

Zarqawi's Jordanian Agenda

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Articles & Testimony

Though most famous for funding and organizing suicide bombings and beheadings in Iraq, Ahmad Fadil Nazal al-Khalaylah -- aka Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- has long assumed a leading role in terrorist operations in other countries, including his native Jordan.

An East Banker and a member of the Bani Hassan tribe (one of the largest in Jordan), Zarqawi is often denigrated as a "thug" by fellow Jordanians [1]. Even after spending several years in Afghanistan in his early twenties, Zarqawi remained little more than a violent criminal until he met Abu Mohammed Maqdisi, a radical Palestinian cleric and figurehead of the militant Bayat al-Imam network in Jordan. In 1999, King Abdullah assumed the throne and issued a general amnesty in which Zarqawi was freed. As of July 2004, Maqdisi remained in a Jordanian prison, convicted of trying to overthrow the government and establishing an Islamic caliphate.

After his release, Zarqawi moved to Pakistan, and then Afghanistan where he ran a training camp near Herat. After 9/11, he settled in northern Iraq where he met up with Jordanians from his hometown of Zarqa and from the Suwaqa prison and established a training camp tied to Ansar al-Islam. Zarqawi has been affiliated with several groups, which over time have coalesced into one large network. These include Jund al-Shams, Bayat al-Imam, Ansar al-Islam, al-Tawhid, Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, and most recently, al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (Iraq).

At the turn of the millennium, Zarqawi was involved in a plot to target hotels frequented by Jewish and American tourists in Amman during millennial celebrations. Zarqawi is believed to be behind the failed assassination attempt in February 2002 of Ali Bourjaq, a Jordanian secret-police official. In October 2002, Zarqawi planned and facilitated the assassination of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley in Amman. According to the indictment of captured assassin, Salem Said Bin Sewid, Zarqawi snuck into Jordan to personally recruit members of the cell. In April 2004, Zarqawi was convicted for his role in the plot along with Libyan and Jordanian attackers and four others.

One of Zarqawi's most successful operations targeting Jordanian interests was the bombing of the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad in August 2003 -- an attack which killed at least fourteen people. While Jordanian officials first maintained both in public statements and in an interview with the author that Ahmed Chalabi or elements tied to him were responsible for the attack, Jordanian authorities now believe Zarqawi was behind this plot. [2]

The most spectacular of Zarqawi's plots was foiled, but would have been considered a mega-terror attack had it not

been. In April 2004, Jordanian officials announced they had thwarted a major plot to attack various locations in Amman, targeting Jordanians and Americans. Zarqawi personally recruited the cell's leader, Azmi Al Jayousi, a Jordanian of Palestinian origin, along with several other Jordanians and Syrians. The cell's targets included the Jordanian General Intelligence Department (GID) Headquarters, the Prime Ministry, and the U.S. Embassy in Amman. Hussein Sharif, one of the operatives recruited by Jayousi, confessed that Jayousi told him that the aim of the attack was to execute an operation that would "strike at Jordan and the Hashemites, a war against the crusaders and infidels."

The operation as planned was audacious not only in its targets, but in the scale of the intended attack. Jordanian authorities maintain that the twenty tons of explosives intended for the multiple coordinated attacks contained more than ninety-two chemicals and would have resulted not only in a large explosion but a chemical cloud. Based on an analysis of the explosives that were confiscated, Jordanian experts maintain that the bomb had the potential to injure 160,000 people. [3]

Just as disconcerting is the fact that this attack was largely funded and facilitated by a logistical support network operating out of Jordan and Syria. For example, Haithem Omar Ibrahim, a Syrian member of the Zarqawi network, entered Jordan via Iraq and arranged safe houses for the plotters where they lived for several months while preparing the planned mega attack. During this time, the cell manufactured 20 tons of explosives and organized the logistics of the attacks.

Throughout, Jayousi remained in contact with Zarqawi by messengers, most of whom traveled between Jordan and Iraq through Syria. One of Zarqawi's most prominent aides, a Syrian named Suleiman Khaled Darwish, supervised this communications channel, arranging for couriers to deliver messages, forged passports and identity cards. Jordanian intelligence further discovered that Zarqawi's network would often send couriers with messages written in invisible ink on paper currency carried in their wallets. [4] Passing messages on bills of small denominations raised no alarms since anyone passing through the border would be expected to have a small amount of cash on their person. Zarqawi also used these couriers to send large amounts of money -- presumed to have been raised in Europe and the Persian Gulf states -- to fund the operation. According to Jayousi, Zarqawi "started sending me money through messengers, payments of ten and fifteen thousand, until I had a total of about \$170 thousand; I bought a large quantity of the material with that money."

The Jayousi plot was not the only time messengers and money were smuggled across the Syrian-Jordanian border. Facilitated by several key aides residing in the country, Zarqawi has made Syria a springboard for his activities both in Iraq and Jordan. Already in April 2003 Italian prosecutors warned that "Syria has functioned as a hub for an al-Qaeda network" linked to Zarqawi. The Italian investigation revealed that Zarqawi operatives in Europe were acting at the instruction of superiors in and around Damascus and Aleppo, including "Mullah Fuad" (described as the "gatekeeper in Syria for volunteers intent on reaching Iraq"), "Abdullah," and "Abderrazak."

According to Jordanian intelligence, despite Zarqawi's connections to al-Qaeda, his group has developed its own networks of operatives and sources of funding and is not dependent on any external organization. Couriers deliver money collected in Europe and Persian Gulf states, while cars are bought in Jordan and sold or traded in Iraq. [5] Such was the case with Bilal al-Hiyari, a Jordanian businessman sentenced in October 2004 to six months in jail by Jordan's military court for raising funds to finance Zarqawi's attacks in Iraq and Jordan. According to the indictment, in August 2003 al-Hiyari allegedly raised approximately \$3,000 to buy a German-made Opel car that was sent to Zarqawi in Iraq. Jordanian intelligence officials explained that such schemes allow Zarqawi to move funds from Jordan and other countries into Iraq, thus avoiding the risk of messengers being caught at the border with large sums of money. [6]

Zarqawi's ambitions clearly extend beyond Iraq, and the implications for Jordan are particularly chilling. Beyond

Zarqawi's demonstrated interest in targeting fellow Jordanians, he and his operatives have been definitively linked to several other terrorist organizations that have implications for Jordan's security.

In an interview with the authors, Jordanian officials recently revealed that a number of Zarqawi operatives regularly visit Osbat al-Ansar's "base" in Ain al-Hilweh, a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon known as a hotbed of Islamic extremism. (For further information on Ain al-Hilweh, see *Terrorism Monitor*, Issue 21, Nov. 4, 2004) The officials maintained that these Zarqawi men meet with members of Osbat al-Ansar (designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Treasury in March 2002) a small but dangerous Sunni extremist group that Jordanian officials claim has planned attacks on Western and Jordanian embassies in Beirut. [7]

Facing such threats, Jordan has developed a well-rounded counterterrorism strategy combining both tactical and strategic measures. The raids and arrests that thwarted the Jayousi plot are but one example of the country's tactical counter-terrorism capability. Jordan's Special Forces' counter-terrorism unit can boast of many such successes, including the November 2002 arrest of a group of Islamists in the southern city of Maan who had been terrorizing the population, carrying weapons and bombs in the street, and setting fire to homes. In September 2003, Jordanian authorities arrested the Jordanian militant Mohammad Shalabi, also known as Abu Sayyaf, for plotting to carry out terrorist attacks against American targets in the country, possessing explosives, inciting riots in Maan, and belonging to the banned militant group Takfir wal-Hijra. According to Jordanian intelligence, Abu Sayyaf was captured in northeast Jordan on his way to join Zarqawi in Iraq. [8]

Strategically, Jordan is one of the few countries truly engaged in the battle of ideas. As important as it is to conduct raids, make arrests, and freeze terror funds, the war on terror also requires that countries deny jihadists the ability to radicalize and deploy new recruits. In November 2004, during the holy month of Ramadan, Chief Justice Sheikh Izz-Eddine Al Tamimi delivered a sermon during a religious ceremony in the presence of King Abdullah II emphasizing tolerance, humanity, the true values of Islam and rejecting extremism. Subsequently dubbed the "Amman Message," the official statement proclaims: "On religious grounds, on moral grounds, we denounce the contemporary concept of terrorism which is associated with wrongful practices wherever they come from...These despotic attacks on human life transgress the law of God, and we denounce them." [9] Jordan has called for a regional Islamic conference sometime next year to discuss and endorse the message. The Amman Message and the conference Jordan plans to host are significant milestones in the battle of ideas. Such efforts are critical if jihadists like Zarqawi are to be defeated. The alternative, allowing jihadists to dominate the battle of ideas and recruit several new terrorists for every one killed or captured, is a recipe for failure.

Matthew Levitt, a former FBI counterterrorism analyst, is a senior fellow and Director of Terrorism Studies at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Julie Sawyer is a Research Assistant at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The two authors just returned from a research trip to Jordan and Israel.

Notes:

1. Author interview with Jordanian scholar, November 11, 2004.
2. Author interviews with Jordanian officials, September 11, 2003 and November 11, 2004.
3. Author interview with Jordanian official, November 11, 2004.
4. Author interview with Jordanian official, July 7, 2004.
5. Author interview with Jordanian official, November 11, 2004.
6. Author interview with Jordanian official, November 11, 2004.
7. Author interview, November 11, 2004.
8. Author interview with Jordanian official, November 11, 2004.
9. "Jordan issues the 'Amman Message' on Islam." Embassy of Jordan - Washington DC Press Release. November 9, 2004. ❖

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