



THE DEMISE OF ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI

By Michael Radu

Born circa 1966 in the Bedouin tribe of Bani Hassan in Zarka, Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. air strike on June 7, near Bakuba, Iraq.

Lately known as the “amir” of Al Qaeda in the Country of the Two Rivers (Iraq), Al-Zarqawi typified the nature, methods, strengths, and weaknesses of Islamist terrorism. Unlike most Al Qaeda leaders, he was uneducated, on Islam or anything else. It was by sheer ruthlessness and personality that he established himself as an important figure. And the same brutality that brought him to prominence ultimately doomed him.

Jordanian journalist Abdullah Abu Rumman, who met al Zarqawi in jail, described him as “very religious.... He considered those who did not make their prayers ... as infidels. In his cell he worked on memorizing the Quran. When he talked it was in ancient Arabic. He used words from the age of the Prophet. In public he was very quiet. He seldom smiled. He was very impressive. He was very charismatic.”

As a young man he was moved by the calls to anti-Russian jihad he heard daily in the local mosques, and in the early 1990s he took his first trip to Afghanistan, but too late to fight. Upon returning to Jordan, he fell under the spell of Abu Mohammad al-Maqdissi, a Salafi Islamic scholar with whom he shared time in jail for planning terrorist attacks in the kingdom. He established a following among fellow radical inmates. Amnestied in 1999, he went back to Afghanistan where, near Herat, he set up his own training camp.

In 2002, Al-Zarqawi was the planner behind the murder of an American diplomat in Jordan, and by 2003 he had entered Iraq via Iran and joined a small Kurdish radical Islamist group, Ansar al Islam, a group with known ties to Al Qaeda that had established itself in a few villages in Iraqi Kurdistan. But just as in Afghanistan, he remained his own man, with his own small organization, Tawhid wal Jihad (Unity and Jihad).

How that group became the core of a vast recruitment and fundraising network with tentacles in the Middle East and Europe is unclear, but it certainly had something to do with Al-Zarqawi’s being among the first to engage in attacks against Coalition forces in Iraq. On the other hand, not unlike Al Qaeda in general, Al-Zarqawi demonstrated an ability to make enemies faster than he could cope with them--and that proved fatal. The precise air attack that killed Al Zarqawi suggests very accurate tactical intelligence, which most likely came from Iraqi elements--whether pro-Baghdad or just anti-Zarqawi is not clear, but the latter would not be surprising.

Thus, in Iraq, he claimed that “Our fighting against the Shia is the way to drag the Islamic nation into the battle..... I come back and again say that the only solution is for us to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shia with blow after blow until they bend to the Sunnis.... Know that those [Shia] are the most cowardly of God's creatures and that killing their leaders will only increase their weakness and cowardice, since with the death of one of their leaders the sect dies with him.”¹ As for the Americans, “These, as you know, are the most cowardly of God's creatures. They are an easy quarry, praise be to God. We ask God to enable us to kill and capture them to sow panic among those behind them.”

In November 2005 Zarqawi’s group bombed hotels in Amman, killing a wedding party of Palestinians--an action that led his own tribe to disown him and threaten to have him killed. The murder of Arab diplomats--including an Egyptian--only encouraged regional governments to help in getting rid of him. Indeed, it appears that at least the Jordanians played a role in his demise.

In general, Al-Zarqawi’s actions--those mentioned, the murder of a dozen hapless Nepalese and of Nick Berg (the latter his personal act)--tended to give the entire idea of jihad a bad name, leading to criticism from Al Qaeda’s main ideologues, Ayman Al Zawahiri and al-Maqdissi themselves.

¹ Al Qaeda Strategy for Iraqi Resistance. Believed to be authored by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in January 2004 http://www.thewednesdayreport.com/twr/Abu_Musab_al-Zarqawi-Iraq-Instructions-To-Al_Qaeda.htm.

On the other hand, Al Zarqawi provided global jihad with a prominence it was beginning to lose by the time of the invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, despite his 1994 public declaration of allegiance to Osama bin Laden, Zarqawi was an autonomous operator, and one with a more coherent and organized network than the former can claim. Thus, via Tawhid or Ansar al Islam, Zarqawi has established a recruitment and fundraising network in the Middle East and especially Europe. Although with some exaggeration, he was often seen as responsible for terrorist attacks in Sinai and Istanbul, Casablanca and Madrid (the latter is quite unlikely). Zarqawi's network was and presumably still is active in Spain and Italy, France, Belgium, the UK, Germany, Belgium, etc. The number of European-based volunteers he attracted to Iraq is in the many hundreds, with returnees alone recently estimated at some 300.

The issue--one that inevitably remains a matter of speculation--is whether Al-Zarqawi could be replaced -- or more precisely what we mean by "replacement." The network he has established is simply too extensive to disappear overnight, and the ideological motivation that brought hundreds of Muslims from Europe and the Middle East to blow themselves up in Iraq and elsewhere is still there and even intensifying. However, a few distinctions must be made.

The Iraq network has likely been decisively, if not terminally, weakened, with its founder's death coming at a time when foreign jihadists were already increasingly at odds--often violently--with local groups. That may mean an eventual decline in suicide bombings, especially against Shias, but a short-term rush of such attacks cannot be discounted. After all, the network's remnants must try to prove they are still around. Meanwhile, intra-Iraqi violence will in all likelihood change little.

Al-Zarqawi's European network, on the other hand, was less directly controlled by him. The local cell leaders always had a degree of autonomy and self-financed their operations. Thus it will be convenient and practical for them to concentrate closer to home. But that will mean, inevitably, smaller-scale attacks and less coordination across national boundaries.

Ultimately, Al Zarqawi's demise is yet another important step on what remains a very long road, and many more such steps are needed. Still, many Islamists will believe he was a martyr, and many more like him need to share his fate before Iraqis, and we, can feel at rest.

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