



# U.S. Revenge from the Shadows

An Interview with Bob Grenier  
on the Assassination of  
Ayman Al-Zawahiri



Rainey  
Center



It's now part of the history of 9/11 that the CIA was waving their hands in the air to get the attention of the Bush Administration with the famous "Bin Laden determined to strike the U.S." intelligence it was sharing in the weeks leading up to that infamous day. One of the key figures in that assessment was Robert "Bob" Grenier, who was CIA Station Chief in Islamabad, Pakistan, when the attacks took place.

Bob details that time — and the harrowing weeks that followed and led to war in Afghanistan — in his compelling memoir "88 Days to Kandahar." He was the first U.S. government official to cross the border into Afghanistan after 9/11 to meet with the Taliban and urge them to turn over Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda members to face justice in the U.S. for their actions or face the consequences. He nearly succeeded and to read Bob's memoir is to understand how precisely how the wheel of history can turn on such small details.

But the Taliban of course didn't turn on Al Qaeda and war soon followed the 9/11 attacks. Bob left the Agency in 2006 — after nearly three decades of public service and concluding his government career as head of the CounterTerrorism Center (CTC) — but his colleagues have never stopped tracking the top Al Qaeda figures and they scored a huge victory on July 31st with the stunning killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the world's most wanted terrorists for decades and the successor to Osama Bin-Laden.

I caught up with Bob to ask him about Zawahiri's demise and how the world and its threats looks to him as a result.



## What was your reaction upon hearing the news of the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri?

My initial reaction was that this was a long time coming. He was in hiding for a very long period of time. Back when I was Director of CTC, he was an important target — we used to talk in those days about trying to cut off the head versus cutting off the hands. Obviously we were focused on Bin Laden and Zawahiri, but they were essentially in hiding and not exposing themselves in ways that would make them more viable as targets. Another class of targets — senior operations people — we felt posed the most clear and present danger. As a matter of urgency we kept taking them out and they would get replaced. Obviously at the same time you look for an operation to track Bin Laden and Zawahiri but because they weren't actively involved in operations our chances were fewer and our priorities needed to be elsewhere. But I remember an instance in 2005 when we thought we had a shot at Zawahiri and

based on statements he made afterwards it was clear that was in our sights, but we failed to get him. How practically important he was to the organization, how important it was to take him out, is a matter of some debate, and not something I'm currently well positioned to address. Like Bin Laden before him, Zawahiri was providing top-line guidance and inspiration, but he was not nearly the charismatic figure that Bin Laden was. The immediate impact of his death is somewhat limited, but the long-term implication on attracting new recruits and raising funds is probably greater. I would point out that Al Qaeda is now essentially multiple organizations, affiliates that are only loosely linked. The greatest threat they pose is their ability to raise money and give those funds to affiliates.



## What can you say about the tracking of Zawahiri and the actual execution of the plan considering that the U.S. pulled its assets out of Afghanistan a year ago — how can people understand how the CIA was able to track down Zawahiri considering all the hurdles?

I can speak freely because I don't know anything anymore! I can only take a look at this from afar, but with some base of knowledge. While our ability to collect intelligence on the ground in Afghanistan must be harder these days, we had a long time to build up networks there. I'm sure there had to be thought given to how to maintain a stay-behind capability, so I'm sure there were sources on the ground. It's

clear also that Zawahiri was receiving assistance, it appears that the Haqqani network was hosting and sponsoring him, and members of that organization are very dangerous and have been responsible for attacks against Americans and scrutiny of that network could have led to Zawahiri.



## Where does the killing of Zawahiri leave U.S. / Afghan relations?

It's interesting, I haven't looked at the official documents that comprise the Doha Accords in a while, but there were a number of other documents in addition to the accords, in the back and forth between the U.S. and the Taliban, and the Taliban always made it clear that while they wouldn't allow their territory to be used for extremists to attack outside of Afghanistan, they were not going to deny sanctuary to extremists who in their view didn't pose such a threat and were their guests. They never promised to expel, for instance, Arabs who have been affiliated with various extremist groups. Their assurances from our perspective were always a matter of a suspension of disbelief.

I think anyone familiar with the Taliban wouldn't have thought that they would make a strong effort to try to control the activities of these people even to the extent they could with their limited resources and all the pressure they are under. So I'm not at all surprised by this. I'm a little surprised that the current administration would point to the issue of the Doha Accords quite as strongly as they have since Zawahiri's death because I think there is that willful suspension of disbelief. But I think a lot of it has to do with the idea that it creates another rationale about why the U.S. should keep denying resources from flowing to the Taliban, and discourage allies sharing assistance to the Taliban as well.



## Are you concerned that Afghanistan will once again become a safe haven for terrorists?

What many of us have feared was that we would see a surge of extremists coming back to Afghanistan knowing there would be a hospitable environment for them. But to my knowledge that hasn't happened. We can see the Tehreek-E-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) posing a threat, but it's a recent one and they are focused on Pakistan. There are threats emanating from Afghanistan but by and large they aren't

a particular threat to western interests. So there is a threat there, it's certainly a still a focus of some concern for the counterterrorism community, but I would suspect that they regard it as a manageable threat, and not one that would require the investment of huge resources.





## Al Qaeda has become something of a franchise operating independently around the world. What do you say to critics that say that Zawahiri was a figurehead and no longer a particular threat to the U.S. and that the focus should have been elsewhere?

It's a mistake to think that the CIA and the U.S. counter terrorism community isn't focused globally. There are many different aspects of the effort. We're building the capacity of allies to control territory, for example. And while you want to maintain a global capability and maintain the ability to act, you can't say that allocating particular resources will lead to particular results; that betrays a lack of understanding of the effort. I don't know how they developed this lead that placed him on a balcony of a home in a residential part of Kabul, but once you have that lead you have to follow it up. We may not know

how important Zawahiri was to the organization, but it is still safe to say he posed a clear and present danger to the U.S. and its allies, and given the opportunity he would harm the U.S. Given the chance we had it was worth taking the shot. I wouldn't denigrate the idea that has symbolic value. He was an iconic figure, he joined forces with Bin Laden in the 1990s, and in terrorism as in life nothing succeeds like success. For others in that organization to see that someone like Zawahiri, who was in hiding for years, was still not beyond the reach of U.S. intelligence has to be discouraging.



## Building on the last question, where do you see the global war on terrorism is currently — is it still ongoing?

Islamic inspired terrorism is still an important phenomenon but it's very much a manageable one, though it does depend on the geography (thinking about northern Syria or Iraq or Somalia when it comes to ungoverned spaces). It's now a global police issue, a manageable threat. The professionals whose job it is to protect us from these threats need

to be pursuing this with a great sense of urgency, but for most of us as citizens, as Americans, this is probably not something we need to be worrying about. Not that the threat has gone away, but considering the threats we all currently face from a variety of areas, the threat from Islamic terrorism is far down the list.





**People typically only hear about the CIA if there is a scandal or an intelligence failure — they don't hear about the many successes of the Agency because of the need to protect sources and methods. I wanted to give you a chance to reflect on the personnel at the Agency and this extraordinary success.**

The amazing sophistication of this operation is really something. Zawahiri was not circulating around town. His immediate neighbors didn't know he was there. A relatively wealthy neighborhood is not where you would necessarily think to look for him. Even there he was keeping an extremely low profile. He would only go outside on a balcony for a few hours a day. To have the resources to figure out he's there, confirm that, and then actually attack him and to exercise great caution to not harm all the others in the building and to just harm

him takes enormous professionalism and tremendous patience and discipline. You really can't say enough about it, and to be able to do it on another side of the world where we don't have the platform is really remarkable. There is a whole infrastructure of people who made this work who are in the shadows, who will never be known, who will never have medals pinned to their chest. They are extraordinary and it should give us pause as citizens and remind us that there are people protecting us and doing a great job.



**BOB GRENIER** was with the CIA for twenty-seven years. Upon leaving the CIA he served as Chairman of Kroll Associates. He is currently a consultant, public speaker, and author.

**JEREMY HUREWITZ** is a Policy Advisor on National Security with the Joseph Rainey Center. He is a consultant, writer, and creator of [Sell Like a Spy](#).



# Rainey Center

317 A Street SE  
Washington, DC 20003  
(202) 350-1689  
[info@raineycenter.org](mailto:info@raineycenter.org)  
[raineycenter.org](http://raineycenter.org)