

Placing Iraq and Zarqawi in the Terror Web

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Feb 13, 2003

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Brief Analysis

Following Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 6 address to the United Nations Security Council, some questioned his description of the "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network." In fact, the relationship between Baghdad and terrorism mirrors the way in which today's international terrorist groups function: not as tightly structured hierarchies, but rather as shadowy networks that, when necessary, strike ad hoc tactical alliances bridging religious and ideological schisms. Osama bin Laden's recent call on Muslims to come to Iraq's defense, even as he derided the "infidel" regime in Baghdad, is a case in point.

The Zarqawi Network

One of the more active terrorist networks in recent years has been that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. At least 116 terrorist operatives from Zarqawi's global network have been arrested, including members in France, Italy, Spain, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. For example:

Turkey: Two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct bombing attacks in Israel were intercepted and arrested by Turkish police on February 15, 2002. The three men were members of Beyyiat el-Imam (a group linked to al-Qaeda) who fought for the Taliban and received terrorist training in Afghanistan; they were dispatched to Turkey by Zarqawi while he was in Iran.

Germany: Although the al-Tawhid terrorist cell apprehended in Germany in April 2002 has been tied to the recently arrested Abu Qatada in Britain, its activities were controlled by Zarqawi. 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 U.S. or Israeli interests in Germany.

Jordan: While in Syria, Zarqawi planned and facilitated the October 2002 assassination of U.S. Agency for International Development official Lawrence Foley 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." Moreover, during his UN address, Powell revealed that after the murder, an associate of the assassin "left Jordan to go to Iraq to obtain weapons and

explosives for further operations." 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 an al-Qaeda cell was operating out of Iraq.

Poison plots: 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. Similarly, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet has stated that the Zarqawi network was behind the recent poison plots in Europe.

Zarqawi's Links to Other Terrorists

The relationship between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda is the subject of much debate. Although Zarqawi's active role in organizing terrorist operations suggests that he himself is a major terrorist leader, it is useful to clarify his links to other groups so as to better understand how international terrorism works. The principal terrorist threat today stems from the web of shadowy relationships between loosely affiliated groups. The sponsors of such groups further complicate the web, be they states or sub-state actors. Indeed, there is no precise organizational or command structure to the assemblage of groups that fall under al-Qaeda's umbrella or that cooperate with the organization. Hence, whether Zarqawi swore allegiance (bayyat) to bin Laden makes little difference in whether the two would work together at promoting a common agenda.

The range of actors who have given Zarqawi safe haven and support clearly illustrate the current modus operandi of terrorist networks. Consider his movements since he first surfaced as a terrorist suspect in 1999, when he led Jund al-Shams, an Islamic extremist group and al-Qaeda affiliate operating primarily in Syria and Jordan:

Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: In 2000, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan, where he oversaw an al-Qaeda training camp and worked on chemical and biological weapons. Such camps served as open universities, educating terrorists from a wide array of local and international groups. These students in turn established relationships and networks, like the anti-Soviet mujahedin before them. With every success in the war on terrorism, such networks become increasingly essential to al-Qaeda, providing a new cadre of terrorist operatives.

Iran and Iraq: In early 2002, Zarqawi was wounded in the leg while fighting against U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. He escaped to Iran, then traveled to Iraq in May 2002, where his wounded leg was amputated and replaced with a prosthetic device. According to Secretary 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. These al-Qaeda affiliates, based in Baghdad, now coordinate the movement of people, money, and supplies into and throughout Iraq for his network, and they've now been operating freely in the capital for more than eight months."

Syria and Lebanon: From Baghdad, Zarqawi traveled to Syria and then to Lebanon, where he met with leaders from Hizballah and other extremists at a terrorist training camp and at the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp. U.S. intelligence officials have definitively linked Zarqawi to Hizballah, magnifying their concerns about the ad hoc tactical relationship brewing between Iran's Shi'i proxy and the loosely affiliated al-Qaeda network.

The Ansar al-Islam camp in northern Iraq: Currently, Zarqawi is believed to have returned to the Ansar al-Islam camp in northern Iraq run by his Jund al-Shams lieutenants. There, he enjoys safe haven and free passage into and out of Ansar-held areas.

Iraq and Terrorism

As persuasive as the Zarqawi connection is, Secretary Powell has provided other evidence about Iraq's links to terrorism. During his UN address, Powell made use of a wide range of sources -- signal intercepts, satellite imagery,

defectors, human intelligence, and ten European and Middle Eastern intelligence services -- to pile on the evidence. For instance, he revealed that an Iraqi intelligence officer (likely an agent named Abu Wa'il) is the official Iraqi liaison officer assigned to Ansar al-Islam. According to Powell, "in 2000 this agent offered al-Qaeda safe haven in the region," an offer that some operatives accepted. U.S. intelligence also indicates that this agent operates "in the most senior levels of the radical organization [Ansar al-Islam]." Moreover, senior Iraqi and al-Qaeda officials are known to have met at least eight times since the early 1990s; indeed, the Iraqi embassy in Pakistan was used to liaise with al-Qaeda from 1999 through 2001.

Conclusion

The United States will not be pressed into a war with Iraq solely because of Baghdad's sponsorship of terrorism. After all, Iran and Syria's terror connections are even stronger than Iraq's. Nevertheless, Iraq clearly sponsors terrorism. To be sure, the most dangerous terrorists in the world are not those that are tightly controlled by any government. Yet, several countries, including Iraq, have provided support for the shadowy networks and loose alliances through which the most violent terrorists organize their attacks. What Powell offered in his UN address is a convincing description of how Iraq fits into this web.

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