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Death of a Jihadi: Implications from the Death of Al-Zarqawi.

John Harrison*

12 June 2006

The death of Ayman Al-Zarqawi could not have come at a better time for the United States. The ongoing war in Iraq has created major domestic pressure on President Bush. The American public has largely maintained a negative view of the Bush Administration's handling of the war in Iraq. Most prominently, the American public is of the view that the war is not being waged successfully and has little end in sight. In addition, the debate over pre-war intelligence continues on both the domestic - the indictment of Vice President's former Chief of Staff for alleged crimes relating to the so-called Valerie Plume affair - and international front - the recent German intelligence leaks over their concerns over pre-war intelligence. The negative air hanging over the whole campaign makes the need for a victory all the more necessary to clear it.

The death of the new face of Al-Qaeda, and perhaps some of his senior operatives, may provide just that required good news. Its implications for both US intelligence gathering in Iraq and the wider war are very interesting.

Al Qaeda's New Face

Al-Zarqawi has been a rising star within Al-Qaeda circles since the late 1990s. While his original focus of interest was Jordan, he rose to international prominence during the run-up to the Iraq War when then Secretary of State Colin Powell mentioned him by name as a senior Al-Qaeda operative in Iraq during his UN Security Council briefing in 2003. Al-Zarqawi would then resurface shortly after the invasion leading the Al-Qaeda forces in Iraq. While the size of the force has always been a matter of dispute, the skill and dedication to the jihadi cause has not. His organization has been linked to kidnappings, beheadings, suicide operations, and sectarian attacks – all designed to plunge Iraq into a vicious civil war and to advance the objectives of jihad.

There has long been a dispute over the nature of the relationship between Al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qaeda leadership. The letters exchanged between Al-Zawahiri and Al-Zarqawi have made for fascinating reading. While Al-Qaeda through Al-Zawahiri seem to be evolving a political strategy to complement the armed struggle – a political strategy that includes alliances with the Shia community – Al Zaraqawi appears to be devoted to the more extremist view. This view rejects any political component to the struggle and views Shia in the same light as all other apostates. This lack of political sensitivity can be seen in Jordanian attacks by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the ham-fisted reaction to the outcry against them as well as Al-Zarqawi's increasing isolation in Iraq due to his violent opposition to the electoral process. This

uncharacteristic tone deafness has led to some armed clashes between the Sunni resistance in Iraq and Al-Zarqawi's forces. The capstone in his isolation was his apparent removal as the leader of Jihadi forces in Iraq.

Following these events, the reports on Al-Zarqawi throughout the last year have been intriguing. Earlier this year Al-Zarqawi barely escaped an air strike on a safe house and it was a few weeks ago that the alleged right hand man of Al-Zarqawi was killed in a raid on a safe house; a raid that Al-Zarqawi barely escaped. In the past the US has not launched a raid unless it had visual confirmation or "eyes on the target". While operational necessities have most likely caused that standard operating procedure to be relaxed, the number of frequent and almost successful operations indicates there is increasing, accurate, and timely intelligence regarding his whereabouts. Certainly technical intelligence is providing some of this but at least some must have been provided by human sources.

Winning the War?

What does the above mean? In the long term, it may mean that the jihadi's have overstayed their welcome. The extreme violence introduced by foreign fighters may have led to a split with local fighters. Furthermore, the political strategy adopted by Al-Zawahiri may be widening this divide. Local Sunni resistance seems to be becoming more amenable to a political solution to the war and this may lead to the coalition's long sought "exit strategy" emerging.

The Sunnis, Iraqi Government, and coalition forces have all been sending signals towards this and most seem to agree that the foreign fighters do not represent any segment of Iraq. All parties also seem to have accepted long ago there can be no military solution. However, all parties have required time to see if the political process would be productive. As this appears to be the case, there may now be grounds for a settlement. The largest obstacle to this remains the jihadis. A small minority with a propensity for extreme violence can still delay the emerging peace process, and cause massive suffering.

It seems clear that while intelligence on the Sunni insurgents will remain difficult and sporadic, the opposite may be true with respect to the foreign fighters. After all, the uninvited "brothers" do not share the same objectives as the local resistance, thus permitting an Iraqi providing intelligence on Al-Qaeda in Iraq to be free of any allegations of being a betrayer of Iraqi resistance.

In the short term, removing the top two leaders in such a short period of time will have a significant impact on Al-Qaeda's capacity to fight in Iraq. If nothing else, they will have to examine their operational security in light of the potentially changed environment. The subtle political changes in Iraq along with the egregious miscalculation of the attacks in Jordan will cause difficulties and some strategic reassessment. There in lies the paradox. Al-Zarqawi's inability and unwillingness to calculate the political impact of his actions provide the most powerful counter tool to Al-Qaeda. His hatred for the Jordanian government blinded him to the potential consequences of the attack, and caused his ham-fisted spin. On a perverse level, he was more valuable alive than dead.

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