



WHAT IS AL-QAIDA IN IRAQ?

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As military action in Iraq continues, the Bush administration has made getting rid of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, a top priority.

Continued attacks against U.S. forces and other targets in and around Iraq have raised questions about the role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaida leader who has vowed to chase the United States out of the Middle East.

The jihadist's actions have made him as important a figure as Osama bin Laden in the Bush administration's war against terror. The United States has put a \$25 million bounty on Zarqawi's head.

Who is Zarqawi?

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was born in a working-class Jordanian industrial town in 1966. According to various accounts, he was angry and combative at a young age.

He dropped out of high school and left his family to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the early 1980s.

He returned to Jordan with fanatical beliefs in jihad, a holy war waged in the name of Islam.

He was thrown in jail, where his views grew stronger and he developed leadership skills.

"In prison, [Zarqawi's] mentor describes him as having had remarkable charisma and incredible organizational abilities," said Bernard Haykel, an assistant professor of Middle Eastern studies at New York University.

Once released from prison, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan and created the organization Al Tawhid, which was determined to overthrow the moderate Jordanian government and replace it with an Islamist regime.

His group also was behind foiled plots to disrupt millennium celebrations in the United States and Jordan.

A splinter group or a subordinate group?

In February 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell said in his speech to the United Nations that Zarqawi was "an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida lieutenants."

Since then, however, there has been widespread debate over whether or not Zarqawi is operating with the approval of bin Laden.

“Someone could legitimately say [Zarqawi] is not al-Qaida,” said Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a press briefing in June 2004.

Loretta Napoleoni, the author of a book about Zarqawi and al-Qaida, said that Zarqawi has surpassed bin Laden as a symbolic leader of the terrorist movement in the Middle East and has taken on the image of a “jihadist Zorro.”

As he has become better known, he is no longer confused with bin Laden’s second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri of Egypt.

In July 2005, Zawahiri wrote a letter criticizing Zarqawi for killing Muslim civilians, although the authenticity of that letter has been challenged.

“There is a split [between Zarqawi and al-Qaida], I think, over tactics but not really over strategy,” said Professor Haykel.

A dangerous organization

Zarqawi’s group has been responsible for many deadly attacks since the Iraqi insurgency began in the summer of 2003.

Among the incidents believed to be the work of al-Qaida in Iraq are the truck bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Iraq, which killed the region’s top U.N. official, the car bomb assassination of the Iraqi Governing Council President Izzedin Salim, and the televised beheading of American businessman Nicholas Berg.

“[Zarqawi] has a number of young folks bent on jihad that he puts right into the fight and right into the suicide vehicles,” said Gen. Richard Myers, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Experts knowledgeable about the situation in Iraq are quick to point out that Zarqawi is only the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq and not of the whole insurgency movement.

“The resistance itself is fragmented and consists of parties [and] factions that have differing strategic objectives even if their tactical goals are held in common,” said Steve Simon, a counterterrorism official during the Clinton administration.

Even if he is captured or killed, the United States and its allies will continue to have difficulty quashing the insurgency.

“Zarqawi will be bigger icon in death than in life,” said Napoleoni. “Bringing him to justice will not make fight any easier.”

-- *Compiled by Brian Wolly for NewsHour Extra*

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