

The Legacy of Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi

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 Wednesday, 09 September 2009
 Last Updated Friday, 05 February 2010

Despite Death, Late Leader Remains Potent Influence in the Jihadi Movement in Iraq

On April 23, 60 Iraqis and Iranian Shi'ite pilgrims were killed and over 125 were wounded when two female kamikaze bombers struck near the Shi'ite shrine of Kadhimayn in Baghdad. The day before, 53 Iranian pilgrims were killed in another kamikaze attack in the province of Diyala east of the capital. On May 1, a 16 or 19-year-old, depending on reports, bomber was stopped before he could detonate his explosives-belt inside an Iraqi Turcoman Shi'ite mosque in the northern city of Kirkuk.

These attacks, which have been claimed by or are believed to have been carried out by groups connected to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an umbrella for the most radical Sunni-Salafi insurgent groups operating in the country, are reminiscent of the highly effective and murderous sectarian tactics perfected by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the late Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (also known, as al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI).

Between 2003 and his death in a U.S. airstrike on June 7, 2006, al-Zarqawi outlined and implemented a plan to draw Iraq's Sunni and Shi'ite communities into a civil war, which in turn would create chaos resulting in a failed state where AQI would be able to operate freely.

He outlined his plan in a letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's "Central Command" (AQC) chief ideologue, writing about Shi'ism: "They are] a lurking snake a crafty and malicious scorpion, a spying enemy, and a mortal venom. Here, we are entering a battle on two levels. One is open, against a furious enemy and patent unbelief [the U.S. and foreign, non-Muslim Coalition]; the other is more difficult and fierce, against a cunning enemy who wears the garb of a friend [that of a Muslim], pretends to agree, and calls for solidarity, but harbors evil and takes tortuous paths. He is the heir to the esoteric gangs that traversed the history of Islam and left indelible scars on its face. The attentive observer and careful witness will realize that Shi'ism is a looming danger and a true challenge. "They are the enemies; so beware of them. The curse of God be on them! How are they deluded (from the true Islam)..."

Throughout the letter, al-Zarqawi usually refers to Shi'ism with the Arabic word "Rafida" or its plural, "Rawafid," which translates approximately to "those who reject," referring to "true" Islam in al-Zarqawi's mind. In short, Iraqi Shi'ites are viewed as a treacherous lot who need to be utterly destroyed, and with whom compromise and alliance is not possible. His ideology marked a new, more militant shift in Salafi jihadi ideology of the AQC variety. Although al-Zawahiri and other AQC leaders have long been critical of Shi'ism, they have usually stopped short of endorsing or calling for violence against them based on religious grounds. In contrast, al-Zarqawi argued that such violence was a strategic and religious imperative for Sunni jihadi groups. His views were even questioned by his former teacher, the Palestinian Salafi jihadi scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and al-Zawahiri in 2005, leading to a breakdown in relations between al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi.

AQI and other Salafi jihadi groups operating in Iraq, many of whom were grouped together under the banner of the Shura al-Mujahideen (Mujahideen Council) suffered a series of setbacks beginning in 2007, after the U.S. military secured an alliance, thanks to generous funding (some would call bribes), with Iraqi tribal councils, the so-called "Awakening Councils" (Majalis al-Sahwa), and their militias, which the U.S. government prefers to call the "Sons of Iraq." Many longtime safe havens for Sunni insurgents and Salafi jihadis were taken over by Awakening militiamen, but despite these setbacks, AQI and other insurgent and jihadi groups proved to be remarkably resilient. In October 2006 the Shura al-Mujahideen was replaced when the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was proclaimed.

Al-Zarqawi's successor as amir (leader) of AQI, the Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, declared fealty to the amir al-mu'mineen (commander of the believers) of the ISI, the mysterious Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. Based on communiqués from AQC, it is clear that the al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden, and other leaders in the movement view the ISI as

the beginning of the establishment of a transnational Islamic state (caliphate), much as they view the Taliban as another "beginning" (they also refer that group's leader, Mullah Muhammad "Umar as "amir al-mu'mineen," a title historically reserved by Sunnis for the caliph).

The sectarian bombing campaign continued through this summer, with a massive kamikaze truck bombing outside an Iraqi Turcoman Shi'i mosque, Masjid al-Rasul (Mosque of the Messenger, referring to the Prophet Muhammad) on June 20 that killed at least 73 people and wounded over 200, and a June 24 rickshaw bombing (not a kamikaze attack) on the Mraydi Market in the Sadr City district of Baghdad, which killed at least 72 people and wounded at least 127 others.

This series of recent attacks along sectarian lines, with Iraqi and foreign Shi'is as the chief targets, may be a sign that the ISI, AQI, and other Salafi jihadi groups in Iraq are returning to the ideologically-driven, tried-and-true tactics developed by the late al-Zarqawi that have been so effective in the recent past. Despite premature discussion of the "death" of the insurgency, the ISI and its member groups remain a potent and potentially severely destabilizing force in Iraq. They have proven to still be capable of large-scale, deadly attacks, including a series of well-coordinated kamikaze truck bombings and mortar attacks launched on August 19 against sites in heavily fortified areas of Baghdad, including outside of the Foreign Ministry and near the Finance Ministry, which killed 95 people and wounded over 530 others.

The ISI claimed this series of attacks in a statement issued to Salafi jihadi online discussion forums on August 25, dubbing it the "Raid of the Captive" and saying that they had struck the "strongholds of infidelity and unbelief" of the "Safavid government" in Baghdad. The ISI is referring to the government led by Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki as "Safavid," after a Shi'i medieval dynasty that ruled much of Iran and historical Azerbaijan from 1501-1732, it is viewed as an "Iranian" (Shi'i) government.

Despite its return to previously tried-and-true tactics, the ISI and AQI have also adopted a new strategy. They are forgoing a high number of attacks, or frequency, in favor of well-planned, and very deadly spectacular attacks, but fewer of them. This type of attack is more likely to garner them the publicity they desire. Better planning and preparation also mean that such attacks have a better chance of succeeding. Many of the bombings and other major attacks this year have also taken place in Baghdad or to the north, west, and east of the capital, particularly around the northern city of Mosul, suggesting that these areas are where the ISI, AQI, and other Sunni insurgent groups remain strong.

The Iraqi government continues to blunder in its campaign against the Sunni and Salafi jihadi insurgencies, claiming to have captured the ISI amir, al-Baghdadi, in June, only to have its claims revealed to be propaganda when the elusive leader released a series of audiotapes judged to be authentic by analysts. Following the August 19 attacks in Baghdad, the Iraqi government entered into a diplomatic spat with neighboring Syria, which it accused of harboring the responsible parties, which it says were members of the deposed Iraqi Ba'ath Party, only to later say that it had in fact apprehended them. The Iraqi government, and particularly Iraqi Shi'i political leaders, have often claimed that "Ba'athists" were behind major insurgent attacks, often with little to no evidence to back up their claims. It is more likely that the August 19 attacks were carried out by the ISI or AQI, which have claimed the vast majority of large-scale, well-coordinated attacks in the past. On September 5, the ISI issued a statement denying the Iraqi government's claims, warning that more attacks are to come.