



# COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER at West Point

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## **The Post-Zarqawi Leadership Dilemma**

By Brian Fishman

Two statements released by the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) since Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's death provide insight into the fundamental questions surrounding Zarqawi's successor as Emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The MSC is an umbrella group for several jihadi organizations in Iraq.

On June 8, the Deputy Emir of AQI, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi, released a statement lauding Zarqawi and swearing to continue jihad on his behalf. Then, on June 9, the President of the MSC, Abdallah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi released a statement pledging to continue jihad and violently threatening Iraq's Shi'a.

These two critically important individuals, although not necessarily rivals, seem to have different perspectives on the fundamental question facing post-Zarqawi AQI: Should the group continue Zarqawi's strategy of attacks against civilian Shi'a in Iraq despite opposition from Osama bin Laden and the central Al Qaeda leadership?

Neither statement was released by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the man fingered by U.S. forces as the most likely successor to Zarqawi, but the two perspectives shed light on the ongoing debate inside AQI about the organization's future—no matter who the new Emir is.

Al-Iraqi's statement was the first official jihadi acknowledgment of Zarqawi's death. In it, al-Iraqi promised to continue jihad, referred deferentially to Osama bin Laden as the Emir of Al Qaeda, and pledged to continue implementing the strategy that bin Laden had designed for AQI. This is a notable sentiment, precisely because Zarqawi blatantly disregarded bin Laden's strategic direction by brutally attacking Shi'a civilians. Al-Iraqi seems to be brushing over that inconsistency in order to position himself as a close intellectual ally of bin Laden.

Conversely, al-Baghdadi's statement echoed Zarqawi's central message of attacking Iraq's Shi'a, which precipitated AQI's disagreement with bin Laden and Zawahiri. Al-Baghdadi even repeated some of Zarqawi's most common insults against the Shi'a, including likening them to Ibn al-Alqami, who Zarqawi often accused of betraying the Muslim defenders of Baghdad in 1258. Furthermore, al-Baghdadi did not mention bin Laden at all.

Al-Iraqi and al-Baghdadi's positions are not altogether surprising. Some Arab commentators have argued that al-Iraqi's senior role in AQI was a function of his intellectual affinity for bin Laden and Zawahiri, and that bin Laden almost made al-Iraqi Emir of AQI instead of Zarqawi. That is an unverified, but fascinating claim. Meanwhile, al-Baghdadi is the President of the Mujahidin Shura Council, which speaks for a number of jihadi organizations in Iraq. Because of this, he is responsible for maintaining a sense of strategic continuity for all of the organizations he represents, which is likely why he closely parroted Zarqawi's strategy in yesterday's release.

It is not clear where Abu Ayyub al-Masri falls on this spectrum, but Major General William Caldwell did say that al-Masri had been in contact with Zawahiri, which may put him closer to al-Iraqi than al-Baghdadi.

AQI will have a difficult time resolving its leadership question. Internal factions will undoubtedly have different visions for the future of the organization. Ultimately, ideology may not be the most important factor. Zarqawi had rare leadership skills that were a function of his physical presence and personality more than his ideology. For the next Emir of AQI to maintain continuity in the organization he will need to have similar skills; if not, doctrinal disagreements will tear the organization apart.

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