Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri

Why in news?

Recently, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan.

Who was Zawahiri?

- **Birth**- Born into a wealthy family of medical professionals in 1951, Zawahiri grew up in Gamal Abdel Nasser's secular Egypt.
- This was the period when Egypt saw intense ideological and violent clashes between the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser's modern secular socialist state.
- **Inspiration**- Sayyid Qutb, a Brotherhood-associated cleric inspired Zawahiri towards revolutionary Islamism.
- Zawahiri, a member of the Brotherhood, had formed an underground Islamist cell in the 1960s whose main goal was to overthrow the government and establish an Islamist state.
- In late 1970s, his Islamist cell merged with other radical units to form the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.
- **Meeting Osama Bin Laden**- In early 1980s, Zawahiri travelled to Peshawar to work with the Red Crescent Society, the Islamic arm of Red Cross that was involved in treating wounded Afghan Mujahideen who were fighting the Soviets across the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan.
- It was during this period Zawahiri met Osama bin Laden, who was running a camp for the Mujahideen in Pakistan.
- That was the beginning of a relationship which would see both men planning and executing some of the biggest terrorist attacks in the world, including the September 11, 2001 attack in the U.S.

What was his role in al-Qaeda?

- By the time the Soviet troops were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, Bin Laden had founded al-Qaeda.
- In 1998, Bin Laden, Zawahiri and their co-jihadists issued a 'fatwa' in the name of the World Islamic Front.
- It said "the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies is an individual duty of every Muslim".
- Zawahiri was believed to have played a critical role in the planning of the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.
- Since the creation of Qaeda al-Jihad, Zawahiri has been the second-in-command of the outfit.
- He went into hiding, along with Bin Laden, in 2001 when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan

after the 9/11 attacks.
- After Bin Laden was killed in 2011 by an American commando raid in Pakistan, Zawahiri was the obvious choice to be the 'emir' of the terrorist group.

What is his legacy as al-Qaeda chief?

- **Emir**- When Zawahiri became the 'emir', al-Qaeda had already been substantially weakened and lost their safe haven in Afghanistan.
- Arab Spring protests were rocking Muslim countries that brought down regimes of dictators of Tunisia and Egypt.
- **Split ups**- His authority as the terrorist-in-chief was tested when a leader of an al-Qaeda branch, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced a new organisation called the Islamic State.
- There came a split in the global jihadist landscape and the Islamic State quickly rose as a proto-state (new Caliphate), capturing and holding territories from eastern Syria to the outskirts of Baghdad.
- Zawahiri's strategy was to retain al-Qaeda as a decentralised network of autonomous terror franchises.
- **Role in Syrian civil war**- He exploited the Syrian civil war to build a Qaeda network in the country and exploited the vacuum created in Libya to strengthen al-Qaeda Africa.

What is the current state of al-Qaeda?

- There are different branches such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabab and al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Idlib).
- These groups are ideologically connected to the Salafi-Jihadist ideals of the original al-Qaeda founded by Bin Laden, whose main goal is to uproot the "un-Islamic" governance models through jihad and establish an emirate.
- Most of them have their own leadership and tactics in the geographies they operate in thus making it difficult for any centralised military action to defeat al-Qaeda.
- Zawahiri's killing is clearly a setback to the al-Qaeda brand, but it is to be seen whether his death would weaken the operations of the different al-Qaeda networks that have spread across continents.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explainer-who-was-al-qaeda-chief-ayman-al-zawahiri/article65722442.ece?homepage=true



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