



Grave Situation

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Articles & Testimony

Zarqawi's death presents a dilemma for the Bush administration: What to do with his body? The corpse of the terrorist leader is currently under guard in Baghdad, but Zarqawi's family in his home country of Jordan is demanding the return of his remains. The obvious move would be to send Zarqawi's body back to Jordan—either to his family or to the Amman government—thereby making America appear magnanimous in the eyes of the world. But, in this case, the obvious move is also the wrong one.

Handing Zarqawi's remains directly to his relatives would yield a predictably undesirable result: a public funeral that could very well serve to burnish—rather than extinguish—the arch-terrorist's legend. Sending his body to the Amman government instead—a much more likely scenario—would almost certainly lead to the same unfortunate outcome. True, members of King Abdullah's government and many Jordanians loathe Zarqawi, who was responsible for terrorist attacks on their country's soil. But Jordan is also home to a minority of Islamist extremists and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi expatriates—a combustible mix of elements sympathetic to the anti-American insurgency. If the Amman government receives custody of Zarqawi's corpse, these groups—led by his family—will exert enormous pressure to allow a public funeral. If Abdullah refuses, he would open himself to criticism at home, and perhaps invite terrorist reprisals as well. For these reasons, he would almost certainly allow a public funeral to go forward.

What would a Zarqawi funeral look like? His family has said he deserves to be laid to rest as a martyr, meaning his funeral would be a jubilant affair drawing thousands—maybe more—to celebrate his passage into paradise. (Much like the 2004 burials of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah and Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Gaza.) Al Jazeera and other satellite channels are sure to broadcast images of Zarqawi's followers paying homage to him. This would provide a source of comfort and encouragement to radicals and likely inspire similar fetes in other Muslim countries. The scenes would circulate on the Internet for months, resulting in a sustained public relations victory for Al Qaeda. In addition, a celebration-cum-burial could deepen existing divisions—and maybe provoke violence—in Jordan, where Zarqawi is alternately hated and revered.

Moreover, permitting Zarqawi to have a funeral would mean that he would be laid to rest in a marked grave that would probably become a shrine for radicals. Over the years, the legitimization provided by a public grave would help to feed hero-worship surrounding Zarqawi, establishing his personal saga as a source of inspiration to future generations of would-be terrorists.

Fortunately, there is a better option: burying Zarqawi in an unmarked grave somewhere in Iraq. This would provoke a certain amount of international criticism, but that seems an acceptable price to pay to avoid a full-blown public funeral in Jordan.

The case for burying Zarqawi's body in an unmarked grave is, first and foremost, strategic: For one thing, it is

imperative that America do everything in its power to stunt the growth of Zarqawi's mystique and hinder his exaltation; for another, doing so would spare our allies in the Jordanian government a major headache (and indeed, Jordanian officials have made clear that they do not want the corpse). But at a moral level, it is also worth pointing out that such a burial would leave Zarqawi no worse off than plenty of his victims. After all, the bodies of many of those he bombed and beheaded were never found.

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