

# Inside the Zarqawi Network

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**A**t least 13 Iraqis were killed in fighting with U.S. soldiers in the Iraqi city of Falluja on July 30, part of the ongoing U.S. offensive against fighters loyal to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the man Bush administration officials claim is the most dangerous terrorist in Iraq today. Critics, however, contend that the Jordanian-born Zarqawi is a Washington-made bogeyman who is not worth the \$25 million bounty on his head. They doubt the strength of Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad (Unity and Holy War) group, citing intelligence officials who generally agree that no more than 1,000 foreign fighters are active in Iraq.

A memo acquired by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy from Iraqi intelligence sources, however, provides a first glimpse into the configuration of Zarqawi's Iraqi network, which may be more dangerous than previously imagined. The memo, "Structure of Tawhid and Jihad Islamic Group," details several days of recent interrogations of one of Zarqawi's captured lieutenants. Umar Baziyani, Zarqawi's number four, a member of the Tawhid legislative council, and the "emir" of Baghdad, was captured by U.S. forces in late May 2004. The account of his confessions details the hierarchal structure of Zarqawi's group, its ties to Syria and Iran, the number of fighters it commands in Iraq, the names of the regional emirs, its media strategy, and more.

The memo explains that Zarqawi, who had allied himself with the Kurdish al Qaeda affiliate Ansar al Islam in northern Iraq, lost his lifeline to al Qaeda in January 2004 when U.S. intelligence arrested Hassan Ghul. Ghul, according to U.S. officials, was carrying a message from Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden. Ghul, who was reportedly a lieutenant of 9/11 planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, was considered to be the top al Qaeda operative captured in Iraq. Baziyani explains that after Ghul's arrest, Tawhid and Jihad was cut off from al Qaeda. Recent reports, citing U.S. intelligence agencies, indicate that Zarqawi may have been trying to reconnect with bin Laden "in the last few weeks."

Baziyani explains, however, that Zarqawi's group did not wither when it fell from the al Qaeda vine. He claims that there are nine regional leaders of the Falluja-based Tawhid and Jihad under Zarqawi. His deputy, also based in Falluja, is known as Mahi Shami. If U.S. intelligence manages to catch up with these two top leaders, there are still regional "emirs" fanned out around Iraq, which could make the network incredibly difficult to break. For instance, Baziyani explained during his interrogation that he had been replaced as emir of Baghdad after his arrest. There are also regional emirs in the Kurdish north (Hussein Salim), the western Anbar province (Abdullah Abu Azzam), and the city of Mosul (Abu Tallah). In this way, Tawhid and Jihad can execute spectacular terrorist attacks throughout the country. These include the Baghdad-based bombing of the Jordanian embassy; suicide bombings against Shiites and

an attack on Basra's oil infrastructure in the south; suicide bombings against Kurds in the north; attacks against police recruiting centers throughout the country; and the beheading of American Nick Berg in an unknown location.

In addition to its regional bases, Zarqawi's group has a specially designated media department. Baziyani claims that a man named Hassan Ibrahim heads this department, along with lieutenants Khadi Hassan and "Adil," who were responsible for taping and releasing the May 11 beheading of Berg.

Baziyani also details the military strength of Tawhid and Jihad. He lists seven military commanders under Zarqawi's control throughout Iraq with about 1,400 fighters at their disposal. Not surprisingly, Baziyani stated that the Falluja group, headed by Abu Nawas Falujayee, has the most fighters with 500. Second to Falluja is Mosul, with 400 fighters. (Analysts believe Mosul is a haven for former Ansar al Islam fighters.) There are also strongholds in Anbar (60 fighters), Baghdad (40 fighters), and Diyala, the province just northeast of Baghdad (80 fighters). According to Baziyani, most of the fighters in Tawhid and Jihad are Iraqi Arabs and Kurds -- not foreign jihadis -- which corroborates reports by U.S. intelligence that the foreign fighter presence is much smaller than previously imagined.

One senior administration official, however, doubts Baziyani's claim that Zarqawi has 1,400 fighters under his command. A more realistic figure, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity, might be 500. But the official admitted, "I'm not sure how anyone would really know. If we knew more, we would have probably rolled up this group by now. It could be wrong for us to think we know better than the man we debriefed."

Interestingly, Baziyani's interrogation reveals that Tawhid and Jihad maintains a strong military presence (150 fighters) in the town of al-Qaim, which is close to the Syrian border, just west of the Euphrates River. One Pentagon official believes that the number of fighters Baziyani put in al-Qaim is likely inflated, but says that the importance of the town cannot be overstated. Al-Qaim, to the bewilderment of U.S. officials, was where the Iraqi army put up some of its fiercest resistance during the 2003 Iraq war. A senior administration official calls Qaim "critical" and "the key to understanding how Syria is involved" in the insurgency.

With the help of Zarqawi, the town is said to be a depot for weapons, cash, and fighters supplied by Zarqawi's financiers -- the bulk of whom are now believed by U.S. intelligence to be operating out of Syria. Abu Muhamed, whom the memo fingers as the military emir of the Baghdad cell, is a former Lebanese military officer who once lived in Denmark. According to Baziyani, he was smuggled into Iraq via Syria. Many other fighters, including Zarqawi's driver and bodyguard, are of Syrian descent.

There are other foreign links. Baziyani explained to his interrogators that the Zarqawi network received a great deal of assistance from Iran. One Tawhid and Jihad militant, Othman, was reportedly responsible for transferring former Ansar al Islam fighters and other jihadis back and forth from Iran to Baghdad once the U.S. occupation was underway. In other words, Iran has been involved in supplying fighters to tangle with U.S. soldiers. This should come as no surprise, given the 9/11 Commission's recent report that Iran was a transit state for 9/11 plotters.

Looking back, Sunni-Shia enmity has never been a concern for Iran when it comes to providing logistics to al Qaeda, or even supporting Sunni groups such as Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza. Iran, it is also worth noting, provided assistance to the Sunni and Kurdish Ansar al Islam on the eve of the 2003 U.S. invasion. Tehran allowed Ansar fighters to cross the border to escape the U.S. assault. According to several Ansar prisoners, Iran allowed fighters to remain there, and then later helped them back into Iraq to join the insurgency.

Interestingly, the Baziyani memo is not all bad news. The captured militant says that U.S. forces have hammered the Falluja bases of his organization in recent months. This, he said, has caused the network's leadership to disperse. Thus, Baziyani states, some of Zarqawi's deputies have considered Samarra as a new base. According to one Iraqi source close to the new Iraqi security cabinet, there has been some indication of "command and control in the Samarra area." Several U.S. officials, however, believe this assertion to be untrue -- perhaps wishful thinking or even

disinformation on the part of Baziyani.

The information in the Baziyani interrogation memo needs to be further vetted by U.S. and Iraqi intelligence. Still, the memo provides an unprecedented look into the mind of one of Zarqawi's lieutenants. It also provides a view of the small but powerful network that may or may not be at the center of the Iraqi insurgency, but has established itself as its brutal, public face.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming *Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror*. ❖

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