

The Death of Zarqawi:

Organizational and Operational Implications for the Insurgency

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Brief Analysis

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the most wanted man in the country, died violently and fittingly in a coalition airstrike June 7. His death represents a case of justice delayed, but justice done, and constitutes an important victory for the coalition and the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, Zarqawi's demise is likely a setback rather than a decisive turning point for the insurgency, and observers need to be conservative in their assessment of the effects.

Zarqawi and the Insurgency

Zarqawi was the leader of the most extreme element of the terrorist wing of the insurgency. AQI came to symbolize the willingness and ability of some insurgents to carry out any action, regardless of its cost in human life, to advance their cause. Increasingly this had come to mean attacks on the Shiite population aimed at increasing sectarian conflict and ultimately precipitating a civil war. These objectives were closely identified with Zarqawi himself, and represented a source of friction with other elements of the insurgency.

Zarqawi also served as a media-savvy "drummer" for the jihadist elements of the insurgency, recruiting likeminded individuals within and outside of Iraq and mobilizing support for his cause. His public profile, enhanced by the U.S. focus on him, and his ability to elude capture contributed to his image as a successful jihadist leader and organizer.

The Jordanian-born Zarqawi also brought experience as an underground operative and connections to the broader Islamic terrorist movement to the struggle in Iraq. The most wanted man in Iraq since Saddam's arrest in December 2003, he eluded capture and built an effective organization in the face of sustained coalition efforts to eliminate him and dismantle his organization.

Zarqawi also served as a facilitator and coordinator of operations, with local "emirs" responsible for tactical operations. AQI and other insurgent organizations associated with it in the Mujahedin Shura Council have served as the shock troops of the insurgency, killing Iraqis with abandon in an effort to foment civil war and undermine the ability of the Iraqi government to rule. They have been the principal agents of the insurgency's counterstability line of operations and major participants in its countercollaboration campaign.

Not all of Zarqawi's roles have been positive from the standpoint of the insurgents. AQI operations against civilians have created some tensions and even clashes within the insurgency itself and between his organization and some elements of the Sunni population. At the time of Zarqawi's death, these tensions were playing out in Anbar and Salahuddin provinces. Even in this case, Zarqawi's actions had some positive effect for the insurgency by representing an element that could be denied by more "moderate" or nationalist insurgents while still allowing them to benefit from the effects of his actions.

An Adaptive Insurgent Organization

The changing political and military landscape in Iraq has forced all insurgent groups there to adapt or risk organizational destruction. Under Zarqawi, AQI has proven capable of replacing substantial losses to coalition operations of leadership at all levels of the organization, accommodating other insurgent elements, incorporating a greater Iraqi component, and contesting for power in Anbar province with disaffected Sunni tribal elements. More recently it has apparently expanded operations in Diyala province, a prime fault line for sectarian violence. Diyala is on its way to becoming a major battleground between the insurgents and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and it is no accident that Zarqawi was killed in this province. It is unclear how much of this adaptive quality reflected Zarqawi's personal influence. If it has become a trait of AQI, it will assist the organization in dealing with his death.

An important issue in determining the ability of the organization to recover from the attack is who died with him. Early reports are that a number of Zarqawi's advisors and senior lieutenants were also killed. If true, this suggests that it will be more difficult for the organization to respond, especially in the near term.

Near Term Effects

The probable near term effects of Zarqawi's death will be proportionate to his role in the insurgency and the ability of his organization to adapt to his loss. There is likely to be a period of disruption of AQI activity. Until a senior leadership is reestablished, there will probably be a decline in the number and quality of attacks as the organization sorts out the consequences, insures security for remaining leaders, reestablishes direction, and decides how to respond. Coordination among local leaders is also likely to be more difficult. These tasks will be more challenging if other important leaders were killed as well. Because of Zarqawi's close identification with sectarian violence and attacks on civilians, some of the energy may go out of these kinds of actions. Surviving AQI leadership is likely to feel more vulnerable, and to be looking for support from other elements of the insurgency, rather than in pursuing controversial and divisive tactics.

While the remaining AQI leaders may act cohesively to produce a new head, there is potential for a leadership struggle within the organization between or among the surviving Iraqi leadership and foreign leadership elements. The commander of coalition forces in Iraq, Gen. George W. Casey, alluded in his statement on the raid to tips from within the AQI network, suggesting some sort of leadership contest may already have been underway (or simply that elements of the organization believed that Zarqawi had become a liability). There is also the possibility of the organization devolving into a more decentralized form, with local emirs achieving more prominence. A third possibility is that other elements of the insurgency will absorb or otherwise take over AQI elements. Much will depend on how quickly the extant leadership can assert itself.

At some point, there will be retaliation, with senior coalition and Iraqi leaders likely targets. Attacks outside Iraq, especially in Jordan, are another probable avenue for retaliation.

A Longer View

For the longer term, one development to watch for would be how the rest of the insurgency reacts. Whether Zarqawi's death is mourned, welcomed, or ignored, and by whom within the insurgency, will be important in gauging the strength of the insurgency's terrorist wing. Zarqawi may have been broadly useful to the insurgents, but

he was probably loved by only a few. Lasting changes in operational patterns will be of interest, especially if there is a decline in counterstability operations. This would suggest that Zarqawi's death had long term operational impacts on the situation, not just transitory effects. In addition, the outcome of the succession process, and even whether a clear successor emerges, should reveal much about the nature, health, and prospects for AQI.

It will be important to see how Zarqawi's death affects the "violence system" in Iraq. His organization and he himself have been important components of this system, propelling violence to higher levels and raising the prospects for civil war. If and how AQI adapts its strategy and operations in Zarqawi's absence, or if another organization emerges to replace it in this role, will help determine the level of violence in Iraq.

Finally, the coalition has removed its primary bogeyman in Iraq. Who or what emerges to replace him as a policy, intelligence, and operational target will be important.

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