



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (25/2004)

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## **ABU MUSAB AL ZARQAWI: A new generation terrorist leader**

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Terrorism's mastermind today is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and while he's focused on Iraq for now, the West ignores him at its peril. Washington's increase last week of the bounty on the head of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from \$US10 million to \$US25 million - the same as for al-Qa'ida leader Osama bin Laden and principal strategist Ayman al-Zawahiri - reflects the pivotal role he plays in the terrorists' war on the West.

There are several reasons for this :

First, Zarqawi has emerged as al-Qa'ida's de facto operational leader, replacing September 11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the organisation's former military committee head, who is now in US custody. To gain legitimacy and credibility among violent Islamists and their supporters, Khalid and Zarqawi both engaged in ritualistic killings. Just as Khalid beheaded US journalist Daniel Pearl, Zarqawi beheaded US businessman Nick Berg and South Korean translator Kim Sun-il. Both publicised the murders. Like Khalid, Zarqawi is daring and invests in planning spectacular attacks.

Second, Zarqawi leads Tawhid wal-Jihad, the most active terrorist and guerilla group in Iraq. Most of the recent suicide attacks in that country were organised by Tawhid wal-Jihad and conducted by foreign mujaheddin. As long as Tawhid wal-Jihad is active, stability and security cannot return to Iraq; despite sustained multinational efforts to target the group, it has strengthened in Iraq and expanded its operations to neighbouring countries and beyond.

Third, Zarqawi has built a European network that is likely to expand into North America. Tawhid wal-Jihad is also increasingly directing networks previously controlled by al-Qa'ida. These diaspora networks, which traditionally engaged in propaganda, recruitment, fund raising and procurement, are mutating into attack networks. With the difficulty of dispatching recruits, funds and supplies to al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan, they are providing recruits and funds for Tawhid wal-Jihad in Iraq. Zarqawi's network has been able to develop contacts with a few hundred individuals in a dozen European countries. And with the post-9/11 generation of Islamist terror networks being difficult to detect without high-quality intelligence, Tawhid wal-Jihad and its associated groups have emerged as the biggest terrorist threat in Europe.

Fourth, Zarqawi is determined to conduct deadly mass attacks using both conventional and unconventional weapons. Zarqawi established a chemical training facility in the Pankishi Valley in Georgia, and trained cell members in Paris in December 2002 and in London in

January 2003. Furthermore, the Khurmal chemical training facility in Iraq provided comparable training to several recruits post-September 11.

Had Jordanian police not broken up in April a Zarqawi-financed and directed plot to detonate five bombs that would have released a cloud of poison gas in central Amman, more than 20,000 people could have died. While al-Qa'ida failed in its attempts to conduct attacks using unconventional agents, Zarqawi nearly succeeded. As a vengeful and a determined leader, Zarqawi is likely to strike again.

### **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's background**

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi - presumed responsible for at least two beheading murders in recent weeks - symbolises the post-al-Qa'ida generation of leaders: although active in the mujaheddin struggle since 1998, he came to prominence only in the post-September 11 environment. The future terror mastermind was born Ahmad Fadil Nazal al-Khalayleh on October 20, 1966 in the town of Zarqa, Jordan, 26km northeast of the capital, Amman. The family home is located in the al-Ramzi area of Zarqa, where his first wife, son, six sisters, two brothers and several nephews still live. Abu Musab's father, who used to work for Zarqa's local institutions, died in the 1980s, leaving a small monthly pension to support his family. His mother, Umm Sayef al-Khalayleh, who was very close to Abu Musab, died in March this year.

Other family members were also involved in terrorist activities. Jordanian police arrested Saoud Mohammed Ali al-Khalayleh, a 28-year-old cousin, last December for plotting several attacks against US interests in Jordan with a group of radical extremists who tried unsuccessfully to reach Afghanistan during the US offensive there. Zarqawi's nephew Umar Jamil al-Khalayleh was expelled from Iran in mid-2002. Authorities there suspected he had ties to al-Qa'ida as well as a close relationship with his uncle.

Zarqawi's political involvement began in Zarqa's Palestinian refugee camp, known as a centre for the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, where he attended religious studies at the camp mosque. In the late 1980s, he developed an interest in religion and politics, but never graduated from high school. At about 20 he joined the anti-Soviet multinational jihad in Afghanistan. After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Zarqawi returned to Jordan, where he married, settled down in Zarqa and opened a video store. He also spent hours memorising the koran.

As a former Afghan mujahid and member of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, Zarqawi was watched by the authorities and eventually jailed in 1992 for his participation in Jordanian Islamist activity. While in jail he came under the influence of Abu Mohommad al-Maqdisi, an influential Jordanian cleric. Maqdisi, a contemporary and friend of al-Qa'ida's spiritual leader in Europe, Abu Qatada, called for the overthrow of Jordan's monarchy and the creation of an Islamic state. Both Zarqawi and Maqdisi were followers of Hezb-ut-Tahrir.

Zarqawi's seven years in prison increased his deep resentment against the monarchy. On his release in 1999 under a general amnesty he left for Peshawar, in Pakistan, where his wife and children joined him. Soon after, however, she returned to Zarqa and he divorced her and married his second wife, a Jordanian he met in Pakistan.

## Network for terror attacks

Zarqawi's Jordanian network enabled him to play an important role in al-Qa'ida's plans to launch terror attacks at the turn of the millennium. The group's then operations officer based in Peshawar, Abu Zubeidah, a Palestinian, developed elaborate plans to conduct co-ordinated simultaneous attacks on multiple targets in Jordan, the US, and Yemen. In Jordan, the most attractive target was the Radisson SAS Hotel in Amman, fully booked with 400 tourists, mostly Americans.

Al-Qa'ida also developed plans to attack Christian and Jewish sites in Jordan and bomb Los Angeles Airport. Amman's security service, respected as the best intelligence agency in the Middle East, disrupted that operation in Jordan. The would be Los Angeles bomber, Algerian Ahmed Ressay, was detected crossing the border from Canada to the United States with a trunk full of explosives. Zarqawi was sentenced in absentia in September 2000 to 15 years' jail for his part in the plot.

In 2000, Zarqawi established a training camp in Herat, Afghanistan, receiving supplies and funds from al-Qa'ida and his own contacts in the Levant, initially to train Jordanians. While al-Qa'ida had used the Karachi, Pakistan, route to receive recruits and send out trained members, Zarqawi's Herat gambit established a new route through Iran. As the Iranians were aggressively controlling the Iran-Afghanistan border, Zarqawi mastered the art of clandestine infiltration into and travel within Iran.

Gradually he created a network in Iran and beyond into Iraq, firstly in the Kurdish north through his contacts in both the Islamic Movement Kurdistan and its factions such as Ansar al-Islam in Iraq. Since 2001 he has gained control of several regional groups by giving training and logistical support. Some of these groups, such as Ansar al-Islam led by Mullah Krekar (now in Norway), had extensive networks in Europe and North America.

Until 2001 Zarqawi was a regional figure with a focus on Jordan, Israel and Turkey. It was only after the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in Oct 2001 that he expanded his operation to Europe. The provision of training and assistance enabled Zarqawi to connect like-minded individuals and groups building networks. Although many of these networks were independent from al-Qa'ida, they enjoyed support from it and its associated groups such as charities and community institutions worldwide.

Zarqawi's access through Iran not only helped him to develop operations in Jordan, but also in Israel and Turkey. The network developed by Zarqawi helped him and his associates in al-Qa'ida and other groups use the Iran route to move to Iraq and beyond. After a period in Iran, Zarqawi moved to Iraq where he is directing the terror campaign against the US led coalition troops in Iraq.

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