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Zarqawi's Death: The Way Forward in Iraq

By Brian Fishman

The U.S. airstrike that killed Al Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) Emir Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was a tremendous success for the new Iraqi government and U.S. forces in Iraq. It will undoubtedly save the lives of many innocent Iraqis. The question now is how will AQI rebuild its leadership for the future?

While answering this question it is important to remember that Zarqawi was not the fundamental cause of Iraqi insurgency. Zarqawi certainly exacerbated the deep-seated security and political problems in Iraq, but his death alone will not resolve them.

Still, Zarqawi, unlike Osama bin Laden whose importance is now mainly symbolic, remained an operational commander even after achieving worldwide notoriety. His death is important on the ground. Zarqawi's strategic role was to provide critical context for the various attacks his organization conducted. Without Zarqawi to enunciate the purpose of those attacks, they will be disconnected from any strategic rationale, which is the death knell for any terrorist organization.¹

Zarqawi's lieutenants will respond swiftly to his death by naming a successor and dramatically rallying around that individual. Nevertheless, the process of determining a successor will be fraught with conflict for AQI. The fundamental question is how independent the new Emir will be from Al Qaeda's central command. Zarqawi had charted a course independent of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; they will see his death as an opportunity to assert control over Al Qaeda's operations in Iraq. Zarqawi's most loyal followers, however, will want to continue implementing his independent course.

¹ See www.ctc.usma.edu and http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-05-08-translation_x.htm

Zarqawi's primary divergence from bin Laden and Zawahiri was on strategy toward Shi'a Muslims. Zarqawi's campaign in Iraq was built on the strategy of attacking and demonizing Iraq's Shi'a in order to provoke a violent response against Sunnis. He hoped that this response would radicalize Sunnis so they would rally to his cause.

This strategy angered bin Laden and Zawahiri, who argued that brutal violence directed at Shi'a civilians alienates the wider Muslim community.

For Al Qaeda's central leadership, Zarqawi's death is blow, but also a relief. Zarqawi's indiscriminate attacks have angered many in the Arab and Islamic world; this is a chance for bin Laden and Zawahiri to rebuild their image.

AQI's new Emir will need to provide public strategic direction on the Shi'a question immediately after taking power. So far, information is vague: a statement released in the name of the Deputy Emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi, was posted online pledging to continue the struggle after Zarqawi's death. The statement, however, fails to specifically address the Shi'a issue. There is some question as to the authenticity of these statements, as a man identified as Abd al-Rahman was killed in the strike along with Zarqawi. If alive, al-Rahman al-Iraqi is the best bet to assume leadership of AQI, but without clearly being named Emir he will likely not address the most fundamental questions facing the group.

Cutting off the head of AQI will not immediately impair its ability to cause destruction in Iraq. Local and regional commands will continue to be a constant threat to both U.S. forces and Iraqis.

In the long-run however, the question of AQI's leadership is critical. If AQI cannot rally around a new Emir, the organization will have difficulty recruiting and will fall victim to internal divisions. Cellular organizations are resilient, but they create incentives for local cells to develop local incentives and missions, particularly after the loss of the central leader.

Whether or not AQI is able to regenerate an effective leadership, the Iraqi insurgency will continue to fester. Zarqawi's group was not the heart of the Iraq insurgency; there are other Jihadi-Salafist organizations, secular nationalists, disaffected Ba'athists, and Shi'a militias. The violence will not stop because Zarqawi is dead.

Perhaps the most important question surrounding Zarqawi's death is to what degree his killing will bolster the new Iraqi government. The fundamental problem in Iraq is that the government still lacks legitimacy among all sects of Iraqi society, which is

a phenomenon entirely independent of Zarqawi. Still, Zarqawi's killing may boost the government's credibility as an arbiter of security in Iraq. If so, then June 8, 2006 will not simply be a very good day in a very nasty war; it will be a critical step toward ending it.

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