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After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq

Although they worked together nominally, the central Al Qaeda network, as led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's terrorist group in Iraq held vastly different conceptions of jihad. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq minimized the magnitude of that ideological clash, enabling Zarqawi's limited cooperation with Al Qaeda in the Iraqi arena. Although they used each other for tactical support, publicity, and recruiting purposes, their doctrinal differences made them only allies of convenience rather than genuine partners, and as Zarqawi's tactics grew more extreme and indiscriminate, Al Qaeda chose to distance itself from his handiwork.

The U.S. air strike that killed Zarqawi on June 7, 2006, deprived Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) of its strategic leader. But the knowledge that U.S., Iraqi, and Jordanian intelligence effectively penetrated AQI to gather information on Zarqawi's whereabouts is just as important to the group's future as Zarqawi's elimination. The coalition's demonstrated ability to gather accurate intelligence is likely to frighten and sow distrust among AQI's remaining members. This heightens the leadership challenge for AQI's new emir, identified only under the alias Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir. His response to the internal security questions and the lingering doctrinal impasse with Al Qaeda proper will determine the organization's future trajectory.

The challenge for Muhajir is to strike a balance between appealing to secular and tribal Sunnis in Iraq, some of whom likely provided intelligence that helped doom Zarqawi, while maintaining an insular terrorist network that can

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sustain potentially weakening criticism from Islamic, Arab, and Western sources. During his tenure, Zarqawi discovered that these two goals require unique ideological and operational strategies that may be mutually exclusive. A moderate ideology allows for mass appeal, whereas a more extreme ideology that emphasizes the moral imperative of separation from society increases group cohesion but impairs recruiting. Zarqawi developed a controversial strategy to sidestep this contradiction, which ultimately widened the rift between his group and bin Laden's. Now, Muhajir or whoever ends up at AQI's helm must clarify AQI's focus to counter increasing factionalism. This is easier said than done. Muhajir has done little to clarify AQI's strategic future in the months since Zarqawi was killed. The United States can seize on this turning point to manipulate AQI's points of instability.

Enemies Near and Far

After being released from a Jordanian prison in 1999, where he was held for five years on terrorism-related charges, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan to establish his own terrorist training camp. He did not, however, join Al Qaeda. Sayf al-Adl, a senior Al Qaeda leader, explained that Zarqawi's disagreement with Al Qaeda, or more specifically, bin Laden, was ideological: "The controversial issues with [Zarqawi] were neither new nor uncommon.... The most important issue with [Zarqawi] was the stance regarding the Saudi regime and how to deal with it in light of the Islamic laws that pertain to excommunication and belief."[1] The disagreement between Zarqawi and Al Qaeda over Saudi Arabia hinted at what would become their fundamental discord: whether jihadi-salafists should prioritize attacks against the "near enemy" or the "far enemy." This debate would not be easily resolved. Even three years later, when Zarqawi was building a terrorist network in Iraq called Tawhid wal Jihad, he did not join Al Qaeda.

Zarqawi and Al Qaeda based their versions of jihad on their divergent understandings of their enemy's center of gravity. Bin Laden's Al Qaeda saw U.S. support (the far enemy) for Arab governments in funding, the granting of legitimacy, and weapons sales as the source of apostate political power and therefore prioritized attacks on the United States. In contrast, Zarqawi focused on apostate cultural and political influence within the Islamic world (the near enemy), which he considered a separate issue from U.S. governmental support. Thus, the two parties employed different strategies of warfare even as they shared the same ultimate goal: the reestablishment of the caliphate, a single, transnational Islamic state.

This ideological dispute between Zarqawi and Al Qaeda was never resolved, which explains much of the tension between them even after Zarqawi swore allegiance to Al Qaeda. Zarqawi and bin Laden put aside their differences

because the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its subsequent intimate relationship with the new Iraqi government conflated the near and far enemy. The functional implications of the ideological gap between Zarqawi and Al Qaeda were reduced greatly by the invasion, enabling them to cooperate operationally even as they continued to disagree ideologically. In 1999, when Zarqawi operated in Afghanistan, his ideological differences translated into different tactics. At that time, Al Qaeda's focus on attacking the U.S. homeland required very different planning than an attack on an Arab regime or apostate cultural site. In present-day Iraq, however, the operational implications of the two strategies are not so distinct. An attack on a U.S. patrol or an Iraqi police station requires similar planning and is a direct blow against both an apostate government and a critical U.S. foreign policy goal.

> Zarqawi and Al Qaeda were allies of convenience rather than genuine partners.

Zarqawi's agreement to join Al Qaeda in the fall of 2004, 18 months after the invasion of Iraq, did not mean that he immediately acceded to Al Qaeda's ideological and operational strategy. In a book released online in May 2005, the chief of Zarqawi's *shari'a* committee, Abu Hamzah al-Baghdadi, explicitly contradicted Al Qaeda's doctrine by restating Zarqawi's focus on the near enemy: "Apostasy is a greater transgression than original disbelief, and the apostate is a greater enemy.… [T]he enemy who is close to the Muslims is more dangerous. When you fight him, you avert his evil and the evil of those who stand behind him. If the Muslims occupy themselves with fighting the far enemy, the near enemy will seize the chance to hurt the Muslims."[2]

During Zarqawi's tenure as emir, AQI's relationship with Al Qaeda was a function of strategic convenience rather than doctrinal agreement. For Al Qaeda, attaching its name to Zarqawi's activities enabled it to maintain relevance even as its core forces were destroyed or on the run. Zarqawi, meanwhile, used the Al Qaeda brand to facilitate recruiting. This nominal relationship was never truly robust; its weaknesses became increasingly apparent when Zarqawi ignored instructions from Al Qaeda to cease attacks against civilian and Shi'a cultural targets, which could not easily be interpreted as strikes against the far enemy. This decision was not taken lightly, and it was largely a function of AQI's second dilemma.

The Gharib Paradox and Shi'a Strategy

All terrorist groups face an important ideological paradox. Their ideas must appeal to a popular audience, but they also must be insular enough to maintain internal group cohesion in the face of external criticism. The latter

effect is often achieved by denigrating the masses that do not belong to the group, which naturally limits mass appeal. Zarqawi dealt with this paradox by favoring internal group cohesion over popular appeal, a tendency illustrated by his long-standing nickname, al-Gharib, or the Stranger, a common *nom de guerre* among jihadists.

Will Al Qaeda in Iraq follow Zarqawi's teaching or bin Laden's?

Zarqawi's adoption of Gharib in the early 1990s was a means of steeling himself for the isolation of the long fight on which he had embarked. This definition of identity—an outsider from mainstream society—embraces and expropriates isolation from the majority so that, instead of being a source of despair and weakness, seclusion promotes unity and strength.[3] The gharib identity informed Zarqawi's activities until his death. In October 2005, he paraphrased scholars and *hadith* to argue that God smiles on strangers because they adhere to Islam even as the masses abandon God:

> The strangers … are the good few among the evil many…. These various descriptions of the strangers by the prophet, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, while explaining the great role of these strangers in their places and during the times of their alienation, namely their role of implementing and adhering to the orders of God, also explains the immense pain and suffering of these strangers and their great patience in facing them.[4]

Zarqawi used the gharib identity to explain the disadvantaged political position of jihadists and to suggest that their isolation and criticism indicated the moral rectitude of their path. Zarqawi cultivated this identity within his organization to prevent discouragement and disillusionment, stating that "[t]hose who belong to the victorious group can tolerate the bleakness of their path and they are not alarmed when they see that only few men take such a path. They are only compared in this with the best of creation and the eminent prophets and messengers."[5]

Zarqawi's approach to the gharib paradox made AQI resilient but impeded his ability to build a social consensus in the Sunni community that would be strong enough to assert any real political control in Iraq. An inflexible, extremist ideology that relishes violence and embraces criticism as an indicator of ideological correctness is always going to alienate more people than it attracts, a trend that played out as Iraq's tribal Sunnis increasingly rejected Zarqawi.

Back in 2004, Zarqawi made a critical choice about how to deal with Iraq's Sunni tribes. At the time, Zarqawi believed that increasing cooperation between Sunni tribal leaders and U.S. as well as Iraqi government forces left him with two bad options and one long-shot hope for building an alliance with the

tribes. The first option was to attack the tribal chiefs directly despite the probability of alienating Sunnis in his base areas. The second was to abandon Iraq to fight elsewhere.[6] Because neither option was palatable, Zarqawi reasoned that his only hope of making common cause with the tribal leaders was to instigate widespread Shi'a-on-Sunni violence.[7] Zarqawi hoped that provoking a Shi'a backlash against Sunnis would convince moderate and tribal Sunnis that the Iraqi government was simply a veil of legitimacy disguising a coordinated Shi'a plot to attack Sunnis. This, Zarqawi hoped, would compel secular Sunni groups to ally with him and adopt his ideology and methods. In other words, Zarqawi believed that it was not necessary to moderate his ideology and strategy to become attractive to moderate Sunnis because he believed that he could quickly radicalize the Sunni population. He would solve the gharib paradox by dramatically changing the underlying conditions.

Six months before joining Al Qaeda, Zarqawi explained this Shi'a strategy to its leaders, saying that

> targeting [Shi'a] in religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies … and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of the Sabeans.[8]

This is not to say that Zarqawi opposed attacking Shi'a targets as a worthwhile goal in and of itself. The killings were intended to punish the Shi'a for theological offenses, to correct historical injustice, and to penalize collaboration with U.S. forces. Yet, Zarqawi's policy had a grander strategic purpose of building popular support for Zarqawi in the Sunni areas of Iraq without moderating the ideological extremism that insulates the movement from outside criticism.

Zarqawi's problem was that not all criticism of his strategy came from outside the jihadist movement. In the summer of 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second in command, criticized Zarqawi's Shi'a strategy, claiming that attacks on Shi'a targets distorted the image of jihadists and distracted them from their most important enemy, the United States. This disagreement pertained to more than just the Shi'a; it reflected the older disagreement over whether or not attacks should be focused on the near enemy or the far enemy. Zarqawi's attacks on Shi'a cultural sites and civilian institutions were more difficult to justify as damaging to the U.S. far enemy than attacks on U.S. or Iraqi security forces. As Zarqawi's attacks grew more indiscriminate, the operational nexus between the near and far enemies that was created by the U.S. presence in Iraq dissolved, and the alliance of convenience between Zarqawi and Al Qaeda broke down.

Zarqawi's Strategic Failure

Zarqawi's response to the two fundamental dilemmas facing AQI was internally inconsistent and ultimately self-defeating. First, although AQI built a nominal relationship with Al Qaeda based on the U.S. presence in Iraq, Zarqawi pursued an operational strategy premised not on the U.S. occupation but on the underlying sectarian divisions in Iraqi society. That operational strategy ultimately undermined the confluence of interests that had enabled the original alliance. Second, Zarqawi designed an insular ideology that would complement his brutal operational strategy. This ideological decision was ill conceived precisely because AQI's controversial operational strategy ensured that the most damning criticism would come not from outside the jihadi movement but from inside Al Qaeda itself.

> How much will Al Qaeda in Iraq expand its area of operations outside of Iraq?

The best illustration of Zarqawi's self-defeating strategy was the November 2005 coordinated bombing attack of three hotels in Amman, Jordan. The attack was widely derided in Jordan, particularly after the revelation that one bomb had detonated amid a wedding party. Although there is no public record of Al Qaeda condemning Zarqawi for this attack, in retrospect its silence was deafening. On April 13, 2006, six months after the Amman bombing, Zawahiri released a video that, in part, praised Zarqawi.[9] This was striking because Zawahiri's tape appears to have been made in early November 2005, just before the Amman hotel attacks. In the video, Zawahiri suggests it was intended to mark the anniversary of the infamous Tora Bora battle in Afghanistan, which occurred in November and December of 2001. He also referred to the September 2005 reelection of Egyptian president Husni Mubarak and the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan as recent events.

The delay between taping and release was perhaps an attempt by Zawahiri to distance Al Qaeda from the Amman attacks because of the negative reaction they generated in the Arab world. That Zawahiri did not mention Zarqawi by name in any of his statements during the interim period is further evidence that Al Qaeda did not want to be associated with an unpopular attack that did not serve its operational and ideological strategy. Although Zarqawi also tried to distance himself from some of the carnage of these attacks, he clearly considered the premise of attacking Jordanian hotels consistent with his modus operandi of attacking civilian apostates. To Al Qaeda's leaders, however, the Amman attacks demonstrated that the functional implications of Zarqawi's ideological and strategic differences with Al Qaeda remained significant despite their confluence of interests in Iraq.

Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future in Iraq

Many major issues drive factionalism inside AQI, including the basic questions of power and influence. The most important strategic question is a function of AQI's two critical dilemmas discussed above. Should AQI continue to conduct excruciatingly brutal attacks, particularly against Shi'a civilians, or should it fall in line behind Al Qaeda's leadership and refocus attacks on the far enemy? In other words, should AQI respond to the gharib paradox by following Zarqawi's teaching or bin Laden's?

One man that seems to be firmly in the Zarqawi camp is Abdallah bin Rashid al-Baghdadi, the emir of the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC). The MSC, which was formed in January 2006 as an umbrella media group for several jihadist groups in Iraq, may play an increasingly important role now that the jihad's greatest media champion, Zarqawi, is no more. On June 9, 2006, Baghdadi reiterated his determination to continue Zarqawi's jihad against Iraq's Shi'a. Baghdadi's intentions were further clarified on June 21, 2006, when the MSC's legal committee authorized the execution of four Russian hostages.[10] A video of their beheadings was circulated online four days later.[11]

Baghdadi's statement stood in stark contrast to the first official jihadi statement made after Zarqawi's death. In that statement, the deputy emir of AQI, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi, pledged to continue bin Laden's strategy in Iraq.[12] Iraqi ignored the fact that bin Laden's strategy had never been followed in Iraq and that doing so would represent a major strategic shift for the organization. His attempt to ignore this reality was likely an attempt to position himself as a close intellectual ally of bin Laden.

In this internal debate, the Zarqawi camp is likely to have the upper hand. Maintaining strategic momentum will be simpler than changing it midstream. Furthermore, the apparent penetration of AQI by U.S. and Iraqi intelligence, as indicated by the U.S. ability to pinpoint Zarqawi's advisers and track them to the safe house where he was killed, will compel the group to close ranks ideologically and operationally. In an environment of internecine warfare and distrust, the pressure to respond to the gharib paradox by increasing the brutality of attacks and demonizing all nongroup members is very high. AQI will attempt to increase group solidarity through shared participation in brutal acts and will use both ideological and operational participation in such behavior as a means of vetting members. The increase of sectarian violence in Iraq since Zarqawi's death will only reinforce this tendency.

Another question regarding Zarqawi's successor is whether AQI should be led by an Iraqi or another foreigner like Zarqawi. The appointment of Muhajir as the new emir, whose pseudonym implies he is not an Iraqi, suggests this question has been decided, but that does not mean all of the issues

surrounding it have been resolved. One critical issue is the vulnerability of AQI to penetration by U.S. and Iraqi intelligence. If Iraqi intelligence brought Zarqawi down, foreign fighters in the group may lose trust in their Iraqi comrades. Likewise, the revelation that Jordanian intelligence, which worked closely with Iraqi tribes to gather information on Zarqawi, contributed to Zarqawi's demise may sow distrust of foreigners among Iraqi elements of AQI.[13] Although AQI's ideology eschews nationality, having foreign leadership certainly did not help the group win friends among Iraq's Sunni population. In the wake of Zarqawi's failed attempt to radicalize large numbers of Iraqi Sunnis, some AQI members will likely advocate reaching out to them by elevating Iraqi members of the organization.

> It may be better to let disagreements fester rather than to eliminate all potential targets.

The third question concerns how much AQI should expand its area of operations outside of Iraq. Zarqawi's Shi'a strategy was a long shot to avoid pursuing the only other strategies that he felt were available: confront the tribal leaders head-on or leave Iraq. The Shi'a strategy was clearly failing even before Zarqawi was killed, which accounts for the increase in attacks on tribal leaders and helps explain AQI's effort to build infrastructure for jihad outside of Iraq.[14] Even setting aside the November 2005 Amman hotel attacks, the evidence that Zarqawi was planning to expand the jihad beyond Iraq is robust. Jordanian sources report that up to 300 terrorists trained in Iraq have since returned home to await orders.[15]

Zarqawi's final missive focused on a regional Shi'a conspiracy against Sunnis and threatened Lebanon's Hizballah in particular.[16] A document found in the safe house where Zarqawi was killed outlined a plan to incite a war between Iran and the United States. One possible tactic was to frame Iran for attacks in the West itself.[17] The debate within AQI over operations outside of Iraq will inevitably be tied to the question of whether AQI's future revolves around attacking the near enemy, like Zarqawi advocated, or the far enemy, as bin Laden argued. Even though Zarqawi was toying with the idea of blaming Iran for attacks on Western targets, his long-standing doctrine suggests that AQI's primary focus would likely have remained apostate Arabs in the Middle East. Zarqawi's death may actually strengthen the negotiating position of jihadists dedicated to attacking the U.S. homeland.

Decoding Muhajir

After Zarqawi's death, Muhajir has assumed the responsibility of leading AQI. His primary challenge is to consolidate control over AQI's various

elements while providing strategic guidance on these critical strategic questions, which will not be easy. From the moment Muhajir was appointed, U.S. forces, AQI members, and online sympathizers speculated about the emir's real identity. Some sympathizers maintained it was Iraqi, AQI's deputy emir, whereas Maj. Gen. William Caldwell declared that Muhajir was really Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian with long-standing ties to Zawahiri. Meanwhile, another group hoped to build support around Baghdadi, emir of the MSC. As of this writing, confusion over the identity of AQI's new emir has not been definitively resolved, a fact that alone demonstrates how Zarqawi's death was a significant blow to AQI. In his wake, Muhajir must harangue disparate factions into accepting his authority, but more substantively, he must address the distinct strategic perspectives within AQI. Further, he must do all of this in a very difficult operational environment. Zarqawi's killing demonstrated that AQI had been penetrated, and Muhajir must redefine AQI's strategic direction within an organization that he cannot completely trust.

During his tenure as AQI leader, Zarqawi used public statements released online to convey determination, ideological fervor, and strategic purpose to followers, enemies, and pole-sitters. These statements provided strategic context for AQI's attacks, which might otherwise be perceived as simple acts of sadism rather than military instruments designed to achieve specific outcomes. They also encouraged widely dispersed AQI members to sustain criticism and suffer the hardships of jihad. Without a central node defiantly explaining the group's strategic purpose, AQI as we know it would have ceased to exist.

The most striking attribute of Muhajir's tenure thus far is the fact that he has chosen not to define either his own identity or his strategic vision for AQI clearly. Muhajir must have good reasons for this silence because the costs of such strategic ambiguity are very high. Muhajir is likely foregoing the benefits of strategic clarity in order to mollify different factions within AQI. His silence prolongs the internal debate within AQI over the group's future strategy. Muhajir is unlikely to force a resolution until he is certain he will win. In a covert organization that depends on the cooperation of many members, the standard for victory is not simply a majority, it is near consensus.

Predicting Al Qaeda's Next Move in Iraq

In the long run, it may be better to let disagreements fester within AQI rather than to eliminate all potential targets immediately.[18] Striking kinetically at an organization's leadership is not always the best way to destroy its effectiveness. Asking who will be the next emir of AQI is a useful intellectual question, but it may be somewhat misleading. Asking which leader within the jihadist movement in Iraq will be Zarqawi's intellectual successor may

be a better way to frame the issue than focusing on the AQI organization specifically. Despite this ambiguity, some broad conclusions can be reached about the future of AQI and the wider jihadist movement in Iraq.

First, Al Qaeda in Iraq will fragment. Other Islamic groups in Iraq, notably Ansar al-Sunnah and the Islamic Army of Iraq, will collect some of AQI's inevitably disaffected derivatives. Zarqawi's greatest strength was

> The leadership would welcome a fight between the United States and Iran's Shi'a leaders.

not his ideological prowess, it was his personal leadership skills. Muhajir, whether he is the Egyptian Masri or someone else, is unlikely to be commensurately capable. Some elements of AQI will likely leave the organization, both in response to doctrinal disagreements and to fears that the group has been penetrated by coalition intelligence operatives. In order to build unity within AQI, Muhajir or whoever ultimately takes control will most likely continue Zarqawi-esque attacks but will at least temporarily reduce AQI's anti–Sunni-apostate rhetoric.

Zarqawi may be dead, but the gharib identity will live on, either in AQI itself or in some derivative organization. Although Zarqawi was rightly and frequently derided as an ill-educated leader, he combined ideology and action in a manner that will continue to inspire many in and outside of Iraq. His ideology had teeth. As damaging as AQI's brutal anti-Shi'a attacks may be to Al Qaeda's image, a public rift would be even more traumatic. Despite continued strategic tension, neither party will provoke a dramatic falling-out.

Second, AQI's new emir will try to attack outside of Iraq. AQI's long-term focus on the near enemy suggests it is best positioned to attack Arab countries, rather than the United States or European targets. Although a specific location will not be Muhajir's first concern, he will look for a place with established support networks, a large Sunni population, historical Sunni-Shi'a tension, and an unpopular apostate government. The most likely targets are Lebanon and Syria, where a dramatic and bloody attack on Shi'a targets would be extremely destabilizing. Although attacks on Israel are the lowest common denominator of terrorist act in much of the Islamic world and moving in that direction is, to some degree, an act of desperation, organizing a successful attack on Israel could bolster the credibility of AQI's new emir more than any other action. Zarqawi's successors will be heartened by the fighting between Israel and Hizballah. Although they would prefer to see a Sunni group, rather than Shi'a Hizballah, be the champion of militant anti-Zionism, they will see war between two of their biggest enemies as a positive development and a potential opportunity.

Attacks on the United States or Europe are possible, but this would signify a greater degree of subordination to bin Laden and Al Qaeda proper. No matter where AQI chooses to focus geographically, it will attempt to exploit events in the region. One of the most provocative would be a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran. Although Iran itself is not a good arena for jihad, Muhajir and the AQI leadership would welcome a fight between the United States and Iran's Shi'a leaders. If the United States attacks Iran because of its nuclear program, the network will actively attempt to heighten the tension regionally, perhaps by staging dramatic attacks in Syria or Lebanon and blaming either Iran or the United States.

Whatever the specific target, AQI's network outside of Iraq will begin to freelance. Communications problems will make it more difficult for AQI to exert bureaucratic control over its global network. In lieu of direct bureaucratic control, ideological homogeneity and group insularity are very important for organizational cohesion.[19] Although Muhajir, like his predecessor, will eventually develop a strategic media presence to distribute ideology, Zarqawi's death will loosen the personal and ideological bonds connecting the dispersed jihadis to AQI. These individuals will maintain a kinship to the Iraqi jihad but may be less directly tied to the AQI network.

Implications for U.S. Withdrawal

Wittingly and unwittingly, U.S. policy shapes the political terrain on which the jihadi-salafist network, including AQI, is built. By employing a selective use of force, a carefully designed political and military presence in the Middle East, and information operations, the United States can design the battlefield to be as disruptive to the jihadi-salafists as possible. Generally speaking, measured actions are best. AQI, like other terrorist groups, would like to provoke unhelpful overreactions.

U.S. policymakers must always think holistically about U.S. interests before embarking on any initiative. No single approach is correct, and policymakers must carefully analyze the costs and benefits of all options. Although disrupting the AQI–Al Qaeda nexus is a critical foreign policy goal, it should not be pursued at the expense of all others. Protecting U.S. economic interests and containing Iran's nuclear ambitions are but two examples of more important priorities than driving a wedge in Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, in order to increase the discord inside AQI and between AQI and Al Qaeda, the United States should increase the distance between the near and far enemies by minimizing public support—military, economic, and moral—for "apostate" Arab regimes, including Iraq's. To divide Zarqawi's ideological successors from the bin Laden sympathizers, the United States should aggravate the functional implications of their ideological disagreement by disengaging from Iraq as much as possible.

Strategically, disengagement means beginning the process of moving troops out of Iraq and explicitly guaranteeing that all U.S. forces will leave eventually. Even if credibly separating the near and far enemies in the short term is not possible, the United States can complicate jihadist long-term planning by forcing on them a debate about how to proceed once the near and far enemies are less obviously linked. The U.S. debate over Iraq has been focused on means for too long, specifically the timeline-for-withdrawal debate, to the neglect of the most important issue, the end state, i.e., complete withdrawal versus a semipermanent presence. To disrupt the jihadists, U.S. strategic direction must be very clear, and talk must be supported by visible action. This is not a call for U.S. troops to run for the exits immediately but for the United States to make its strategic intentions to withdraw completely apparent. If that is not its intention, the United States must be prepared for Americans to die in Iraq in perpetuity.

> **N**either Zarqawi nor Al Qaeda were ever the center of gravity of the Iraqi insurgency.

Critics will rightly question whether the benefit of upsetting AQI's relationship with Al Qaeda justifies a strategic reorientation. If the war on terrorism is our primary concern, it very well may. The sectarian violence wracking Iraq is extraordinarily disruptive but does not necessarily translate into increased support for Al Qaeda and its affiliated movements. Iraq's violent mobs and numerous secular insurgents will not target U.S. interests beyond Iraq's border, but AQI and Al Qaeda will. The argument that we must prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for terrorists is certainly potent, but its impact is mitigated by the fact that Iraq is already serving that purpose. If the war in Iraq is but one front in a wider war on terrorism, then the campaign there should be designed to disrupt those elements that threaten U.S. interests around the world. Furthermore, the functional aspects of the strategic reorientation, in the short term, need not be overly dramatic. Although the timeline is protracted, Gen. George W. Casey's reported plan to reduce U.S. combat brigades in Iraq from 14 to six over the next 16 months is the right kind of thinking, as long as it is coupled with an unambiguous strategic message.[20]

Most importantly, U.S. planners should resist the temptation, in an attempt to avoid the psychological costs of defeat, to pursue middling strategies that have little hope of bringing victory but carry significant costs in blood and treasure. If the long-term outcome in Iraq resembles what many now consider victory in Afghanistan, the United States will be in a very precarious situation indeed. Maintaining a small U.S. force to advise and support an Iraqi government that can assert continuous authority only in some of Iraq's provinces would be a very expensive strategy to give Zarqawi's

successors and other jihadists exactly what they want: access to U.S. troops, ungoverned space in the heart of the Middle East, a means of draining the U.S. Treasury, and a recruiting boon.

Although a decisive, complete withdrawal of troops is vital, the inverse principle is just as important. If the United States is determined to remain in Iraq, it should maximize the opportunity to crush the insurgency by increasing the number of troops on the ground. Calls for maintaining current troop levels or a phased drawdown of troops without a clear, strategic end state are well meaning but will ultimately serve our worst enemies' interests rather than our own. In other words, strategic action must be resolute.

Getting Al Qaeda Out of Iraq

The United States should take advantage of AQI's differences with Al Qaeda rather than criticize AQI's ideology, overtly or covertly. Zarqawi's *gharib* identity will live on in AQI. Directly criticizing the network will be counterproductive, particularly in the months after his death, because the group's ideology will manipulate criticism from the outside into solidarity within. Perhaps most importantly, the United States must be aware that neither Zarqawi nor AQI were ever the center of gravity of the Iraqi insurgency. AQI will be less dangerous without Zarqawi, but its derivatives will metastasize and grow. Secular, Sunni, and Shi'a groups will continue to kill Americans and disrupt the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, the United States can improve its overall prospects in this long war by sowing division within AQI and between AQI and Al Qaeda by simply avoiding actions that unite these rivals despite their ideological divisions.

Notes

1. Abu Hamzah al-Baghdadi, "Why Do We Fight, and Whom Do We Fight?" June 2005, http://www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums.

2. Ibid.

3. The nickname also invokes an Arabic literary tradition that celebrates the lonely traveler longing for the simple comforts of home. See Abu 'L-Faraj al-Isfahani, *The Book of Strangers*, trans. Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000).

4. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, audio lecture, September 30, 2005, http://www.world-news-network.net (appears to be derived from the Sahih Muslim, *Kitab al-Iman* [The book of faith], chap. 66.

5. Ibid.

6. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, letter released by the Coalition Provisional Authority, February 12, 2004, http://www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212_zarqawi_full.html.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ayman al-Zawahiri, **"**Four Years After the Tora Bora Battles; From Tora Bora to Iraq," *Global News Network*, April 13, 2006, http://www.w-n-n.net.

10. Mujahidin Shura Council, untitled video, June 21, 2006, http://www.hanein.net.

11. Mujahidin Shura Council, untitled video, June 26, 2006, http://www.muslm.net/vb.

12. Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi and the Mujahidin Shura Council Media Committee, "Statement Untitled—Acknowledging Zarqawi's Death," June 8, 2006, http://www.tajdeed.ork.uk/forums.

13. Borzou Daragahi and Josh Meyer, "'We Knew Him': Jordanian Spies Infiltrated Iraq to Find Zarqawi," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2006, p. A1.

14. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Situation Report," Harmony document no. IZ-060316-01, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony_docs.asp. This document was written by an aide in Zarqawi's organization. The document was captured in Iraq by U.S. forces in early 2006.

15. Michael Slackman and Scott Shane, "Terrorists Trained by Zarqawi Went Abroad, Jordan Says," *New York Times*, June 11, 2006, p. A1.

16. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Has the Story of the Rejectionists Reached Thee?" *Islamic Renewal Forum*, June 1, 2006, www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums.

17. For a document found in a safe house and released by Iraqi national security adviser Mouwafak al-Rubaie, see Sameer N. Yacoub, "Al-Qaida in Iraq Sought War Between U.S. and Iran," *North County Times*, June 15, 2006, http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2006/06/16/news/nation/15_01_226_15_06.txt. As this document was released just after Zarqawi's killing by the Iraqi national security adviser, some have questioned its veracity. Whether authentic or not, the claim that Zarqawi hoped to instigate hostilities between the United States and Iran is likely accurate.

18. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Department of Social Sciences, U.S. Military Academy, "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities," February 14, 2006, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/Harmony%20and%20Disharmony%20--%20CTC.pdf.

19. Ibid.

20. Michael Gordon, "U.S. General in Iraq Outlines Troop Cuts," *New York Times*, June 25, 2006, p. A1.