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Osama and Azzarqawi: Rivals or allies?

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The European intelligence community believes that Abu Musaab Azzarqawi, the man being blamed for the spate of kidnappings in Iraq, wants to compete with Osama bin Laden. The Europeans also believe that Azzarqawi aims to carry out an operation even bigger than the September 11 attacks, either in the United States or in Europe. A few weeks ago, in a video-taped address to his followers in Iraq, Azzarqawi urged them to “get ready for war”. Will such an attack take place? If so, will it officially establish Azzarqawi and his group, Attawhid wal Jihad, as the new Al-Qaeda?

Al Qaedaism

If 9/11 changed the way the United States perceived and fought terrorism, it also caused a similar change in Osama. In Afghanistan, the Americans had destroyed the Al Qaeda network as well as killed and jailed several of its members. Osama responded quickly by ordering his followers to return to their countries of origin, where they would be able to pursue jihad. Going home however was an opportunity for developing and creating new cells for future operations. Osama was pleased that the young Mujahideen, thousands of kilometres away, were still keeping to their promises and honoring their *Bai'at* (oath of allegiance) to him, pledged while in Afghanistan.

However, and contrary to what many expect, the fall of the Taliban regime and the huge casualties suffered by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, have led neither to its decline nor destruction. In his article “Think Again: Al Qaeda”, Jason Burke wrote: “Al-Qaeda is transforming really into Al-Qaedaism.” It is a movement that is spreading in different countries, having the same ideology but employing different tactics. These new cells are led by different people such as Azzarqawi in Iraq, Al Oufi in Saudi Arabia and Abu Faraj Allibi in Europe. One wonders whether there will, one day, be a confrontation between Al Qaeda, as represented by Osama, and the other groups such as Attawhid wal Jihad, led by Azzarqawi.

Who is Azzarqawi?

The American invasion of Iraq has, ironically, helped to establish Azzarqawi as a charismatic leader. Unlike Osama and his deputy Ayman Azzawahiri, Azzarqawi neither came from a wealthy family nor pursued a high education. Azzarqawi also set himself apart from Osama and Azzawahiri in another way: Osama was born a Saudi and carried with him the religious prestige of the kingdom and its position in the Muslim world. Azzawahiri was

born an Egyptian and carried with him the knowledge and prestige of Egypt. Azzarqawi however was neither. He is believed to have 1000 to 1500 members from different parts of the Arab world who are experts in explosives and other weapons. He keeps a small, closely-knit group of mostly non-Iraqis, who are also his old friends. Among them is Abu Ali, an expert in missiles who carried out military duty under the Saddam regime. Another member, Abu Mohammad, a military man from Lebanon and an expert in explosives, worked in Denmark before going to Iraq. The group is headquartered in Fallujah in Iraq and has nine *emirs* (leaders), each leading a front.

Azzarqawi was born in Jordan in 1966 and travelled to Afghanistan in 1989. According to several writings, he was not a leader in Al Qaeda but was tasked to look after individuals coming from Jordan and Palestine. He set up a camp and invited young people from the two countries to join him. In 1995, he returned to Jordan and was arrested and jailed for a while. After his release he went back to Afghanistan and was in charge of Palestinian and Jordanian families who lost their members in the war in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. In 2000, he was sentenced to 15 years' jail by a Jordanian court in connection with the "Bay'at group". After the fall of the Taliban regime, he disappeared.

The invasion of Iraq by the Americans pushed his name into the limelight as he was suspected of being behind many operations such as the attack on the Jordanian embassy in Iraq in August 2003, the attack on the United Nations building in Iraq and the killing of the shi'ite cleric Baqir al Hakim. In Germany, he established an organisation known as Attawhid, which was led by Mohammad Abu Dahiss. Azzarqawi met Abu Dahiss in Iran in 2001 and ordered him to execute a few terrorist operations against Jewish facilities in Germany. According to the German authorities, the group was active and was involved in collecting donations, the falsification of passports and arranging the illegal movement of the Mujahideen.

Osama versus Azzarqawi

Azzarqawi is not in a position to declare himself as the legitimate leader of the Mujahideen who are trying to drive the Americans out of Iraq with terrorist attacks. He however has a deep understanding of Al Qaeda's culture: He knows that Osama is regarded by many Arabs as more than a leader. Indeed, inside Al Qaeda, Osama is the father, the Sheikh, the Mujahed and the true Muslim - an icon to be remembered, not forgotten.

What motivates Osama, Azzarqawi and thousands of others is not power, wealth or fame but an almost ideological belief in their struggles. Osama and Azzarqawi know very well that any conflict or clash between them will only weaken their striking abilities and create more differences within the Ummah (Islamic community). Contrary to what some reports say, both are actually on good terms and enjoy mutual respect.

In February 2004, American soldiers in Iraq found a letter addressed to Osama which was believed to be written by Azzarqawi. The letter said: "Noble brothers, leaders of jihad, we do not consider ourselves in competition with you, nor would we ever aim to achieve glory for ourselves...If you agree with the idea of killing the perverse sects, we stand ready as an army for you, to work under your guidance and yield to your command. If you think otherwise, we will remain brothers, and disagreement will not destroy our cooperation or undermine our efforts for what is best."

A conflict between Osama and Azzarqawi is therefore unlikely. Speculation about a potential clash between them could be aimed at disrupting the terrorist networks from the inside. The strategy of “divide and rule” however would not be effective against Al Qaeda where members live for almost no other wish than to die as a *shahid* (martyr) in battle. On October 17, Azzarqawi declared allegiance to Osama, according to a statement posted on a Islamic web forum. The statement said: "We bring good news to our glorified Ummah, news that will deeply anger the infidels and scare the Muslim's enemies. We announce that Tawhid wal-Jihad, its emir and its soldiers have pledged allegiance to the sheikh of the mujahideen, Osama bin Laden, to carry out Jihad in the name of God."

Lastly, to prevent any possible conflict between the two men, Attawhid wal Jihad has even adopted a new name to reflect its affiliation with Al Qaeda. The group has henceforth called itself Qaedat al Jihad fibiladi-Haramain, (Jihad's base in the land of the two rivers.) Such a change not only underscores the growing rapprochement between Osama and Azzarqawi, but also reflects how terrorism is far from dead.

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