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AL-QAEDA, AL-ZAWAHIRI, AND THE POISONED LEGACY OF BIN LADEN

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On the eve of the 60th birthday of Egyptian surgeon Sheik Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Islamic website has appointed him Osama bin Laden's successor as the head of Al-Qaeda. The wire services have picked up the news, and consider it factual. No little expectation had arisen regarding the possibility of the emergence of a new leader, and the fact that it took so long to reach a decision awoke speculation about an illusory internal contest for the succession. What instead seems to be confirmed, is the irremediable dissolution of Al-Qaeda, a mere shadow of what it had been for the past 15 years: an organization with a capacity for operations and for propagandistic leadership, capable of massacring innocents and raising the hackles of established power.

For Dr. Al-Zawahiri, this appointment is more of a poisoned gift, for what he is receiving—though no one knows exactly from whom—is the command of an organization that is going through its worst moments since he and bin Laden first met in the Afghan city of Jalalabad in 1997. It was there that the fusion of their respective organizations took place and, on August 7, 1998, they sent the North American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam flying. The Egyptian doctor is wanted in the U.S. for his participation in this crime (and not for 9/11), and the Department of State has offered as much as 25 million dollars for information leading to his arrest and trial, according to the page on the FBI website that announces its “most wanted terrorists.” To be second on the list, when the first has just fallen, cannot be a comforting position.

The core issue is not whether or not Al-Zawahiri is the leader Al-Qaeda needs, but what his future and that of the operations in Afghanistan will be. A series of factors conspire against the resurgence of a “global jihad.” Osama bin Laden is dead; today it is more difficult to hide in Pakistan, whether it be under cover of tribe members, the army, or intelligence. What's more, in little more than a year, 20 of the 30 most sought-after activists have been eliminated in attacks by predator drones in the Northern provinces.

Al Zawahiri's objective in founding the Egyptian Islamic Jihad was none other than to overthrow the secular, corrupt Egyptian government. This objective has been reached, not by violent means, nor to install an Islamic republic, but by peaceful means and to install a democracy. And it was achieved through

the mobilization of young people and civil society, and not by a terrorist organization through assassinations and indiscriminate bombings. This is the determining factor, and the one that may turn out to be the coup de grâce for Al-Qaeda.

The war in Afghanistan has ceased to be a “war of need” to become a “war of choice.” Its initial justification, the overthrow of the Taliban regime that was the basis of “The Base” (for this is the meaning of “Al-Qaeda”), has since been achieved. The ruinous distraction of Iraq’s bloodshed not only prevented the task from being finished, but also threw gasoline on the embers of Al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, once Baghdad was stabilized, Kabul could not be abandoned without having won the highly symbolic trophy of the head of Bin Laden. And even if the trophy was brought down in neighboring Pakistan, the time has come to return home. The next step now is to begin the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and that entails concentrating attacks on what is left of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, stabilizing the difficult relationship with the civilian rulers in Islamabad, and negotiating with the Taliban on both sides of the border.

For almost 10 years, the war effort in Afghanistan has been enormous, and the results ambiguous, to put it mildly. But Europe (and the United States) need to devote their increasingly meagre resources to other issues such as, for example, revitalizing their own economies and reaching a rapid resolution of the operation under way in Libya, a fundamental objective in order to demonstrate the seriousness of Western support for democratic change in the Arabic countries. This transformation represents a major geopolitical shift, and there is no justification for scrimping on resources in the Mediterranean while continuing sine die an investment in the distant mountains of Tora Bora (what cannot go on, as the Mayor of Los Angeles put it recently, is “the building of bridges in Kandahar and not in Baltimore.”)

From the Nile to the Atlantic, from Sinai to the Strait of Ormuz, the maintenance of the status quo as doctrine has come to an end. The panorama of the Arabic and Islamic world inherited by Al-Zawahri has little to do any more with the possibility of a hypothetical Great Sunni Caliphate, which he and Bin Laden dreamed of in the ‘90s. In Afghanistan, whether the military likes it or not, withdrawal is under way, and the Global War on Terror has culminated with the, above all, psychological blow in Abbottabad. It will be necessary to continuing carrying out surgical strikes against what Al-Zawahri and the various “violent extremist organizations,” or VEOs, as specialists in what were formerly known as terrorist groups now prefer to call them. But at this stage nothing can justify the massive deployment of tens of thousands of combat troops in Afghan territory, and the price tag of 2 billion dollars a week, on a protracted war that has been financed not with tax income but through public debt.