

“Who Is Abu Zarqawi?; What we know about the terrorist leader who murdered Nicholas Berg”

Robert S. Leiken & Steven Brooke, *The Weekly Standard* May 24, 2004.

WHO KILLED NICHOLAS BERG? His grief-stricken family blames the U.S. government for the appalling videotaped beheading of their son in Iraq. A more fitting object of outrage is the executioner. For the terrorist who claims credit for the killing of the Jewish-American civilian is no walk-on, no lackey or even lieutenant of Osama bin Laden. Instead, he is an independent operator with a long history in global jihad--sometimes coordinated with al Qaeda, sometimes not--who may be challenging bin Laden for the leadership of global Sunni terrorism.

Abu Musab al Zarqawi is hot right now. He masterminded not only Berg's murder but also the Madrid carnage on March 11, the bombardment of Shia worshippers in Iraq the same month, and the April 24 suicide attack on the port of Basra. But he is far from a newcomer to slaughter. Well before 9/11, he had already concocted a plot to kill Israeli and American tourists in Jordan. His label is on terrorist groups and attacks on four continents.

Zarqawi was first thrust into the global media spotlight in February 2003, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when Secretary of State Colin Powell at the U.N. called him an "associate and collaborator" of bin Laden and part of a "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network." Zarqawi, however, is not Osama's man, and still less was he Saddam's.

Zarqawi was born Ahmed al-Khalayleh to a Palestinian-Jordanian family in 1966 and grew up in a shabby two-story dwelling in a dusty mining town 17 miles north of Amman. The town was called Zarqa--hence the nom de guerre. But while we know the details of bin Laden's privileged youth, we know next to nothing about Zarqawi's impoverished early years. His parents are dead, and few near relatives have been uncovered by the press. His passport picture is on a U.S. poster offering a \$10 million reward for him, but his height and weight are listed as "unknown." Nor do we know what he studied in school; only that he dropped out of high school and locals say he was "pious." Until recently, the mystery man rarely claimed credit for his terrorist exploits. U.S. intelligence once thought he'd been injured in the American assault on Afghanistan and had taken refuge in northern Iraq, later traveling to Saddam's Baghdad to have his leg amputated; now they're not so sure.

We do know that like thousands of Muslim youths he rallied to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and gained renown as a fighter. Returning to Jordan after the Soviet withdrawal, he may have joined the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which merged with al Qaeda in 1998. While in Jordan he also associated with Hizb ut Tahrir, an angry, anti-Semitic conclave devoted to the restoration of Islamic rule. Released in 1997 after five years in a Jordanian prison for plotting to replace the monarchy with an Islamic state, Zarqawi fled to Europe. He returned to Afghanistan in 2000 and built his own network of training

camps near Herat, seizing control of the clandestine routes between Iran and Afghanistan.

In his camps, Zarqawi dispensed his specialized knowledge of chemical weapons and poisons to loyal followers, who then dispersed to the Middle East and Europe. The week of April 19, Jordanian police broke up a Zarqawi-financed and orchestrated plot they estimate would have detonated 20 tons of chemicals and released a cloud of poisonous gas into central Amman. The blast could have killed some 80,000 civilians and destroyed the U.S. embassy and Jordanian intelligence headquarters. In a videotaped confession shown on Jordanian TV, the head of the cell admitted, "I took explosives courses, poisons high level, then I pledged allegiance to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, to obey him without any questioning."

ABU ZARQAWI knows no limits and many continents. Investigating the Hamburg cell after September 11, German authorities came across another terrorist group called al-Tawhid (unity), made up mainly of Palestinian militants trained in Zarqawi's Afghan camps. Tawhid operatives told investigators they got their start in Europe selling stolen and forged documents to militants traveling between the Middle East and Western Europe.

With the outbreak of war in Iraq, Tawhid converted its alien-smuggling and document-forgery ring into a two-way underground railroad between Western Europe and the Middle East. According to European press reports, networks in Spain, Italy, and Germany send recruits into Iraq via Syria. U.S. military officials in Iraq now blame the most heinous terrorist attacks on "the Zarqawi network." But Zarqawi's alien-smuggling system also dispatches Middle Eastern jihadis into Europe via Spain, Turkey, Italy, and Greece. In November 2003, Italian wiretaps recorded two Tawhid operatives speaking of "the jihad part" and its "battalion of 25-26 units" of suicide bombers.

If Zarqawi's underground railroad demonstrates the terrorist uses of illegal immigration, the investigation into the Madrid bombings reveals new connections to Zarqawi every week. Zarqawi's lieutenant, a 36-year-old Moroccan named Amer el Azizi, planned the Madrid terror and is the living link between al Qaeda, the Zarqawi network, and the Moroccan immigrant cell that set the Madrid bombs. Azizi also organized and presided over the 2001 meeting in Spain where Mohammed Atta and al Qaeda leaders put the finishing touches on the September 11 plan.

Azizi fled Spain in November 2001 as Spanish authorities dismantled the al Qaeda logistics cell. He jetted to Afghanistan via Iran, where Zarqawi's cross-border networks helped him elude the coalition. While falling in with Zarqawi, Azizi kept an eye on Spain and his Moroccan colleagues, who managed to set off bombs in Casablanca in May 2003. Shortly before the Madrid 3/11 train bombings, Azizi left Iran via Turkey and slipped into Spain to witness the carnage firsthand. He is still at large.

PROBABLY THE MURKIEST and most intriguing feature of this man of many mysteries is the question of Zarqawi's relations with Osama bin Laden. Though he met with bin Laden in Afghanistan several times, the Jordanian never joined al Qaeda.

Militants have explained that Tawhid was "especially for Jordanians who did not want to join al Qaeda." A confessed Tawhid member even told his interrogators that Zarqawi was "against al Qaeda." Shortly after 9/11, a fleeing Ramzi bin al-Shibh, one of the main plotters of the attacks, appealed to Tawhid operatives for a forged visa. He could not come up with ready cash. Told that he did not belong to Tawhid, he was sent packing and eventually into the arms of the Americans.

Zarqawi and bin Laden also disagree over strategy. Zarqawi allegedly constructed his Tawhid network primarily to target Jews and Jordan. This choice reflected both Zarqawi's Palestinian heritage and his dissent from bin Laden's strategy of focusing on the "far enemy"--the United States. In an audiotape released after the recent foiled gas attack in Amman, an individual claiming to be Zarqawi argued that the Jordanian Intelligence Services building was indeed the target, although no chemical attack was planned. Rather, he stated menacingly, "God knows, if we did possess [a chemical bomb], we wouldn't hesitate one second to use it to hit Israeli cities such as Eilat and Tel Aviv."

The Tawhid cell uncovered in Hamburg after 9/11 scouted Jewish targets, including businesses and synagogues. Zarqawi's operatives have been implicated in an attack on a Mombassa hotel frequented by Israeli tourists and an attempt to shoot down an Israeli jetliner. He is also suspected to have played a role in the Casablanca bombings of a Jewish community center and a Spanish social club. In February 2002, a Jordanian court sentenced him in absentia to 15 years' hard labor for his involvement in a failed plot to kill American and Israeli tourists at the turn of the millennium, a scheme coordinated with Abu Zubaydah, a top lieutenant of bin Laden. And another Jordanian court sentenced him, again in absentia, to death for the assassination of U.S. diplomat Laurence Foley. Zarqawi is also the prime suspect in the August 2003 truck bombing of the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad.

Zarqawi has been associated with other groups besides Tawhid. Most notorious is Ansar al Islam, a largely Kurdish organization operating out of Northern Iraq, which U.S. officials have linked to al Qaeda. Before the war, Ansar al Islam ran chemical warfare camps in northern Iraq. Last year British counterterrorist investigators traced poisonous ricin found in Manchester to those camps. Zarqawi has been linked with two less-known al Qaeda splinter groups, Beyyiat el-Imam, implicated in attacks in Israel as well as the November 2003 attack on a synagogue in Turkey, and Jund al-Shams, a Syrian-Jordanian group blamed by Jordanian authorities for the assassination of Foley. Zarqawi has also been linked to Chechen jihadis, and Indian intelligence says he belongs to Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a Pakistani Sunni group responsible for slaying hundreds of Shias in South Asia.

The slaughter of Shias touches on another Zarqawi beef with bin Laden. While both men follow the strict code of Salafi Islam, which reckons Shias as apostates, bin Laden prides himself on being a unifying figure and has made tactical alliances with Shia groups, meeting several times with Shia militants. Zarqawi, by contrast, favors butchering Shias, calling them "the most evil of mankind . . . the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom." American military officials hold

Zarqawi responsible not only for assassinating Shia religious leaders in Iraq, but also for the multiple truck bombings of a Shia religious festival this past March, which killed 143 worshippers.

But though bin Laden and Zarqawi differ on strategy, Zarqawi too cloaks his plans for mass murder in the language of the religious zealot. To Zarqawi, "religion is more precious than anything and has priority over lives, wealth, and children." He considers Iraq ideal for jihad especially because "it is a stone's throw from the lands of the two Holy Precincts [Saudi Arabia] and the al Aqsa [mosque, in Jerusalem]. We know from God's religion that the true, decisive battle between infidelity and Islam is in this land [Greater Syria and its surroundings]. . . ." On the tape of the beheading of Nick Berg, entitled "Sheikh Abu Musab Zarqawi executes an American with his own hands and promises Bush more," Zarqawi rages, "Where is the compassion, where is the anger for God's religion, and where is the protection for Muslims' pride in the crusaders' jails? . . . The pride of all Muslim men and women in Abu Ghraib and other jails is worth blood and souls."

The CIA has verified that Zarqawi himself spoke on the tape and personally beheaded Berg. Similarly, the videotaped beheading of Daniel Pearl of the Wall Street Journal in February 2002 was carried out directly by another jihadi leader, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The latter, like Zarqawi, never swore allegiance to bin Laden. In this bloodthirsty crowd, it appears that slitting the throat of an American Jew wins laurels.

IN JANUARY 2004, Iraqi Kurds captured a message from Zarqawi in Iraq to bin Laden. Zarqawi offered bin Laden a chance to expand al Qaeda's role in Iraq. Victory, Zarqawi instructed, meant fomenting sectarian war between Shiites and Sunnis. There are no indications that bin Laden responded, and there are now signs of cooperation between some Iraqi Shia and Sunni militants. Are bin Laden and Zarqawi running competing terrorist organizations in Iraq?

Zarqawi's letter is addressed to a colleague or even a potential competitor rather than to one he regards as his sheikh or emir. He offers darkly, "We do not see ourselves as fit to challenge you." Zarqawi gives bin Laden two choices: "If you agree with us . . . we will be your readied soldiers, working under your banner, complying with your orders, and indeed swearing fealty to you publicly and in the news media. . . . If things appear otherwise to you, we are brothers, and the disagreement will not spoil [our] friendship."

Zarqawi exemplifies Sunni terrorism after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, what some call "al Qaeda 2.0." The Western counteroffensive decimated al Qaeda's leadership, stripped the organization of safe havens and training camps, and disrupted its command and control. Former al Qaeda subsidiaries became franchises, receiving inspiration from bin Laden's occasional messages but operating independently. Historically speaking, the dynamic of revolutionary movements favors the most radical faction--the Jacobins, not the Girondists, the Bolsheviks, not the Mensheviks. If this dynamic prevails in contemporary Sunni terrorism, Abu Musab al Zarqawi represents the future.

*Robert S. Leiken, author of *Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security after 9/11*, is the director of the Immigration and National Security Program at the Nixon Center. Steven Brooke is a program assistant at the Nixon Center.*