



# COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER at West Point

6 June 2006

## Zarqawi's Four Hours: Clarification and Ambition

By Brian Fishman

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's newly released three-recording, four-hour sermon has two purposes: (1) to refocus his organization after a period of strategic drift and, (2) to lay the intellectual foundation for expanding his operations regionally.

### *STRATEGIC FOCUS IN IRAQ*

As with most of Zarqawi's public statements, the Sunni community in Iraq is Zarqawi's primary audience. The purpose of this statement is to provide intellectual context and strategic direction for Zarqawi's ongoing military operations. In response to negative publicity after the November 2005 Amman hotel bombings, Zarqawi projected a much lower public profile in the first months of 2006.<sup>1</sup> Although this probably helped stem negative opinion of his group, recent documents suggest that the reduced profile correlates with a lack of strategic focus in his organization.

This statement, coming in the wake Zarqawi's recent videotape release, suggests that the period of Zarqawi's lower profile is over. Although attacks continued as Zarqawi lowered his profile, his reduced media presence left them disassociated from a larger strategic purpose. This statement is intended to rectify that situation by clearly explaining the "apostasy" and danger posed by the Shi'a.

Zarqawi's core strategic message—in this message and in numerous others—is that the Iraqi government is a veil to provide legitimacy for a Shi'a attempt to dominate and control Sunnis. It is very important for Zarqawi to explain the purpose of his attacks else they seem simple acts of brutal nihilism. The ultimate purpose of this two-pronged strategy is to provoke a violent Shi'a response that will radicalize and unite the Sunni community for jihad.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu) and [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-05-08-translation\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-05-08-translation_x.htm) for examples.

In this new release, Zarqawi also explicitly argues that the Shi'a must be eliminated before defeating the "original infidels." Maintaining this strategy will deepen his rift with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who rebuked Zarqawi for targeting the Shi'a in a letter captured by U.S. forces.<sup>2</sup>

Zarqawi's new statement is not simply explanatory; he understands that words can be weapons. Zarqawi directs his most derisive comments at the Mahdi Army, led by Moqtada al-Sadr. He mocks Sadr's cooperation with U.S. forces and suggests that Sadr's followers are bastard products of "temporary marriages" a Shi'a practice that Zarqawi often points to as evidence that the Shi'a are not true Muslims.

This is a sophisticated and very strategic maneuver. First, Zarqawi defines a vulnerable target audience: the Mahdi army. Zarqawi likely believes that when provoked Sadr and his followers will not show the restraint of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Second, Zarqawi delivers an emotional insult that is nonetheless completely consistent with his broader theological and strategic message. Generating a strategically grounded emotional message is a critical and very difficult technique—Zarqawi's attempt reflects a sophisticated understanding of media operations.

#### ***REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS***

Zarqawi's new statement targets the wider Arab audience in important new ways. It likely indicates an increased effort to build regional support networks (particularly in the Levant), if not develop an operational capacity outside of Iraq.

One of Zarqawi's standard arguments is that Shi'a historically betray "true" Muslims by supporting invaders. His most oft-cited "betrayal" is Shi'a Imam Ibn al-Alqami enabling the Mongol capture of Baghdad in 1258.

Zarqawi's new statement is important because he dramatically expands his list of Shi'a "betrayals" beyond Alqami. Although Zarqawi and his advisors have previously mentioned other examples, Zarqawi generally focuses on Alqami because it is a simple parable for Shi'a cooperation with the U.S. occupation of Iraq today. In particular, Zarqawi's new statement focuses on the challenges faced by Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din fighting crusaders in the Levant.

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter\\_in\\_english.pdf](http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf)

In discussing incidents of Shi'a betrayal, Zarqawi hopes to find historical metaphors that will be as prescient for Sunnis in the region as the Alqami argument has been in Iraq. Although Zarqawi condemns all Shi'a—from Iran to Lebanon—as a single enemy, he is clearly most interested in the Levant. After discussing Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din, Zarqawi argues that the Shi'a group Hizballah is currently betraying Muslims by serving as a buffer to defend Israel against more dangerous Sunni groups like his own.

Zarqawi's advisor Abu Anas al-Shami made many of these anti-Shi'a and anti-Hizballah arguments in 2004, but they are far more significant coming from Zarqawi himself. Zarqawi's command of detail is impressive: he recounts the history of Hizballah and the Shi'a Amal militia in Lebanon and tracks Iranian financial support. Zarqawi accuses Hizballah of not doing enough to support the Palestinian cause and recounts Amal's participation in the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacres of Palestinians.

Zarqawi's increased discussion of the Palestinian cause is a sign both of his regional ambitions and his own image problem. Many of Zarqawi's attacks have been very unpopular; by forcefully championing the Palestinian cause Zarqawi likely hopes that he can rebuild some support in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Brian Fishman  
Associate, Combating Terrorism Center  
[brian.fishman@usma.edu](mailto:brian.fishman@usma.edu)

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point  
607 Cullum Road  
United States Military Academy  
West Point, NY 10996  
<http://www.ctc.usma.edu>