

# USA Ties Terrorist Attacks in Iraq to Extensive Zargawi Network

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.

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## Articles & Testimony

**T**he attack that killed 185 Shi'a Muslims in Iraq during the religious festival of Ashura bore the hallmarks of operations planned by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, according to US Central Command. Matthew Levitt examines Zargawi's role as a co-ordinator of diverse extremist networks in Iraq and beyond.

According to General John Abizaid, commander of US operations in Iraq, the three major elements fighting Coalition forces are former regime elements, transnational terrorists and religious extremists or jihadists.

Gen Abizaid told the US House Armed Services Committee on 4 March 2004: "Transnational terrorists such as the Zargawi network, Ansar al-Islam and Al-Qaeda are attempting to destabilise Iraq by increasing both ethnic and sectarian strife with the intention of inciting chaos and a civil war. These terrorists are operating in the same areas as the former regime elements, which are largely former Ba'athist strongholds. They also have a presence in northern Iraq and are launching attacks into southern Iraq targeting the Shi'a population, the international community, and security forces."

Two days before Abizaid's briefing, on 2 March, an estimated 185 Shi'ite worshippers celebrating the religious festival of Ashura were killed in bombings in Karbala and Baghdad, attacks that Abizaid said bore the hallmarks of operations planned by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (alias Fadel Nazzal al-Khalayleh).

US Central Command expects that terrorist activities by Zargawi's network in Iraq will increase as the country moves towards sovereignty. In his testimony, Abizaid drew attention to a letter believed to have been written by Zargawi, suggesting: "Zero hour must be at least four months before the new government gets into place. We are racing time."

The letter was found on a compact disc when Coalition forces captured senior Al-Qaeda operative Hasan Ghul in January 2004. Written as a response to an inquiry from Al-Qaeda operative Abd al-Had al Iraq (alias Abdallah Khan), it detailed operations and planning in Iraq. It also called for more Al-Qaeda operatives to enter the country and increase attacks on Coalition forces as well as Iraq's Shi'a community.

Zargawi's role

Not known as a bomb maker or financier, Zarqawi appears to function as a co-ordinator involved with several Islamist networks. According to a 23 February report by Brian Bennett and Vivienne Walt in Time magazine, Zarqawi is believed to have been "given responsibility for rotating Al-Qaeda troops between Chechnya and Afghanistan, through the mountains of northern Iraq", as well as running a training camp in Afghanistan.

According to the US Treasury, after fighting against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Zarqawi returned to Jordan in 1991 and founded Jund al-Shams, an Islamic extremist group operating primarily in Syria and Jordan. He was jailed in Jordan in 1992, apparently for a combination of his history as an "Afghan-Arab" and his activities with Jund al-Shams, he was released in 1999. He promptly angered authorities again by his support for a radical Jordanian cleric who called for the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic state in Jordan, and subsequently fled to Peshawar, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At least 116 alleged terrorists linked to Zarqawi have been arrested in Europe and the Middle East with detentions having been made in France, Italy, Spain, the UK, Germany, Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

- Turkey: On 15 February 2002, Turkish police intercepted two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct bombing attacks in Israel. Zarqawi is believed to have dispatched the three men, believed to be members of Beyyat al-Imam, who fought for the Taliban and received terrorist training in Afghanistan. More recently, Abdelatif Mourafik (alias Malek the Andalusian, or Malek the North African), a Moroccan Zarqawi associate wanted for his role in the May 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings, was arrested in Turkey in late 2003. According to early assessments by Turkish officials, Zarqawi was the planner behind the two sets of double suicide bombings in Istanbul in November 2003.

- Germany: Although the al-Tawheed terrorist cell apprehended in Germany in April 2002 has been tied to Abu Qatada in the UK, Zarqawi controlled its activities. Eight men were arrested, and raids yielded hundreds of forged passports from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Denmark and other countries. According to German prosecutors, the group facilitated the escape of terrorist fugitives from Afghanistan to Europe and planned to attack US or Israeli interests in Germany. The 2002 annual report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (OPC) noted that Zarqawi, who "has close links with Al-Qaeda", also "commanded a mujahidin [sic] network in the Federal Republic of Germany, amongst other countries". The US Treasury said that members of Zarqawi's German cell included Mohamed Abu Dhess, Shadi Abadallah, Aschraf Al-Dagma, Djamel Moustafa and Ismail Shalabi.

- Jordan: While in Syria, Zarqawi planned and facilitated the October 2002 assassination of Lawrence Foley, a US Agency for International Development official, in Amman. Jordanian prime minister Abu Ragheb Ali announced that the Libyan and Jordanian suspects arrested in December in connection with the attack received funding and instructions from Zarqawi and had intended to conduct further attacks against "foreign embassies, Jordanian officials, some diplomatic personnel, especially Americans and Israelis". The captured assassin, Salem Said Bin Sewid, confessed that Zarqawi provided funding and weapons for the murder. According the indictment, Zarqawi entered Jordan before the attack to select 11 recruits, and provided "\$60,000, as well as machine guns, silencers, tear gas, gloves and a vehicle to use for terrorist operations". During his UN address on 5 February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said "an associate of the assassin left Jordan to go to Iraq to obtain weapons and explosives for further operations" at a time when a Zarqawi-run network was operating in Baghdad. In addition, a key Zarqawi deputy called Foley's assassins on a satellite phone to congratulate them while he was driving out of Iraq toward Turkey, a mistake that led to his capture and confirmation that a terrorist cell was operating out of Iraq.

Powell also disclosed that Abuwatia, a detainee who graduated from Zarqawi's terrorist camp in Afghanistan, admitted to dispatching at least nine North African extremists to Europe to conduct poison and explosive attacks. According to the intelligence Powell revealed, terrorists detained in Europe not only provided information about the targets of Zarqawi's European network, but also the names of many of the network's members. Central Intelligence

Agency Director George Tenet told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on 6 February 2002 that the Zarqawi network was behind poison plots in Europe. European officials have confirmed that Zarqawi is the co-ordinator for attacks there, including chemical attacks that were thwarted in the UK, France and Italy.

According to Colin Powell, Zarqawi's European network - heavily populated by Ansar al-Islam operatives - included the German cell noted above; Merouane Benahmed and Menad Benchellal in France; Abderrazak Mhadjoub, Mohammed Tahi Hamid, Radi Ayashi and Chise Mohammed in Italy; seven unnamed North Africans arrested in the January 2003 ricin plot in the UK; and, according to US officials, unnamed operatives in Spain. US and European authorities have also tied Zarqawi to terrorists in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge (including Abu Atiya, arrested in September 2003 in Baku, Azerbaijan) and Chechnya. Zarqawi's reported experience with chemical weapons makes his role as the co-ordinator between such networks especially worrisome to law-enforcement and intelligence officials.

#### Transnational support network

In Congressional testimony on 9 March 2004, Tenet included "the Zarqawi network" - along with Ansar al-Islam, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan - in a list of what he termed "smaller international Sunni extremist groups who have benefited from Al-Qaeda links".

The range of actors who have given Zarqawi safe haven and support illustrate the loose and mutable nature of the terrorist networks involved. Zarqawi has been a fugitive since 1999 when Jordanian authorities first tied him to radical Islamic activity leading Jund al-Shams. In 2000, a Jordanian court sentenced him in absentia to 15 years of hard labour for his role in the millennial terror plot targeting Western interests in Jordan. Ahmad Mahmoud Saleh al-Riyati, an Ansar al-Islam member captured by Coalition forces in northern Iraq and deported to Jordan in April 2003, was also sentenced in absentia for his role in the millennial plots.

According to information declassified by the US Treasury Department, Zarqawi sent members of Jund al-Shams from Jordan to train at the al-Faruq Camp in 1999, where they received full support from Al-Qaeda. US authorities maintain that Zarqawi met Al-Qaeda leaders in Kandahar that year and then, in late 2000, left Pakistan for Afghanistan. There he oversaw his own cell and training camp near Herat where cadres, many from his own Bani Hassan tribe in Jordan, worked on chemical and biological weapons.

The US Treasury Department has also linked Zarqawi to Iran and Iraq, claiming that he met an associate named Mohamed Abu Dhess in Iran in early September 2001 "and instructed him to commit terrorist attacks against Jewish or Israeli facilities in Germany with 'his [Zarqawi's] people'". Early the following year, Zarqawi was wounded in the leg while fighting against US-led forces in Afghanistan. He escaped to Iran, then travelled to Iraq in May 2002, where his leg was amputated and replaced with a prosthetic device. According to Powell, Zarqawi then spent two months recovering in Baghdad, during which time "nearly two dozen extremists converged on Baghdad and established a base of operations there". Prior to the war in Iraq, Zarqawi had returned to the Ansar al-Islam camp in northern Iraq run by his Jund al-Shams lieutenants. There, he enjoyed safe haven and free passage into and out of Ansar-held areas. In late 2003 European intelligence officials believed that Zarqawi was in Iran, from where he co-ordinated operations in Iraq. One of his key lieutenants, Abu Mohammed Hamza, an accomplished bomb maker, was killed in a firefight with Coalition forces near Baghdad in February 2004.

Between leaving Baghdad and reappearing in Iran, Zarqawi is believed to have travelled to Syria and possibly Lebanon. US intelligence officials have linked Zarqawi to Hizbullah, magnifying their concerns about an ad hoc tactical relationship brewing between Iran's Shi'a proxy and the loosely affiliated Al-Qaeda network. In September 2003, when US authorities designated Zarqawi and several of his associates as 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist' entities, the Treasury said that Zarqawi not only had "ties" to Hizbullah, but that plans were in place for his deputies

to meet with both Hizbullah and Asbat al-Ansar (a Lebanese Sunni terrorist group), "and any other group that would enable them to smuggle mujaheddin [sic] into Palestine". The Treasury claimed that Zarqawi received "more than \$35,000" in mid 2001 "for work in Palestine", which included "finding a mechanism that would enable more suicide martyrs to enter Israel" as well as "to provide training on explosives, poisons, and remote controlled devices".

Zarqawi also relied on associates in Syria to facilitate travel to Iraq and other logistics for members of his European network. According to Italian prosecutors "Syria has functioned as a hub for an Al-Qaeda network" linked to Zarqawi. Transcripts of operatives' conversations "paint a detailed picture of overseers in Syria co-ordinating the movement of recruits and money" between cells in Europe and Ansar al-Islam training camps in northern Iraq. The cell's leaders in Syria facilitated the recruits' travel and provided their funding, while the European members gave false travel documents to recruits and fugitives and monitored their travel. At least some of the recruits travelling to the Ansar camps stayed at the Ragdan Hotel in Aleppo for some time and later stopped in Damascus. The Italian investigation revealed that Zarqawi's operatives in Europe were acting on the instruction of his lieutenants in and around Damascus and Aleppo, including Muhammad Majid (also known as Mullah Fuad and described as the "gatekeeper in Syria for volunteers intent on reaching Iraq"), and two men referred to as "Abdullah" and "Abderrazak". For example, in one conversation, an operative assures a comrade that sending money via Fuad is safe, saying: "I have sent so many transfers to Mullah Fuad and they always got there, no problem."

#### The nature of terrorism

Zarqawi's activities and his matrix of relationships illustrate the current nature of international terrorism and the complex threat it poses. For example, while there are no known 'headquarters-to-headquarters' links between Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah, senior personnel linked to the two groups are known to have held meetings over the past decade and ad hoc, person-to-person ties in the areas of training and logistical support activities have been maintained.

As recent attacks in Casablanca, Istanbul and Iraq re-emphasised, it is these relationships, rather than particular group affiliations, that are facilitating Al-Qaeda's ability to conduct devastating terrorist attacks. As Tenet has testified, the counterterrorism successes of the past three years have "transformed the organisation into a loose collection of regional networks", but intelligence analysts note that while Al-Qaeda itself has been weakened, "there has been no comparable weakening in the wider Islamic jihadists movement".

While this wider movement continues to provide willing recruits, operatives like Zarqawi will be able to co-ordinate their movement and activities and use related networks and support bases to provide logistics and financial aid for operations.

Matthew Levitt, a former FBI counterterrorism analyst, is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and adjunct professor at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University. This article draws on the author's forthcoming article, *Untangling The Terror Web: Identifying and Counteracting the Phenomenon of Crossover between Terrorist Groups*, in the SAIS Review, Volume XXIV, Number One, Winter-Spring 2004.

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