

contested, particularly as the linkage between words and acts online and deeds offline is exceedingly problematic.²⁸

The nexus between Web 2.0 in particular and the media or virtual jihadist has undoubtedly had important repercussions for jihadism in the 21st century, rejuvenating its ailing ideology and facilitating the dissemination of its counterculture to new audiences, many of whom are beyond the traditional scope of official jihadist media organs. Although the jihadist message is increasingly being granted more diffuse audience penetration, the ideology itself has been forced to sacrifice a significant degree of its coherency and cogency along the way. Marshall McLuhan's well-known and prescient maxim, "the medium is the message," can perhaps help explain how the promotion of a virtual or media jihad within this new media environment has fundamentally recast the ideology of jihadism in the new century to retain its relevance to a new generation of "digital natives."²⁹

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²⁸ See, for example, Akil N. Awan, "Radicalization on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 152:3 (2007); Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, *Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action* (London: ICSR, 2008); Anthony Begin, Sulastri Bte Osman, Carl Ungerer and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, *Countering Internet Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, RSIS-ASPI, 2009.

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 1964).

Internet Jihadists React to the Deaths of Al-Qa`ida's Leaders in Iraq

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

ON APRIL 18, 2010, U.S. and Iraqi forces killed al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) chief Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) leader Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi.¹ The deaths marked another blow to AQI, which also lost its previous leader, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, to a U.S. airstrike in June 2006. U.S. General Ray Odierno, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, said that the killings were "potentially the most significant blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency."²

In addition to damaging the organizational capabilities of AQI, the deaths caused an immediate reaction on jihadist internet forums. Jihadist sympathizers and other forum users at first refused to believe Iraqi government claims that the two leaders were killed, especially since there had been numerous false reports of their deaths in the past. Yet when the ISI announced the martyrdom of the two men, it became clear that U.S. and Iraqi forces had succeeded in decapitating the leadership of AQI and the ISI.

This article focuses on the online reaction to the deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, examining the initial reactions of online jihadist forum users, statements on the deaths from other jihadist groups, and how jihadist forum users viewed the future of the Iraqi jihad in the wake of the recent setbacks.

Online Jihadist Reaction to the Deaths

In response to the Iraqi government's initial announcement on the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, online jihadists expressed disbelief. Members on various jihadist internet forums claimed that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's statement was government

propaganda against al-Qa`ida, similar to past statements erroneously announcing the arrest of al-Baghdadi.

This response changed, however, after the ISI's Ministry of Religious Affairs admitted that both al-Baghdadi and al-Masri had in fact been killed. The ISI assured the Islamic world that it remained in good hands and had already appointed new leadership. The statement, signed by Abu al-Waleed Abdul Hadi al-Mashhadani, reportedly said, "If Allah fated that the two sheikhs be killed at this particular time, know that they left a unique generation behind, one that was raised before their eyes."³ The ISI also released a separate statement that read,

Here we accept congratulations for the martyrdom of the war lions...Amirs of Jihad. They paid their dues and raised our heads high...they put the U.S. and its collaborators in the dirt. We will continue on the same path. No backing down now. Don't turn away. Be as quiet as death and solid as steel. The world is digging its own grave.⁴

After it became clear that U.S. and Iraqi authorities succeeded in killing the heads of AQI and the ISI, jihadist forum contributors called for revenge. One forum member challenged "the infidels," warning that jihad would never stop. The user reminded readers of how even the death of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in 2006 did not quell AQI's activities in Iraq. "Will jihad retract?" he asked.

Previously, when al-Zarqawi was killed, some thought jihad would cease in Iraq. At the time of al-Zarqawi's death, the Iraqi political situation was somewhat stable, but jihad continued. Presently, Iraq is in a political vacuum, rendering better chances for the mujahidin to carry out attacks.⁵

¹ "U.S.: 2 of Al Qaeda's Top Leaders Killed in Iraq," CBS News, April 19, 2010; "Qaeda in Iraq 'Names Replacements for Slain Leaders,'" Agence France-Presse, May 16, 2010.

² "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Says Leaders Dead," al-Jazira, April 25, 2010.

³ Ibid. This statement was posted on www.alboraq.info on April 25, 2010.

⁴ This statement was posted on www.muslim.net on April 25, 2010.

⁵ This statement was posted on www.alboraq.info on April 29, 2010.

On a separate forum, another user called for revenge, warning that the United States “will not dream of or live in safety until we [the Islamic community] live it in Palestine and in all of the Islamic countries from Andalusia to China.”

Yet on one jihadist forum, a long exchange between users revolved around questions of tradecraft. “How could the security forces know the whereabouts of the most important leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq?” asked one user. A number of users in this exchange demanded to know who called the meeting between al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, as that person was likely a traitor to the Islamic cause and was working for the U.S. and Iraqi governments.

Other frustrated forum contributors felt that al-Qa`ida’s media wings have been lying to its adherents concerning the success of the campaign in Iraq. These users argued that the deaths of al-Baghdadi and al-Masri reveal that al-Qa`ida is weak and that its cells are not connected through proper communications networks. They argued that al-Qa`ida’s propaganda and lies were aimed at luring more recruits. “If the news is true, it means one thing,” was the refrain among users in this camp.

Al-Qa`ida’s media wing is lying and spreading false information on the Iraqi arena. It’s holding back the fact that al-Qa`ida is weak and its members are living in an incinerator with no communication means with other cells. The depletion of al-Qa`ida is imminent. Everybody is tired of al-Qa`ida’s stupidity.⁶

Another jihadist user, Marzook, who is known as being against the ISI, said, “The death of the ISI’s top two men in one hole shows the bankruptcy of the organization and the contraction of the Iraqi arena.”

Reaction from Jihadist Groups on the Deaths

Various Sunni jihadist groups released statements concerning the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi. On April 28, 2010, a statement from Ansar al-Islam appeared on jihadist web forums

⁶ This statement was posted on www.muslim.net on April 21, 2010.

offering condolences to “the brothers” in the ISI and to the Islamic world. The statement said that al-Masri and al-Baghdadi were “competent jihadists and fighters. They abandoned their world, not their religion.” Labayk Media, an outlet of the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, issued a statement on April 25 stating, “Today we say farewell to two jihadist figures...who fought the enemy.”⁷ The statement assured that “the war has ups and downs and has not yet ended...God is our supporter...Our fallen ones are in heaven, while theirs are in hell.”⁸

Another jihadist group that offered condolences was Jaysh al-Umma, which is based in the Palestinian Territories. The Salafi-jihadi group released a statement expressing “condolences and even congratulations” over the martyrdom of al-Baghdadi and al-Masri.⁹ The message warned that anyone who thinks “jihad would stop” with the death of a courageous leader is “wrong.”¹⁰

Various other Sunni jihadist groups across Iraq and elsewhere echoed these statements. Members of one Sunni jihadist group in Iraq, the al-Siddiq Army, apparently decided to join the ISI out of tribal allegiance.¹¹ Many jihadist forum participants believe that more jihadists in Iraq who belong to other groups will join the ISI in solidarity in the wake of the leadership decapitation.

Outlook for the Future

The majority of jihadist forum users were quick to assure that AQI, yet not necessarily the ISI, would remain strong in the wake of the latest setbacks. Some of these users, who claimed direct connection to the physical battlefield, wrote that the new AQI leadership is more experienced and will take advantage of the current political vacuum in the country. They believe that AQI and the ISI can be strengthened by exploiting the rivalries between Iraq’s many political groups.

⁷ This statement was posted on www.alfaloyal.info on April 28, 2010.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The statement appeared on a jihadist web forum and was dated April 25, 2010.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This statement was posted on www.muslim.net on April 26, 2010.

Users also hoped that the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan would support al-Qa`ida in avenging the recent assassinations in Iraq. On April 27, 2010, for example, the al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Shabab insurgent group in Somalia attacked an army base in Mogadishu with an explosives-laden truck. A spokesman for al-Shabab, Ali Mahmud Raji, said after the attack,

This operation was carried out to avenge the blood of our two heroic martyrs, God willing, Shaykh Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, his minister the lion Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and the blood of everyone else that was with them when the cowards struck them.¹²

The statement included a picture of one of the purported suicide bombers, holding a flyer that read, “In revenge of the Emir of the Islamic State of Iraq and his war minister Abu Hamzeh al-Muhajir.”¹³

More significant, on May 1, 2010, Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad allegedly attempted to detonate a car bomb in New York City’s Times Square. Shortly after the failed attack, a Pakistani Taliban statement appeared on jihadist web forums claiming responsibility for the attack as revenge for the deaths of al-Baghdadi and al-Masri in Iraq.¹⁴ Despite the claim of responsibility, however, the extent of outside involvement in Shahzad’s attempted terrorist attack is not yet clear, as other Pakistani Taliban factions rejected involvement in the plot, and investigations are not yet complete on whether Shahzad acted alone. Moreover, based on various journalist investigations into his past, Shahzad himself had reportedly become radicalized long before AQI’s latest setbacks in Iraq, sending out angry e-mails to friends about U.S. foreign policy after the 9/11 attacks.¹⁵

¹² This statement was posted on www.alfaloyal.info on April 29, 2010.

¹³ Ibid. The picture was posted at www.shamikh1.net/vb/.

¹⁴ “Times Square Car Bomb: Pakistani Taliban ‘Claims Responsibility,’” *Telegraph*, May 2, 2010; James Gordon Meek, “Pak-Taliban: Times Sq. Bomb Avenged Qaeda-Iraq Leaders’ Deaths,” *New York Daily News*, May 2, 2010.

¹⁵ Andrea Elliott, Sabrina Tavernise and Anne Barnard, “For Times Sq. Suspect, Long Roots of Discontent,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2010.

Conclusion

On May 15, 2010, the ISI purportedly announced that it has appointed new leaders to replace those lost in the U.S.-Iraqi operation that killed al-Baghdadi and al-Masri.¹⁶ According to the statement, the new leaders are “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi, the Emir of the Believers of the Islamic State of Iraq” and “Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Hassani al-Qurashi is his prime minister and deputy.”¹⁷ The ISI had already announced a new minister of war, Abu Suleiman, who will replace Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who served that role in addition to being the head of AQI. Abu Suleiman vowed revenge for the killings of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, warning of “a long gloomy night and dark days colored in blood” and urging followers not to “become accustomed to having a loose hand on the trigger.”¹⁸

Leadership decapitations clearly have an effect on terrorist and militant groups. Whether or not the latest killings will put an end to AQI and the ISI remains an open question. Devastating bombings continue to rip through Iraq, with militants feeding off tensions between the country’s myriad political groups and factions. On May 10, for example, bombings, assassinations and ambushes tore through the country, killing at least 119 people and underscoring the pervasive threat.¹⁹ It is clear from jihadist web forums that many remain hopeful about the insurgency in Iraq despite the recent setbacks. Whether those hopes will be borne out on the ground remains to be seen.

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16 “Qaeda in Iraq ‘Names Replacements for Slain Leaders.’”

17 Ibid.

18 Anthony Shadid, “Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2010.

19 “Iraq Boosts Security after 119 Killed in Attacks,” CBS News, May 11, 2010.

The Kidnapping and Execution of Khalid Khwaja in Pakistan

By Rahimullah Yusufzai

ON MARCH 26, 2010, two well-known former officials in Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and a British journalist went missing in North Waziristan Agency in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Before heading out to the tribal areas, the men told acquaintances that the purpose of the trip was to make a documentary on the Taliban and U.S. drone strikes.¹ The men, however, were abducted by a previously unknown militant group, the Asian Tigers. The group announced that it was holding hostage Khalid Khwaja, retired Colonel Sultan Amir Tarar (commonly referred to as Colonel Imam), and journalist Asad Qureshi. In exchange for the men’s release, the Asian Tigers demanded that Pakistan’s authorities release from custody three important Afghan Taliban leaders: Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Maulawi Kabir and Mansour Dadullah.²

After the 10-day demand deadline expired, the Asian Tigers executed the elderly Khwaja and dumped his body on the roadside near Mir Ali in North Waziristan.³ It repeated its earlier demand, but also ordered the freedom of 120 militants held by Pakistan. Moreover, the group insisted on \$10 million ransom for the release of Qureshi.⁴ Subsequently, Asian Tigers spokesman Mohammad Omar made it clear that Colonel Imam and Qureshi would not be freed until 160 of their men, all militants, were released by Pakistan’s authorities.⁵

1 This information is based on a personal interview with Khalid Khwaja. Also see Rahimullah Yusufzai, “The Kidnapped,” *The News International*, April 27, 2010.

2 Iqbal Khattak, “‘Jehadi Channels’ Opened to Secure Release of Former ISI Spies,” *Daily Times*, April 23, 2010. There is no concrete evidence, however, that Kabir, the former Taliban governor for Nangarhar and Logar provinces and now military commander for eastern Afghanistan, is in Pakistani custody.

3 “Ex-ISI Official Khalid Khwaja Found Dead in FATA,” *Dawn*, April 30, 2010.

4 Mushtaq Yusufzai, “No Real Effort by Govt, Tribal Elders to Secure Release of Col Imam, Qureshi,” *The News International*, May 15, 2010.

5 This demand was addressed directly to this author over the phone on May 14, 2010.

This article provides information on the Asian Tigers, and explains the significance of the kidnapping and execution of Khalid Khwaja. Khwaja, for example, reportedly once maintained contacts with Osama bin Ladin and served as a facilitator between the Pakistani government and various jihadist groups. His surprising assassination reveals the changing composition of the overall Taliban network as a younger and less manageable generation of militants begins to take control.

The Asian Tigers and the Grievances against Khalid Khwaja

Before the recent kidnappings, the Asian Tigers were an unknown group. It is widely believed to be a front organization for a faction of Pakistani militants who previously belonged to the anti-Shi`a militant group, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi. Other reports suggest that the Asians Tigers are a faction of the Punjabi Taliban and are composed of a small group of 30-40 Punjabi and Mehsud tribal militants expelled by their parent organizations, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).⁶

Preliminary information on the group can be drawn from interactions with its spokesman, Mohammad Omar. Omar speaks Urdu, unlike the TTP’s Pashtu-language spokesmen and commanders, suggesting that he is from a group of Punjabi Taliban that has shifted operations from Pakistan’s Punjab Province to North Waziristan.⁷ This group could be operating out of the Mir Ali area under the protection of local tribal militants.

Based on Khwaja’s brutal execution, the Asian Tigers clearly targeted him specifically. Some analysts believe that the group’s motive relates to Khwaja’s past actions, when he reportedly demanded that TTP leaders Hakimullah Mehsud and Waliur Rahman “get rid” of 14 senior Pakistani Taliban commanders—mostly Punjabis associated with Lashkar-i-Jhangvi—for allegedly being on the payroll of India’s

6 Mushtaq Yusufzai, “Asian Tigers’ Kill Khalid Khwaja on Expiry of Deadline,” *The News International*, May 1, 2010.

7 This observation was noted during the author’s telephone conversation with Mohammad Omar.