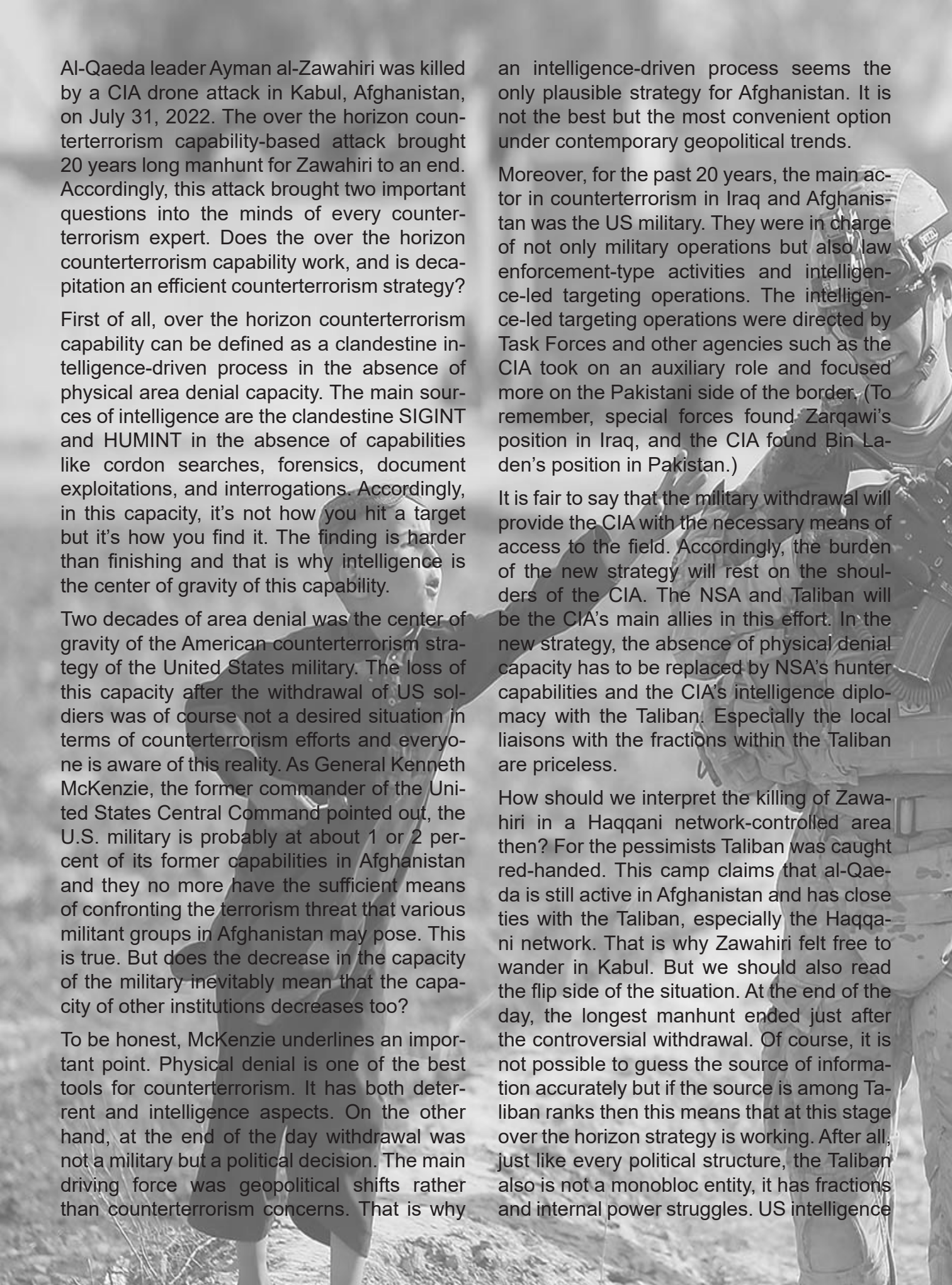




Hitting Zawahiri Over The Horizon

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Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by a CIA drone attack in Kabul, Afghanistan, on July 31, 2022. The over the horizon counterterrorism capability-based attack brought 20 years long manhunt for Zawahiri to an end. Accordingly, this attack brought two important questions into the minds of every counterterrorism expert. Does the over the horizon counterterrorism capability work, and is decapitation an efficient counterterrorism strategy?

First of all, over the horizon counterterrorism capability can be defined as a clandestine intelligence-driven process in the absence of physical area denial capacity. The main sources of intelligence are the clandestine SIGINT and HUMINT in the absence of capabilities like cordon searches, forensics, document exploitations, and interrogations. Accordingly, in this capacity, it's not how you hit a target but it's how you find it. The finding is harder than finishing and that is why intelligence is the center of gravity of this capability.

Two decades of area denial was the center of gravity of the American counterterrorism strategy of the United States military. The loss of this capacity after the withdrawal of US soldiers was of course not a desired situation in terms of counterterrorism efforts and everyone is aware of this reality. As General Kenneth McKenzie, the former commander of the United States Central Command pointed out, the U.S. military is probably at about 1 or 2 percent of its former capabilities in Afghanistan and they no more have the sufficient means of confronting the terrorism threat that various militant groups in Afghanistan may pose. This is true. But does the decrease in the capacity of the military inevitably mean that the capacity of other institutions decreases too?

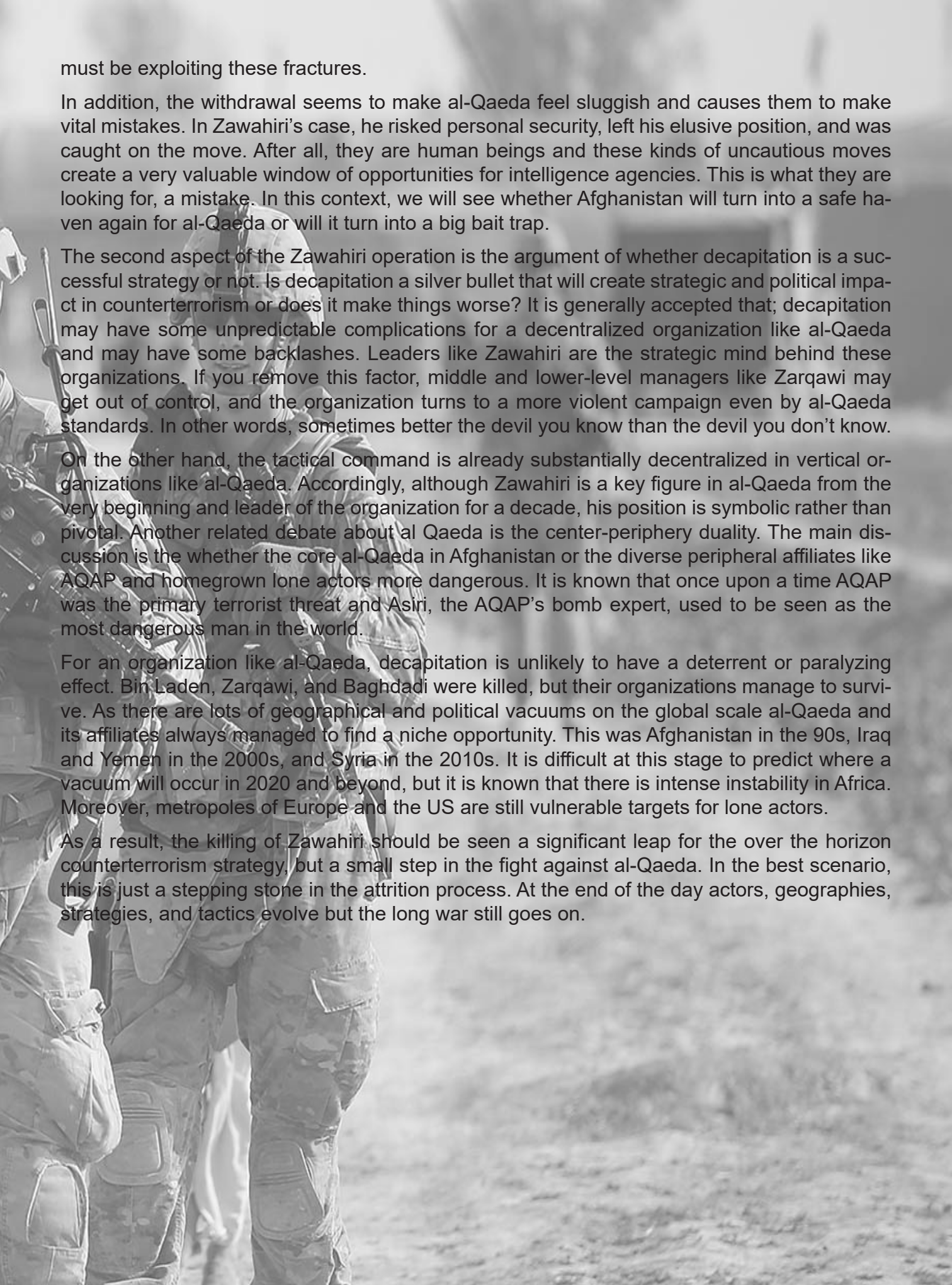
To be honest, McKenzie underlines an important point. Physical denial is one of the best tools for counterterrorism. It has both deterrent and intelligence aspects. On the other hand, at the end of the day withdrawal was not a military but a political decision. The main driving force was geopolitical shifts rather than counterterrorism concerns. That is why

an intelligence-driven process seems the only plausible strategy for Afghanistan. It is not the best but the most convenient option under contemporary geopolitical trends.

Moreover, for the past 20 years, the main actor in counterterrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan was the US military. They were in charge of not only military operations but also law enforcement-type activities and intelligence-led targeting operations. The intelligence-led targeting operations were directed by Task Forces and other agencies such as the CIA took on an auxiliary role and focused more on the Pakistani side of the border. (To remember, special forces found Zarqawi's position in Iraq, and the CIA found Bin Laden's position in Pakistan.)

It is fair to say that the military withdrawal will provide the CIA with the necessary means of access to the field. Accordingly, the burden of the new strategy will rest on the shoulders of the CIA. The NSA and Taliban will be the CIA's main allies in this effort. In the new strategy, the absence of physical denial capacity has to be replaced by NSA's hunter capabilities and the CIA's intelligence diplomacy with the Taliban. Especially the local liaisons with the fractions within the Taliban are priceless.

How should we interpret the killing of Zawahiri in a Haqqani network-controlled area then? For the pessimists Taliban was caught red-handed. This camp claims that al-Qaeda is still active in Afghanistan and has close ties with the Taliban, especially the Haqqani network. That is why Zawahiri felt free to wander in Kabul. But we should also read the flip side of the situation. At the end of the day, the longest manhunt ended just after the controversial withdrawal. Of course, it is not possible to guess the source of information accurately but if the source is among Taliban ranks then this means that at this stage over the horizon strategy is working. After all, just like every political structure, the Taliban also is not a monobloc entity, it has fractions and internal power struggles. US intelligence

A soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and body armor, standing in a field. The soldier is wearing a helmet with a night vision device and is holding a rifle. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

must be exploiting these fractures.

In addition, the withdrawal seems to make al-Qaeda feel sluggish and causes them to make vital mistakes. In Zawahiri's case, he risked personal security, left his elusive position, and was caught on the move. After all, they are human beings and these kinds of uncautious moves create a very valuable window of opportunities for intelligence agencies. This is what they are looking for, a mistake. In this context, we will see whether Afghanistan will turn into a safe haven again for al-Qaeda or will it turn into a big bait trap.

The second aspect of the Zawahiri operation is the argument of whether decapitation is a successful strategy or not. Is decapitation a silver bullet that will create strategic and political impact in counterterrorism or does it make things worse? It is generally accepted that; decapitation may have some unpredictable complications for a decentralized organization like al-Qaeda and may have some backlashes. Leaders like Zawahiri are the strategic mind behind these organizations. If you remove this factor, middle and lower-level managers like Zarqawi may get out of control, and the organization turns to a more violent campaign even by al-Qaeda standards. In other words, sometimes better the devil you know than the devil you don't know.

On the other hand, the tactical command is already substantially decentralized in vertical organizations like al-Qaeda. Accordingly, although Zawahiri is a key figure in al-Qaeda from the very beginning and leader of the organization for a decade, his position is symbolic rather than pivotal. Another related debate about al-Qaeda is the center-periphery duality. The main discussion is the whether the core al-Qaeda in Afghanistan or the diverse peripheral affiliates like AQAP and homegrown lone actors more dangerous. It is known that once upon a time AQAP was the primary terrorist threat and Asiri, the AQAP's bomb expert, used to be seen as the most dangerous man in the world.

For an organization like al-Qaeda, decapitation is unlikely to have a deterrent or paralyzing effect. Bin Laden, Zarqawi, and Baghdadi were killed, but their organizations manage to survive. As there are lots of geographical and political vacuums on the global scale al-Qaeda and its affiliates always managed to find a niche opportunity. This was Afghanistan in the 90s, Iraq and Yemen in the 2000s, and Syria in the 2010s. It is difficult at this stage to predict where a vacuum will occur in 2020 and beyond, but it is known that there is intense instability in Africa. Moreover, metropolises of Europe and the US are still vulnerable targets for lone actors.

As a result, the killing of Zawahiri should be seen a significant leap for the over the horizon counterterrorism strategy, but a small step in the fight against al-Qaeda. In the best scenario, this is just a stepping stone in the attrition process. At the end of the day actors, geographies, strategies, and tactics evolve but the long war still goes on.