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# The man they call Osama bin Laden's brain



By Philippe Naughton, Times Online

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor who warned Britain today that it faced more terror attacks, has been described as "the brain of Osama bin Laden".

As al-Qaeda's chief ideologue and the man who, more than anyone, has set its Jihadist strategy, many consider him the most dangerous international terrorist of the past 25 years.

Al-Zawahiri was born in the Cairo suburbs on June 19, 1951 to a very well-to-do Egyptian family. His father was a professor of pharmacology and his paternal grandfather the Imam of al-Azhar mosque - the highest authority in Sunni Islam. One of his great uncles was the first secretary-general of the Arab league.

Al-Zawahiri was radicalised at a young age and is thought to have joined his first extreme Islamist organisation at the age of 14. He was reportedly arrested at the age of 15 for being a member of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

The humiliation of Egypt's defeat at the hands of Israel in the Six Day War of 1967 entrenched his beliefs, and gave impetus across the Arab world to the nascent Jihadist movement.

He was married in 1979 and trained as a surgeon in Cairo. Around the same time he became one of the founding members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organisation, whose members were responsible for the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat.

Although al-Zawahiri was not blamed for that killing, he spent three years in Egyptian jails after being convicted of organising combat training camps, ordering an insurrection as well as the assassination of top officials.

Al-Zawahiri left Egypt in 1986, initially to take up a doctor's contract in Saudi Arabia, but soon headed for the northern Pakistan city of Peshawar where the Mujahiddin resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was based.

It was in Peshawar that al-Zawahiri, by now a leading figure in the Islamic Jihad, realised that the Afghan conflict gave him and his organisation the chance to gain operational and military experience. The Mujahiddin's success in Afghanistan came as an inspiration to Jihadists everywhere, who came to believe that if they could defeat one global superpower, then they could start to take aim at the other.

It was in Pakistan, too, that he is believed to have met and started to work closely with Osama bin Laden, the Saudi multi-millionaire who had been funding the Mujahiddin since the early 1980s and funnelling money, arms and fighters into the war.

The partnership of the two men has been crucial to the success of al-Qaeda, which came into being around 1988 - with al-Zawahiri providing the ideological impetus and organisation, and bin Laden providing the money.

Although al-Zawahiri is often described as bin Laden's right-hand man or No 2 - and was at his side when he appeared on a video to praise the men who carried out the attacks on Washington and New York on September 11, 2001 - there is thought to be no formal hierarchical relationship between them, and al-Zawahiri has remained

head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

In the early 1990s al-Zawahiri is believed to have lived in Europe before linking up again with bin Laden in Afghanistan. He was also active in Sudan and Yemen and although some of the attacks he helped to plan were failures, he later claimed responsibility for the bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad.

In December 1996, he was arrested by Russia's FSB, the successor to the KGB, as he tried to cross the border into Chechnya. But, despite putting him on trial, Russian authorities could not make any charges stick and he was released the following year.

In 1998, al-Zawahiri was the second of five signatories (under bin Laden) to a fatwa calling for "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders", an order made in the name of Allah for Muslims to kill Americans and their allies, civilians and military, "in any country in which it is possible to do it".

He is listed on the US government's indictment for the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and he was sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court a year later for his role in a 1997 attack in Luxor in which 58 foreign tourists were killed.

Since the September 11 attacks, al-Zawahiri is thought to have been hiding on the Afghan-Pakistani border, although he has surfaced regularly with video or audio statements released via al-Jazeera.

His wife, son and two daughters were reportedly killed in a US air raid on Kandahar in December 2001, a raid which he himself survived.

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