

ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI

An Examination of the Writings of Investigative Journalist Gamal Rahim

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It is vital that America's military leaders be introduced to Arabic sources that detail present and former adversaries. They provide the cultural insight, inventory of myths and occasional undiscovered aspects of our enemies. Despite the successful strike that killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, in June 2006, we must retrace his biography as it reveals networks, connections, and even divisions within the Sunni militant Islamist movement. We cannot simply mark Zarqawi as killed or his cohorts as captured and ignore the tactics, biography, and ideology that inspires a new generation of militant Islamist operatives.

Gamal Rahim published an excellent Arabic biography of al-Qaida deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. He also published a 205-page biography of Zarqawi entitled *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi Sheikh al-Qaida fee Bilad al-Rafidayn* (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Leader of al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers). Rahim is an investigative journalist who specializes in militant Islamist movements. He is the author of several Arabic books on al-Qaida, Usama Bin Laden and militant Islamist ideology and maintains a blog site at www.gamalrahim.blogspot.com. Rahim's biography of Zarqawi was published by al-Arabiya Publishing, which is located in Cairo, Egypt. This book represents what Arab counterterrorism experts are reading and what America's military planners and counterterrorism specialists should explore, debate and discuss along with Western sources. One of the best Western biographies of al-Zarqawi is the French *Zarkaoui, le nouveau visage d' al-Qaida* (Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaida), which was translated into English and published by New York's Other Press in 2005.

Zarqawi's Early Life

Ahmed Nazal al-Khalaylah was born in 1966 on the outskirts of Amman, in the hamlet of Zarqa in a three-room home from the Khalaylah Clan of the Bani Hassan Tribe. This tribe is an important supporter of the Jordanian monarch and in 2005 disowned Zarqawi after the Amman Hotel Bombings. Gamal Rahim writes that Zarqawi's father rented seats, tables and space for weddings and funerals, but could not make ends meet, raising three boys and six girls. Zarqawi would attend King Talal Elementary School and would drop out of the 11th grade with a respectable 87-percent average, choosing to support his family. He loved soccer and his first indication of leadership was organizing a street soccer team that



Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

played in the Usum Cemetery. In the cemetery, the young Zarqawi would connect with criminal gangs and was involved in city crime, fights, and petty theft. His lifestyle would lead to his firing from a municipal job after one month for fighting. Jobless, he took to crime and undertook a personal self-examination of mosque literature that focused on fragments of Islam woven into a narrow militant Islamist ideology. Zarqawi, like many, was not guided through the process of Islamic studies, and gravitated to those who aggressively proselytize Islamist political theory and violent militant ideology.

Zarqawi in Afghanistan (1989-1994)

In 1989, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan and received training in explosives and weapons at Bait al-Ansar. While there he met the Palestinian Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi, who immersed him in Qutbism (militant Islamist theories of Syyid Qutb, who was executed by Egyptian authorities in 1966.) Zarqawi would serve as an organizer for al-Qaida of Palestinians, Jordanians and Syrians arriving in Peshawar and Afghanistan.

Zarqawi was recruited in 1988 by Abdul-Majid Majali, also known as Abu Qutayba al-Irduni (The Jordanian). Majali opened a Jordanian branch of Maktab al-Khidmat, the facilitation organization supporting the Islamist resistance to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and became a representative of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam in Jordan. Azzam is the spiritual founder of al-Qaida and formed Maktab al-Khidmat as the earliest Arab-Afghan logistic and processing center in Peshawar to fight the Soviets. Majali was an experienced, well-credentialed militant who spent two years in Afghanistan (1986-1988) and returned to Jordan with a mandate from Azzam to raise funds and recruit.

Majali recounts that Zarqawi joined the Soviet-Afghan jihad after attending a fund-raising event in which the main speaker was Abdul-Rasul Sayyaf, one of the most prominent and militant Afghan warlords of the Soviet-Afghan War. Majali said he processed Zarqawi among the thousands of recruits destined for Pakistan. Zarqawi was not an exceptional figure when Majali first encountered him in 1988. Zarqawi was channeled into a pipeline of Jordanians, Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians who were grouped into battalions for training in Khost in 1989. In Afghanistan, Zarqawi was close to:

* Saleh al-Hami, who created the magazine *Al-Jihad* for Abdullah

Azzam. The book discusses how Zarqawi was involved in evacuating a seriously injured al-Hami across the mountain passes and into Pakistan.

* Abu Harith al-Sulti, who was emir (leader) of the Mujahideen group of Levantine fighters who provided him tactical and leadership training.

* Abu Muaz al-Khosti, a Palestinian who was killed in 1989 in an assault on Kabul.

Zarqawi Returns to Jordan (1994-1999)

Zarqawi arrived too late in the conflict to participate in combat against the Soviets and returned to Jordan in 1994, linking up with Maqdisi and forming a cell called *Jaysh Muhammad* (Muhammad's Army) that was also referred to as *Jamaa al-Tawheed al-Salafiyah* (The Unified Salafi Group). Maqdisi and Zarqawi began inciting in mosques and distributing Maqdisi's radical writings in pamphlets, eventually evolving into a group that began planning terrorist attacks, first against Israeli interests in Jordan and eventually to attacks along the Israeli-Jordanian border. The group even plotted to assassinate the late King Hussein of Jordan. Once they crossed into attack planning, the Jordanian authorities moved against the group arresting Zarqawi, Maqdisi, and 26 others, also capturing weapons and explosives. They were given 15-year sentences and released after five years on the occasion of King Abdullah II's ascension to the throne in 1999. Of note, Rahim's book reprints Zarqawi's court statement before sentencing, that is rhythmic in style and has the cadence *Ayuha al-Qadi bee ghair maa Anzal Allah* (Oh Judge who does not adjudicate by what God has revealed), a play on the Qutbist slogan of the governor who does not govern according to God's law. In prison, Zarqawi would form a prison cluster, and the roles of Maqdisi as leader and Zarqawi as the deputy were reversed.

Zarqawi Returns to Afghanistan (1999-2001)

Upon Zarqawi's release in 1999, he immediately set about planning attacks in



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In 1989, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan to receive explosives and weapons training.

Jordan and fled to Afghanistan when authorities attempted to re-arrest him. In Afghanistan, Zarqawi would be shaped by a host of other al-Qaida leaders and ideologues, but what distinguished him was his refusal to swear allegiance to Bin Laden. Zarqawi always attempted to maintain his independence. Attempting to trace Zarqawi's associations in Afghanistan provides insight into who would later join him in managing what would evolve into al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). One of the main AQI insurgents and leader of the Fallujah sector was Umar Jumaa Saaleh, also known as Abu Anas al-Shami, a Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship who was born and raised in Kuwait. From the age of 14, Abu Anas had mastered the complexities of the Arabic language, and a year later memorized the entire Quran. He would pursue his Islamic studies at Saudi Arabia's Medina University, where influence from Muslim Brotherhood exiles began to shape his views towards Islamist politics. It is unclear if he completed his studies.

The Late Abu Anas al-Shami: The Zarqawi Representative in Fallujah

Sponsored by Abu Hammam al-Filisteeni, a recruiter, Abu Anas al-Shami left for Afghanistan in 1990 before Operation Desert Storm. There, he took a three-month weapons and explosives course at the Farouk Training Camp and swore fealty to

Bin Laden. In the summer of 1991, unable to return to Kuwait as Palestinians were collectively punished in Kuwait for PLO leader Yasser Arafat's stand with Saddam Hussein, Abu Anas returned to Jordan, where he became imam of the Murad Mosque in Suweilah, a suburb of Amman. He would network with like-minded clerics in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf who preached against the American troop presence in Saudi Arabia. Abu Anas was inspired by the sermons of Safar Hawali, Salman al-Awdeh and Nasser al Omar, three Saudi clerics often called the Awakening Clerics who led a general Islamist reform movement in

Saudi Arabia. Abu Anas traveled to Bosnia, where he served as a cleric for Islamist fighters and then returned to Amman. Abu Anas would be arrested by the Jordanians in March 2003 for inciting against the Jordanian government for its stand against Saddam in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was released within months and refocused his sermons from preaching against the Jordanian government towards calling for jihad against the United States in Iraq. Abu Anas entered Iraq in September 2003 and joined Zarqawi's *Tawheed wal Jihad* (Monotheistic Unity and Jihad) group, becoming its spiritual leader. In April 2004, he was injured in an airstrike. That September, Abu Anas was killed as he was about to conduct suicide operations with 30 operatives. Abu Anas' legacy can be found in militant Islamist Web sites, where his published day-by-day account of the battle of Fallujah that appeared on the internet journal *Sawt al-Jihad* (*Voice of Jihad*) can be read.

Author's Assessment on the Nuances of the Threat

Rahim has an excellent chapter that discusses the divisions within radical Salafism, what is called *al-Tayyar al-Islami* (Islamist Trend). One of the benefits of reading Arabic books is their identification of such ideological and militant philosophical divisions through which

Zarqawi had to operate. They can be classified as:

* *Ikhwani* (Muslim Brotherhood): Those wanting to attain an Islamist state through participation in government and parliaments, as well as through grassroots means such as social services and evangelism. Today, their slogan is reform not revolution.

* *Salafi Ilmi* (Practical Salafists): These are Salafists who wish to attain an Islamic state exclusively through *dawa* (evangelism), but who do not favor participating with corrupt regimes. They feel their perfection of an Islamic society in neighborhoods and hamlets speaks for itself. They do desire an Islamist fundamentalist regime administering government and also wish to impose a single brand of Islam, but they wish to do it through financing mosques, schools, and evangelizing.

* *Salafi Jihadi* (Salafi Jihadists): These are militant Islamists who desire the attainment of an Islamic state through violent means, like al-Qaida. In addition, they utilize their brand of Islam not for any moral purpose but to instill fear on a population.

Of note, these classifications are useful in narrowing down the most immediate threats originating from Sunni Islamist actors. It is also important to realize that a

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person or group can splinter and travel between these three subsets of the Islamist trend, as the book refers to them. These three classifications of Islamist groups may have a regional focus or a global view. Gamal Rahim lays out this explanation to attempt to explain the evolution of the militant Islamist group Ansar al-Islam, which is located in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

Evolution, Ebb and Flow of the Kurdish Militant Islamist Group Ansar al-Islam

In 1988, a group of Kurdish Islamists established *Haraka Islamiyah* (The Islamic Movement) based on the successful Muslim Brotherhood model and negotiated with such Kurdish groups as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The group was led by

Uthman Abdel-Aziz. A splinter group from *Haraka Islamiyah* emerged that rejected working with the PUK and KDP, called a *Nahda* (Renaissance). This group is best classified as Salafi Ilmi (Practical Salafist) with little tolerance for Kurdish diverse political beliefs and religious Islamic practice. Both *Nahda* and *Haraka Islamiyah* would merge in 1999 into *Haraka Wihda Islamiyah* (Islamic Union Party). In 2001, those members wanting to pursue direct armed action split and established *Jamaa Islamiyah* (The Islamic Group) and *Jund al-Islam* (Army of Islam), these can be classified as Salafi Jihadi. Other Salafi Jihadi groups that formed between 1999 and 2001, were *Hamas Kurdiyah*, *Haraka Islamiyah* (Halabja), *Jamaa Islamiyah*, and *Harakat al-Tawheed*.

On 10 December 2001, three of these groups — *Hamas Kurdiyah*, *Jund al-Islam* and *Harakat al-Tawheed* — merged to form *Ansar al-Islam* under the leadership of Sheikh Falih Krekar. These groups were influenced by an amalgamation of Saudi Salafi ideology, Qutbist political thought and Egyptian Islamic Jihad methodology. They started with five committees: Security, Shariah Court, Shariah Studies, Military, and Media. Their communications practices eschewed cell phones and electronic communications in favor of couriers as a security precaution. Their tactics adopted *al-farr wal karr*, a tribal Arab practice of harass and retreat, to wear down a force, and mountain guerilla warfare. *Ansar al-Islam* made enemies with both the PUK-Talabani and KDP-Barzani. *Ansar al-Islam* denies any formal alliance with al-Qaida, but the book by Rahim does not rule out individual relationships. Although similar in ideological outlook, among the differences between al-Qaida and *Ansar al-Islam* are their regional versus pan-Islamist outlooks, and *Ansar al-Islam*'s political line is similar in outlook to the Muslim Brotherhood, which al-Qaida considers heresy. *Ansar al-Islam*, created in 2001, is important to Zarqawi as its members helped ex-filtrate al-Qaida members, including Zarqawi, from Pakistan to Iran and into northern Iraq. A Kurdish group that splintered from *Ansar al-Islam* in 2003 was *Jaysh Ansar al-Sunnah* (Army of the Partisans of Muhammad's Path), which is totally ideologically aligned to al-Qaida and rejects any attempts to introduce a Muslim



Rubble and debris litter the site of the last safe house of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Hibhib, Iraq. The top insurgent target in Iraq was killed during an airstrike on the house on 7 June 2006.

SGT Zach Mott

Brotherhood polity or practical Salafism in its ranks. These nuances are important to begin the analysis needed to exploit divisions within the militant Islamist trend. It is *Jaysh Ansar al-Sunnah* that blew up some Iraqi police stations in the Kurdish region, attacked Canadian, Spanish and British forces, as well as blowing up a PUK regional headquarters.

Zarqawi in Iraq (2003 to 2006)

After infiltrating Iraq through Kurdish territory, Zarqawi developed his Salafi jihadi group *al-Tawheed wal Jihad*. When Zarqawi formed this group in April 2003, Rahim's book pegs the membership of the group at 1,500, its estimated low point. He estimates the high point for this group was around 5,000 as it evolved into AQI. Of interest is the book's discussion of the concentrations of the initial 1,500 Zarqawi fighters as follows:

- * 500 in Fallujah
- * 400 in Mosul
- * 150 in al-Qaim
- * 60 in al-Anbar
- * 50 in Baghdad

Zarqawi attracted a few talented individuals into his organization; among them is Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the current head of al-Qaida in Iraq, who was better known as an experienced bomb-maker. Others mentioned in the book include an officer in Saddam's former army who was a rocketry expert with the ability to improvise, launch, and maintain a myriad of ground attack rockets like the Katyushas. A Lebanese with formal explosives training in the Lebanese Armed Forces also conducted training, disarming and arming of explosives and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Conclusion

Although Zarqawi pledged fealty to Usama Bin Ladin in October 2004 and changed the name of his organization to al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, he still maintained his independence. Zarqawi's unilateral actions led Ayman al-Zawahiri to write a 10-page letter in mid-2005 questioning the public way Zarqawi was killing Shiites, as well as his unconstructive titles like Sheikh of Butchers (www.dni.gov). It is unknown if Bin Ladin considered Zarqawi an opportunity to give al-Qaida relevance in the war in Iraq or if Zarqawi sought Bin Ladin's endorsement for access to donors and recruits. What is known is that Zarqawi had known Bin Ladin since 1989 and initially refused to pledge fealty to him. Zarqawi's attack on three Amman Hotels in 2005 left him even more isolated, outraging the Jordanian public, leading Islamist parties to distance themselves, and leading his own Bani-Hassan tribe to disown him. Zarqawi's orchestration of attacks beyond Iraq's borders include such operations as the August 2005 firing of Katyusha rockets on



U.S. Army photo

MG William B. Caldwell points to a photo of the safe house where terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed during a coalition air strike on 7 June 2006. Caldwell said fighters dropped two 500-pound bombs on the building, killing Zarqawi, his spiritual advisor and four others.

USS Kearsarge and USS Ashland, which were docked in the port of Aqaba in Jordan. There are questions as to whether Zarqawi was betrayed by fellow insurgents for his activities that alienated more and more Iraqi Sunnis.

Like Bin Ladin and Zawahiri, many books have to be read before we can begin to attain a clear picture of Zarqawi. Rahim offers a general biography of Zarqawi, coupled with a nuanced look at the evolution of the Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam that aided in his escape from Afghanistan into Iran and then northern Iraq. There is little discussion on the 1990 eviction of Palestinians from the Persian Gulf after the PLO's siding with Saddam Hussein that flooded Jordan with refugees, many sought haven in Islamist and militant Islamist groups. Rahim also does not discuss the camp Zarqawi established in Herat, Afghanistan, a Shiite area, with the aid of the Taliban, as a proxy fighter to kill Shiites and undermine Shiite commander Ismail Khan or the finance network that originated among Syrian militant Islamists in Europe, as well as Jordanian contacts in Jordan. Despite these shortcomings, a broad reading of Zarqawi both in Arabic and English is needed to understand the intricacies of the movement and the early formation of al-Qaida in Iraq.

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