

“The Rise of Zarqawi; Is he the next bin Laden?”

Steven Brooke, *The Weekly Standard*, June 7, 2004

SINCE COLIN POWELL first brought Abu Musab al Zarqawi to the world's attention as "an associate and collaborator" of Osama bin Laden in February 2003, we have witnessed firsthand his rapid rise to the top of the terrorist heap. He has left his mark on attacks around the world, from Iraq to Turkey to Spain. The escalation of Zarqawi's profile and rhetoric may mean he is mounting a challenge to bin Laden's leadership of the global jihad.

In some respects Zarqawi's development as a holy warrior parallels bin Laden's. He fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, associated with a wide variety of terrorist groups, and ran his own network of training camps in Afghanistan. He even has a hard-core terrorist and ideologue, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, as a top lieutenant, echoing the relationship between bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri.

But despite these similarities Zarqawi has taken pains to distinguish himself from al Qaeda. Zarqawi never pledged the bayat, the oath of allegiance, to bin Laden. He has links to at least three terrorist groups and runs his own, Attawhid Wal Jihad (Unity and Jihad), or simply al Tawhid. Shadi Abdallah, a Jordanian terrorist imprisoned in Germany, told his German interrogators in 2002 that Zarqawi was "against al Qaeda."

The main disagreement between bin Laden and Zarqawi seems to be over strategy. While al Qaeda targets the "far enemy," the United States, Zarqawi focuses his rage on "near enemies" such as Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Zarqawi's choice is not just strategic; it is personal. A Jordanian of Palestinian heritage, he spent seven years in a Jordanian prison he describes as the "Arabs' Guantanamo" for plotting to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy.

But Iraq has become the central theater for Zarqawi's development as a terrorist. In January 2004 Iraqi Kurds captured a letter from Zarqawi to bin Laden proposing closer ties between their organizations. Zarqawi offered bin Laden a chance to join him in the gathering jihad, attaining victory through a sectarian war, by "drag[ging] the Shia into the battle."

Bin Laden appears to have rejected Zarqawi's petition, possibly because of a disagreement over the efficacy of targeting a "near enemy," or perhaps over the wisdom of targeting the Shia and provoking an Islamic civil war. Bin Laden favors tactical cooperation with Shia militant groups while Zarqawi's wrath towards the Shia, whose "damage is worse and more destructive to the [Islamic] nation than the Americans," is extreme.

To Zarqawi, waging (and winning) a jihad in Iraq is central because "if jihad fails in Iraq, the [Muslim] nation will never rise again." This adamant belief in the necessity of victory in Iraq, coupled with a lack of action on bin Laden's part, seems to have spurred Zarqawi's bid for preeminence.

In his letter to bin Laden, Zarqawi hinted that he might seek a higher profile if rebuffed. "What has prevented us from going public," he wrote, "is that we have been waiting until we have weight on the ground and finish preparing integrated structures capable of bearing the consequences of going public." By April, Zarqawi was claiming post facto credit for a laundry list of attacks: "We have cut off their head and ripped their bodies in many areas; the United Nations in Baghdad, coalition forces in Karbala, the Italians in Nasiriyah, the American forces on the

Khalidiyyah Bridge, American intelligence in Al-Shaheen Hotel, the CIA in Al-Rashid Hotel and the Polish forces in Al-Hillah."

When a massive plot to murder as many as 80,000 people with poison gas was foiled in Jordan this past April, officials quickly and publicly fingered Zarqawi. Zarqawi shot back with a communiqué of his own a few days later stating: "Yes our plan was to destroy the Intelligence System completely." But "the claim of the chemical bomb that would kill thousands is absolutely a lie." He followed this up at the end of April with a statement claiming responsibility for an April 24 suicide boat attack on a Basra terminal that killed three sailors. On May 2 he issued a communiqué claiming two suicide attacks the week before. May 6 saw another claim, this time for a devastating car bomb in central Baghdad. On May 17 Zarqawi claimed credit for the assassination of Ezzedine Salim, a Shia member of the Iraqi Governing Council. For someone who used to be known for never claiming his attacks, this turnaround is conspicuous.

As Zarqawi has begun to trumpet his attacks, his rhetoric has also become inspirational, aiming to mobilize Muslims to rally behind his group, which he sees as "the spearhead, the enabling vanguard, and the bridge on which the [Islamic] nation crosses over to the victory that is promised and the tomorrow to which we aspire." His appeal for recruits has increasingly lost subtlety. In his statement before he decapitated Nicholas Berg, a Jewish-American contractor, Zarqawi vents: "Is there any excuse left to sit idly by? How can a free Muslim sleep soundly while Islam is being slaughtered, its honor bleeding?" His communiqué claiming the May 6 car bomb attack was even more explicit: "As we bless this operation...we call upon the Muslim youth everywhere to carry on and follow this path of glory, pride, dignity, heroism, manliness, jihad, and martyrdom." Zarqawi claimed that the assassination of the head of the Iraqi Governing Council "announces to Muslims everywhere that the mujahedeen, with their people in Iraq, are continuing and determined to lift the humiliation from our nation."

In addition to attracting the attention of U.S. authorities, who are considering raising the reward for Zarqawi from \$10 million to \$25 million, (equal to bin Laden himself), Zarqawi's efforts are beginning to draw notice among the universe of Sunni militants. Last month the cell leader of the plot to detonate chemical weapons in Jordan admitted that he had "pledged allegiance to Abu Musab al Zarqawi." The SITE Institute, a counterterrorism research group in Washington, uncovered a declaration of unification between Zarqawi's Attawhid Wal Jihad group and an Iraqi militant band, the Salafist Mujahid Group. The two groups issued a joint statement in which they claimed: "the heroes of the Mujahid Salafist Jamaa [group] and their brothers in Attawhid Wal Jihad convened and embraced their hearts and souls, cordially united their ranks, and acknowledged Abu Musab al Zarqawi as their leader, under the group of Attawhid Wal Jihad." (Translations of several recent Zarqawi communiqués can be found at www.siteinstitute.org.)

In the formative years of al Qaeda, groups and militants flocked to bin Laden because they were inspired by his actions and rhetoric. Now Zarqawi is drawing militants from around the world by offering an alternative to al Qaeda. In many respects this is typical of revolutionary organizations, which fracture as they mature. But it remains to be seen how bin Laden will deal with this motivated and capable challenger.

Steven Brooke is a program assistant at the Nixon Center.