

Zarqawi's 'Total War' on Iraqi Shiites Exposes a Divide among Sunni Jihadists

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Brief Analysis

On November 2, Iraq's Defense Ministry appealed to junior officers from Saddam Hussein's disbanded army to return to service. The decision to include these soldiers is part of an ongoing strategy to minimize support for terrorism by reintegrating Sunnis into the political fabric of the new Iraq. This latest effort comes as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group steps up targeting of Shiite civilians in an effort to spark retaliatory attacks against Sunnis. But as Zarqawi's attacks on Shiites exact growing toll among civilians, his tactics may be causing a divide within the ranks of the resistance.

Al-Qaeda's Strategy of Cooperation

Groups linked to al-Qaeda have a history of perpetrating isolated attacks against Shiite targets. In 1988, Osama bin Laden himself led a group of Taliban fighters to suppress a Shiite revolt in Gilgit, Pakistan, which resulted in the massacre of several hundred Shiite civilians. Sunni and Shiite groups in Pakistan continue to target each other in tit-for-tat sectarian attacks, but al-Qaeda-linked Sunni groups exact by far the higher death toll.

However, since the early 1990s, bin Laden has urged tactical and logistical cooperation among like-minded Shiite and Sunni groups. Iran and Hizballah have frequently assisted al-Qaeda operatives. The two groups have overlapping contacts in South America, Africa, and the Middle East, and have cooperated in fundraising and training. Iran has provided financial support to al-Qaeda operatives; facilitated the travel of several of the September 11 hijackers; provided safe haven to al-Qaeda operatives, including bin Laden's son Saad; and may have assisted in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Despite his anti-Shiite rhetoric and attack campaign, Zarqawi has also availed himself of Iranian support. He has traveled through Iran essentially unmolested, key leaders of his group sought refuge in Iran during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and senior military and intelligence officials in the United States and Britain believe that Iran provides explosives and other support for Zarqawi's terrorist network.

Zarqawi Breaks with al-Qaeda

In February 2004, the State Department published a letter Zarqawi wrote to the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan articulating his plan to attack Shiites in Iraq with the aim of igniting sectarian conflict. Zarqawi was certain the United States would withdraw quickly from Iraq, but wrote that Shiite militia members already dominated the New Iraqi Army, putting his group on the defensive. The situation was dire enough, in Zarqawi's analysis, that he was willing to risk a strategic break with bin Laden and Zawahiri. He wrote, "If you agree with us on [targeting Shiites] we

will be your readied soldiers. If things appear otherwise to you, we are brothers, and the disagreement will not spoil our friendship." In December 2004, bin Laden issued an audio statement recognizing Zarqawi as a key al-Qaeda leader.

One of the most brutal attacks on the Shiite community in Iraq followed closely on the publication of Zarqawi's February 2004 letter. On March 2, 2004, Zarqawi's group staged a series of bomb attacks on Shiites celebrating the Ashura holiday, killing at least 185 people. Since then, Zarqawi's group has perpetrated a campaign of assassinations, kidnappings, and bomb attacks against Shiite civilians, including a suicide attack on a Shiite mosque in July that killed ninety-eight people and a suicide truck bomb attack targeting Shiite workers in August which killed more than one hundred.

On September 14 Zarqawi issued an audiotape declaring "total war" on Iraq's Shiite population, announcing ex post facto a strategy he began to enact more than a year earlier. Though Zarqawi justifies targeting Shiite civilians on religious grounds, arguing that they are apostates, politics, not religion, motivates his assault on the Shiite community. He posted his declaration of war soon after the September counterterrorist raids on Tal Afar, in which 5000 troops from the New Iraqi Army's Third Division killed 156 terrorists and captured 246 others. It is almost impossible to obtain accurate information about the ethnic and religious composition of Iraq's army, but Iraq's Shiite majority and the terrorists' efforts to discourage Sunni enlistment means that Shiite soldiers almost certainly led the Tal Afar offensive. To Zarqawi, the raids must have confirmed his suspicion, articulated in his 2004 letter, that the Shiites had seized the strategic initiative and now dominated the security situation in Iraq. This helps explain why he broadened his group's mandate from attacking Shiites involved in direct assistance to the U.S. occupation to targeting Shiites generally in a "total" conflict.

Zarqawi's Tactics Criticized

Zarqawi's escalating campaign against Shiites has concerned Sunni resistance leaders who believe that attacks on Muslim civilians undermine much needed public support for the insurgency.

The most publicized criticism came from Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's putative second in command. In October, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a letter Zawahiri wrote to Zarqawi in June 2005, in which he urged Zarqawi to limit attacks against Muslim civilians. Such attacks, Zawahiri wrote, "won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it." Zawahiri's criticism received the most media attention, but other proresistance Sunni leaders have also questioned Zarqawi's unusually brutal methods. This debate over Zarqawi's targeting and methodology suggests that divisions among proresistance Sunnis may be deeper, and alienation among the public more widespread, than Zawahiri's letter acknowledged.

Zarqawi's Jordanian mentor Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi was among the original critics of Zarqawi's tactics in Iraq. Maqdisi first questioned Zarqawi's targeting of Shiite civilians in a statement posted on his website (www.almaqdese.com) in July 2004, and again in media interviews in July 2005. Maqdisi criticized Zarqawi on both religious and political grounds. Maqdisi rejected Zarqawi's classification of Shiites as nonbelievers, telling Al-Jazeera that he did not consider ordinary Shiites as non-Muslims, and therefore it was "forbidden to equate the ordinary Shiite with the American in warfare." Maqdisi then made the political argument, that attacking civilians and places of worship tarnished the reputation of the resistance. Maqdisi's political argument against targeting Muslim civilians was echoed by Numan bin Uthman, a former al-Qaeda fighter in Afghanistan. He told Al-Hayat in November 2004 that Zarqawi's operations "damage [the reputation] of Islam," and compared Zarqawi's methods with those of the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria -- a group bin Laden ultimately repudiated because of its vicious attacks against Algerian civilians.

Following Zarqawi's September declaration of war on the Shiite community, other proresistance Sunni groups

condemned his tactics. One representative of an Iraqi Salafist group, Sheikh Zakariyah Muhammad Isa al-Tamimi of the Higher Committee for Dawa, Guidance, and Fatwa, noted that Zarqawi lacked the religious qualifications to interpret Islamic law. However, like Zawahiri, most critics question Zarqawi's approach from a political, rather than a religious, standpoint. In Iraq, the Association of Muslim Scholars and several insurgent groups, including the Islamic Army in Iraq, issued public statements rejecting the targeting of Shiites because the attacks "damage the image of the jihad [and] jeopardize the success of the resistance." Critics from abroad include the mufti of Saudi Arabia, who said in a statement published by Al-Hayat that the effort to ignite a sectarian conflict in Iraq "fulfills the goals of the enemies who plot against Muslims."

Conclusion

Zarqawi's communications in response to criticism indicate that he will not change his tactics. But as the Bush administration revamps its public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East, the divide in the proresistance Sunni community provides an opportunity to emphasize the common interest in limiting terrorism. If some of the most radical elements of the resistance movement object to the terrorists' tactics, disapproval among the public is likely to become even more widespread. President George W. Bush has said before that Muslims suffer the most from terrorism in the Middle East, but ongoing debate in jihadist circles suggests that the time may finally be ripe for this point to take root with the target audience.

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