

Al Qaeda Feels Losses in Syria and Afghanistan but Stays Resilient

American drones and U.S. allies killed several Qaeda leaders and operatives in the past week. But the organization has “ingrained itself in local communities and conflicts,” according to the U.N.



By Eric Schmitt

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WASHINGTON — Last week was a bad week for Al Qaeda around the world.

At least seven top Qaeda operatives were killed in the latest of a recent spate of U.S. Special Operations drone strikes in northwest Syria.

Afghan commandos killed a senior Qaeda propagandist in a raid in a Taliban-controlled district. And the United States continues to pressure the Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, the Shabab, which may be undergoing a leadership shake-up.

Yet nearly two decades after the 9/11 attacks and with many of its top leaders dead, Al Qaeda remains resilient and has “ingrained itself in local communities and conflicts” spanning the globe, from West Africa to Yemen to Afghanistan, a U.N. counterterrorism report issued in July concluded.

Both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as their global affiliates and supporters, “continue to generate violence around the world, whether through insurgency tactics, the direction and facilitation of terrorism or providing the inspiration for attacks,” the U.N. report said.

Over the weekend, Afghanistan’s intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, tweeted that the country’s special forces had killed a senior Qaeda leader in the eastern province of Ghazni.

The tweet showed a grisly picture of the dead Qaeda leader, Hossam Abdul al-Raouf, who went by the nom de guerre Abu Muhsin al-Masri, and said he had been living in Ghazni under the protection of the Taliban.

On Monday, the White House’s National Security Council confirmed the death of Mr. al-Raouf, a top propagandist and trusted lieutenant to Ayman al-Zawahri, Al Qaeda’s senior-most leader, who was on the F.B.I.’s most wanted list. The council praised the Afghan forces in a tweet of its own, “His removal is welcome news in the fight against Al Qaeda and denying it a safe haven in Afghanistan.”

American officials said there was some erroneous reporting in initial media accounts, mistakenly identifying the terrorist killed in Afghanistan as another al-Masri, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, also known as Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who is Al Qaeda’s No. 2 official and who has been viewed as a likely successor to Mr. Zawahri.

The killing of Mr. al-Raouf took place in the Andar district of the Ghazni province. This district, in the Taliban’s Pashtun heartland, is almost completely controlled by the insurgent group.

If Mr. al-Raouf was indeed under Taliban protection, it would be a flagrant violation of the Feb. 29 agreement in Qatar between the Taliban and the United States that directed the Taliban to sever ties with the terrorist group.

Some counterterrorism specialists also warned against overstating the importance of the death of Mr. al-Raouf and other recent losses the group has suffered. Some top American officials, including Christopher Miller, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center, have publicly asserted the end of Al Qaeda is approaching.

“Abd-al-Ra’uf’s demise is undoubtedly significant. He was a veteran jihadist, whose career began in the 1980s,” Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, wrote in FDD’s Long War Journal this week. “He was a trusted subordinate for Zawahri and served Al Qaeda in senior roles, including in its propaganda arm.”

“But it is debatable whether his death, as well as other setbacks, add up to strategic losses for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan or elsewhere,” Mr. Joscelyn said.

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Mr. Joscelyn and United Nations counterterrorism analysts warn that United States has underestimated Al Qaeda's strength inside Afghanistan.

The U.N. counterterrorism report released in July said that the terror group was "covertly active in 12 Afghan provinces," adding it most likely commands 400 to 600 fighters. The report also said Mr. al-Zawahri remained based in Afghanistan, although other counterterrorism specialists assessed that he was hiding in neighboring Pakistan.

More than 2,000 miles away, in northwest Syria, American military drones attacked insurgents linked to a Qaeda affiliate there, Hurras al-Din, with two major strikes in the past two weeks.

Maj. Beth Riordan, a spokeswoman for the Pentagon's Central Command, said seven senior Qaeda leaders were killed while holding a meeting on Thursday near Idlib.

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"AQ-S takes advantage of the instability in northwest Syria to establish and maintain safe havens to coordinate terrorist activities," Major Riordan said in an email after the strike, using a military abbreviation for Hurras al-Din. "The removal of these AQ-S leaders will disrupt the terrorist organization's ability to further plot and carry out global attacks threatening U.S. citizens, our partners and innocent civilians."

Just a week earlier, on Oct. 15, several Qaeda operatives were killed in a similar Hellfire missile drone strike, also near Idlib, Major Riordan said without revealing more details.

Charles Lister, the director of the Middle East Institute's Syria and Countering Terrorism and Extremism Programs, said one of those killed in the Oct. 15 strike was Abu Mohammed al-Sudani, a Qaeda veteran who had worked with and was close to both Osama bin Laden and Mr. al-Zawahri.

The United States has no troops on the ground in northwest Syria, but the military's secretive Joint Special Operations Command, with help from the C.I.A., is carrying out a shadow war against Hurras al-Din, a small but virulent Al Qaeda affiliate that American officials say is plotting attacks against the West.

The two most recent strikes were carried with conventional Hellfire missiles equipped with an explosive warhead of about 20 pounds, military officials said. Special Operations forces are also using a new Hellfire variant, called the R9X or the Ninja, to hunt individual Qaeda leaders in places where the military is trying to avoid civilian casualties.

Instead of exploding, the modified Hellfire hurls about 100 pounds of metal through the top of a target's vehicle. If the high-velocity projectile does not kill the target, the missile's other feature almost certainly does: six long blades tucked inside, which deploy seconds before impact to slice up anything in its path.

The center of the latest drone strikes is Idlib Province, whose population has ballooned to more than three million people during Syria's civil war. It is home to violent Islamic extremist groups, dominated by the Qaeda-linked organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly the Nusra Front. Syrian military forces, backed by Iranian and Russian firepower, have targeted the group.

Hurras al-Din emerged in early 2018 after several factions broke away from the Nusra Front, which at least publicly has since distanced itself from Al Qaeda's overall leadership. Hurras al-Din is the successor to the Khorasan Group, a small but dangerous organization of hardened senior Qaeda operatives that Mr. al-Zawahri sent to Syria to plot attacks against the West.

The Khorasan Group was effectively wiped out by a series of American airstrikes several years ago. But with as many as 2,000 fighters, including seasoned leaders from Jordan and Egypt, Hurras al-Din is much larger and has operated in areas where Russian air defenses, at least until recently, have largely shielded its members from American airstrikes and the persistent stare of American surveillance planes.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting from Geneva.