



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER at West Point

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Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir's 15-Day Strategy

Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, who succeeded Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi as the Emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), broke over two months of silence on September 7, 2006. Al-Muhajir's decision to finally demonstrate public leadership by calling for an increase in violence over the next 15 days is a calculated risk intended to demonstrate his authority and, perhaps, root out informants in his organization.

Al-Muhajir is attempting to control a weakened organization. The U.S.' ability to track and effectively target Zarqawi demonstrated its ability to gather accurate intelligence on AQI's leadership, which is extremely destabilizing for a covert organization. U.S. and Iraqi success tracking down other AQI operatives since Zarqawi's assassination only underscores that trend.

Al-Muhajir stepped into this very uncertain security environment with the tall task of rebuilding internal trust within the group and providing clear strategic direction for the organization's future. Providing strategic direction necessarily means mediating between Zarqawi's acolytes and Osama bin Laden's. Zarqawi and bin Laden strongly disagreed over appropriate strategy in Iraq. Bin Laden felt attacking U.S. forces—in Iraq and in the homeland—should be the priority; Zarqawi was focused on provoking sectarian violence as a means of rallying Sunni support.

Al-Muhajir's 15-day strategy tries to appease both camps, demonstrate his new authority, and rebuild camaraderie within the group. He calls for every AQI member to kill an American within the next 15 days and, just as importantly, every Sunni that has suffered at the hands of Shiite or Iraqi government violence to kill one Shiite. This strategy has several effects:

First, al-Muhajir focuses AQI on the task of attacking Americans, but he embraces and encourages the sectarian violence that was Zarqawi's hallmark. Zarqawi hoped to inspire a widespread Sunni revolt in Iraq; al-Muhajir is continuing that political strategy even as he is focusing AQI militarily on U.S. targets.

Second, al-Muhajir will be able to take credit for whatever violence occurs within the next 15 days. It is a calculated risk because if violence subsides he will look weak, but if violence continues or ticks up al-Muhajir “proves” his ability to lead AQI and inspire attacks across Iraq.

Third, al-Muhajir understands that Zarqawi’s greatest strength was his ability to back up his ideas with real action. Actions and ideas reinforce one another. Al-Muhajir wants his organization to go back on the offensive in order to rebuild ideological solidarity in the group. He may also want to use the practice of violence against Americans as a means of testing the resolve of group members. He must suspect the group has been infiltrated and hopes that calling on all members to attack Americans will draw out the moles.

Al-Muhajir must be relatively confident that he can pull off major attacks in the next few weeks, but it is worth remembering that AQI is not the heart of the insurgency in Iraq. Although Zarqawi and AQI long tried to spur sectarian violence, warfare between Sunnis and Shiites has taken on a life of its own. Now, al-Muhajir is trying to position himself to take credit for this terrible cycle.

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