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IDSS COMMENTARIES (26/2006)

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Jihadis in Iraq: Did al Zarqawi resign?

Bouchaib Silm*

20 April 2006

A STATEMENT posted on a jihadi website announced the establishment of a consultative council for the mujahideen in Iraq. The statement explained that after two and a half years of fighting in Iraq, the mujahideen found that the infidels are regrouping. Therefore, the fragmented mujahideen need to be united to fight back. Six militant groups, including Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi's, have signed an agreement to form what is known as the Mujahideen Shura Council. Contrary to expectations, the council's leader is not al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, but a much lesser known Iraqi citizen, Abdullah Arrasheed al Baghdadi. The question then is how the new council will affect jihadis in Iraq and what will happen to al Zarqawi?

Doctrine of the council

The council proclaimed in the first issue of its online magazine that it has three objectives: To manage the conflict and unite the mujahideen, to guide the Muslim Ummah towards victory, and to stop the local secularist groups from gaining power. The council links itself with Muslim causes in several countries and hopes for "the victory of the mujahideen and for the liberation of the weak Muslims, especially those in Iraq, Palestine". The online magazine is posted on several jihadi websites.

To avoid being labeled as a local council focusing on one country, the body keeps its membership open and invites other resistance and active militant groups, whether in Iraq or beyond, to join. An immediate response came from Abdullah Annaseer, the leader of the army of the Sunnah and Jama'ah community, (jaish ahlu Assunnah wal jama'ah) a group active in Iraq. In a message to the leadership of the council, he said: "We join our brothers in the Mujahideen Shura Council and that we put all our facilities under their service." In his message, Annaseer appeals to the mujahideen to join the council to anger the enemies of Islam who want to divide the mujahideen. On February 29, 2006, a day after Annasser's message, the Mujahideen Shura Council released a statement accepting the Sunnah and Jama'ah community as a new member.

The council has issued a statement analyzing the latest developments in Iraq as well as providing some solutions. It also seeks to justify sectarian attacks, through its assertion that the Shi'as "have chosen from the beginning to be together with the Jews and the Crusaders". The statement followed that the Shi'as are now fighting the Sunnis in Iraq. The council rejected the "political process" emerging in Iraq as a cover for the "Shi'a project" to control Iraq. With regards to the development in Iraq and most importantly, the American future in

the country, the council adds that the current picture “reflects the great trouble they [Americans] face; we’ve seen cartoon-type military attacks, idiotic political moves, different scenarios for a national government, and discussion meetings with the neighbouring Safawi [Iran] state as if it’s to be the magic cure that will eliminate ‘terrorism’ ”.

Significance of the new council

An article posted on a jihadi website elaborates on the recent developments of the militant groups in Iraq. It also makes specific reference to the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council and the future of al Zarqawi. The article explains that a jihadi organization is unique as it does not belong to a person and that jihad will not stop with the disappearance of one person. For that matter, a jihadi group is neither a political party that depends very much on its leader, nor a materialistic group that aims to achieve individual interests. The formation of the new organization and the appointment of Abdullah Arrasheed al Baghdadi as a leader of the council are aimed at the same objective of ending the American occupation. According to the article, al Zarqawi will remain as the leader of the “Jihad Base in the Land of the Two Rivers (Iraq)”, his original group.

The new council is an effort to unite the various groups in a common cause -- the rejection of the foreign occupiers and all who support them. However, there are already divisions over tactics and targets. Some members want to limit their attacks to the foreigners while others want a wider range of targets. Nevertheless, this dispute should not be overstated. It is not a source of leverage for the foreign and government troops to exploit. This is merely a discussion of tactics and not objectives. This is typical of Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, who have proven time and again its ability to adapt to a changing environment.

What lies ahead for al Zarqawi

The unsolved question right now is whether al Zarqawi will remain in Iraq or shift his focus to the building on his growing international network, including several cells in Asia. It is said that the formation of the new council is to limit al Zarqawi’s role. The answer to the key question is this: Is this a shift endorsed by or forced on al Zarqawi? If this is an endorsed shift, it means that the move is to challenge the coalition’s position that his group is isolated from Iraqi society. This being the case, he will remain active in, and more importantly, welcomed by the council. But if he takes a lower profile, it will help build a wider movement as it will not be linked to or be dependant on al Zarqawi’s personal charisma. The appointment of Arrasheed may indicate this. However, if the change was forced on al Zarqawi, it means that he has lost the limited support he may have within Iraq; it will also suggest that his days in Iraq are numbered.

While al Zarqawi’s possible departure from Iraq may dissipate some of the extreme violence he is noted for, it does not mean a decrease in the threat he poses. Al Zarqawi has an extensive personal network based on the camp he established in Afghanistan in 1989. Young people from Palestine and Jordan, amongst others, were personally trained by him. The exposure of the Jordanian network, the Bay’at group, for which he served a jail sentence, and his links to the German-based Attawhid group, hints at his global reach.

Irrespective of the reasons, the man who has gained an international status of sorts for his ordering of some of the most violent attacks in Iraq and Jordan over the last three years will not likely revert to being an obscure soldier, merely following orders. This change of

leadership may spell the end of the local phase for al Zarqawi, but it may be the opening for his debut on the global stage. The world can only hope it is a short performance.

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