

Profile: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

A profile of the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the man responsible for coordinating suicide bombings in Amman and Madrid, multiple attacks on Iraqi Shiites and Shiite mosques, and the highly-publicized beheading of American Nicholas Berg.

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Who was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi?

Jordanian by birth, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi transformed himself into a nationless freelance terrorist. Tactically, geographically, and to some extent philosophically, he established a pattern of inconsistency. His flexibility made him all the more fearsome—and all the more difficult to pin down. Despite a bounty of \$25 million on his head and vastly increased media attention over the past five years, hard facts about Zarqawi's past are few and far between. Hearsay, on the other hand, abounds. As *Foreign Policy* put it, Zarqawi's story has become "one of the most powerful and enduring myths of the war on terror."

How did Zarqawi die?

On June 7, 2006, U.S. forces in Iraq launched an air strike on a safe house some fifty-five miles north of Baghdad, where Zarqawi was hiding. The attack was the product of a prolonged intelligence effort to track down the terrorist leader, and was reportedly

helped along by a tip from Jordan's intelligence service that Zarqawi planned to hold a meeting in nearby Baquba.

While Zarqawi's death marked an important symbolic victory for the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, President Bush warned "We can expect the terrorists and insurgents to carry on without him." In fact, in the months before his death, some reports indicated Zarqawi's influence over the insurgency had begun to wane.

Where does the myth of Zarqawi begin and end?

In 2003, Colin Powell told the UN Security Council that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was, in his very person, the link between Iraq's Baathist regime and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. Zarqawi's dealings, Powell said, proved that Iraq harbored a terrorist network, and mandated preemptive military action against the country. This assertion was later disproved, but it irreversibly thrust Zarqawi's name into the international spotlight.

Though false, Powell's words were darkly self-fulfilling. Enabled by global attention, a man previously considered little more than a malcontent thug emerged as Iraq's leading coordinator of terror.

Zarqawi was born Ahmed al-Khalayleh in October 1966. He took his eventual *nom de guerre* from Zarqa, the poor Jordanian mining town in which he grew up. He had neither the connections nor the proud lineage of a bin Laden, nor even the education of a man like Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's spiritual mastermind. By his eighteenth birthday, both of Zarqawi's parents were dead. He dropped out of school and soon wound up in prison, not for religiously motivated extremist involvement but for drug possession and sexual assault.

Experts who interviewed prison mates and former acquaintances of Zarqawi's say his time in prison gave him focus and religious motivation. Soon after his release, he sought out mujahadeen jihadi groups in Jordan. In early 1989, Zarqawi moved to Afghanistan, hoping to join the fight against Soviet occupation, which by that time was already dwindling significantly. He spent time working in Peshawar, a Pakistani border town known for its illicit black market, and for its bristling Islamic radicalism.

It was in Peshawar that Zarqawi adopted the fundamentalist Salafist faith, which experts say fuels his animosity toward Shiite Muslims and moderate Muslim governments. It may also have been in Peshawar that Zarqawi first crossed paths with Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi then working to organize support for what he perceived as the beginnings of a global holy war.

What terrorist acts are linked to Zarqawi?

The most famous attacks connected to Zarqawi are the Amman, Jordan suicide bombings of November 9, 2005, and the Madrid train bombings of March 11, 2004. He has also claimed credit for the April 24, 2004, suicide attack on the Iraqi port city of Basra, multiple attacks on Shiite worshippers and Shiite mosques in Iraq, and the videotaped and widely publicized beheading of a kidnapped American contractor, Nicholas Berg, also in Iraq.

But Zarqawi's influence was not limited to these specific attacks. Training camps he established in the lawless Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands continue to churn out suicide bombers, often of Palestinian origin, and experts say Zarqawi was probably responsible for a significant number of attacks, in Iraq and elsewhere, for which he never claimed credit.

Zarqawi frequently transmitted public messages through an intermediary or the occasional audio tape. Unlike al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Zarqawi always kept his face hidden in his communiqués. That changed on April 25, when Zarqawi released a video of himself decrying the three-year "crusader campaign."

What is Zarqawi's affiliation with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda?

Part of what makes Zarqawi's influence so hard to classify is the broad uncertainty about which groups he helped build. He was often referred to as al-Qaeda's lead operator in Iraq, though just how much contact he had with either Osama bin Laden or other al-Qaeda higher-ups is far from clear.

Experts say Zarqawi and bin Laden most likely met in Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, in 2000, though it is possible the two met in Peshawar in the early 1990s. Despite their mutual interests, Zarqawi repeatedly refused to join bin Laden's al-Qaeda group, according to widespread accounts. Apparently, Zarqawi could not countenance bin Laden's insistence on targeting the "far enemy," the United States. Rather, Zarqawi directed his animosity toward Israel, Jews generally, and Jordan. At some point in the mid-1990s, after another stint in prison, Zarqawi formed a group called Tawhid, or "Unity." Tawhid was initially funded by the Afghan Taliban government, and its efforts focused on training suicide bombers in a number of camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Even acknowledging an initial administrative separation, there is still a great deal of debate over how much interaction Tawhid has had with bin Laden and al-Qaeda, particularly in the years since Zarqawi's influence has burgeoned. It is known that Zarqawi sent a communiqué to bin Laden in January 2004, which was intercepted by Iraqi Kurds. Coalition authorities also intercepted a July 2005 letter, of unverified

authenticity, apparently sent from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Zarqawi. Also, though there is no financial paper trail linking Zarqawi to al-Qaeda, bin Laden at least nominally welcomed "union" with Zarqawi in videotapes broadcast by al-Jazeera—going so far as to call Zarqawi "the emir of the al-Qaeda organization in the land of the Tigris and the Euphrates."

Source:

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