

Steinberg, Guido

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The Amman Suicide Bombings

On the Strategy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

Guido Steinberg

On November 9 simultaneous suicide bombings in three luxury hotels shook the Jordanian capital Amman. The perpetrators were Iraqis who traveled in from the neighboring country and acted on the instructions of the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Before he became active in Iraq, Zarqawi had, since the early 1990s, fought exclusively against the Hashemite monarchy, so these recent attacks could be read as the logical continuation of this direction line of struggle. However, they must be seen in a new, more comprehensive strategic context: since 2004 Zarqawi is trying to drive the US and its allies out of Iraq, in order to erect an Islamic state there. Following on from that, the “holy war” (*jihad*) is to be taken to the neighboring countries of Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The ultimate goal is the “liberation” of Jerusalem. Since the summer of 2005 the Zarqawi group has been increasingly pursuing these goals in parallel, in Iraq and its neighboring states.

Like many other countries of the Arab world Jordan experienced a wave of political violence in the early 1990s when its Afghanistan veterans returned. Islamist terrorists prepared numerous attacks, which—with exception of a few minor incidents—were, however, thwarted. The most spectacular were the so called “millennium attacks” at the end of 1999. The plan envisaged attacking hotels in which American and Israeli tourists were celebrating. One of the hotels that sights were trained on was the SAS Radisson, in which the majority of the more than sixty victims were killed in this recent attack. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is supposed to have been involved already in the 1999-plans,

though he was out of the country at the time. In October 2002 he was named as organizer of an attack in Amman in which an employee of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was murdered.

Even after 2003, when Zarqawi began assembling his organization in Iraq and started taking action against the occupation forces and their Iraqi allies, he didn’t desist from his planning against Jordanian targets. At the end of April 2004 Jordanian security services uncovered a plot, in which trucks laden with explosives were to be exploded on the site of the headquarters of the Jordanian secret service GID (General Intelligence Department). Zarqawi had entrusted the organization of this attack to

one of his most important companions, which shows that Jordan still remains in the terrorist leader's sights. This became clear again in August 2005 when some of his followers fired Katyusha rockets at American military vessels in the Red Sea port of Aqaba.

Strategic Reorientation

Up until the year 2002/03 what mattered foremost to Zarqawi was to overthrow the monarchy in Jordan and then afterwards to extend the *jihad* to Israel in order to "liberate" the Holy Land. He shares this vision with the majority of his followers, who are overwhelmingly recruited from Jordanians of Palestinian descent. So in this respect Zarqawi was no different from other Islamist terrorists in the Arab world who are also fighting primarily against the governments of their home countries. Osama bin Laden attacks Saudi Arabia, while his deputy, the Egyptian Aiman al-Zawahiri wants to topple Husni Mubarak's regime in Egypt. They only developed their anti-American strategy out of the conviction that the Islamists could only bring the governments in Riad and Cairo to their knees when the US withdrew from Saudi Arabia and gave up supporting Egypt. The global orientation of *al-Qaida* is based on this insight. Its individual members' national direction lines of struggle continue to exist alongside. That's why a trans-nationally structured organization like the Zarqawi network must take account of the aims of its member groups that are directed against separate states.

For the moment, the Amman bombings are an indicator for the continuing hostility against a specific regime, but they do point to a changed overall concept. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has modified his strategic considerations, since he started participating in the fight against the American occupation and the new government in Baghdad. Iraq plays a far bigger part in this altered concept than previously. Over and above that Zarqawi now propagates fighting

against all Arab neighboring states of Iraq.

The most important reason for the expansion of the targeting spectrum lies in the personnel composition of the organization that in the meantime has taken to calling itself "al-Qaida in Mesopotamia" (*al-Qaida fi Bilad ar-Rafidain*). Although Zarqawi has been able to recruit Jordanian fighters from out of Iraq too, their number seems to be limited. In contrast to that, he has been able to record a large influx of Iraqis, some of whom have with time already taken up leading positions in the group. The most prominent amongst these was Umar Hadid who led a troop in the town of Fallujah for Zarqawi in the summer of 2004, and who was later killed. Furthermore, one prominent Iraqi-Kurdish field commander called Umar Baziyani joined up along with his followers, who had previously belonged to the northern Iraqi organization *Ansar al-Sunna*. And finally, the number of Iraqi suicide bombers has grown constantly, although up until now it is still mostly foreigners who are responsible for these attacks.

Zarqawi's group comprises a growing contingent of fighters from third states alongside Iraqis and Jordanians. The majority of them hail from Saudi Arabia, Syria and Kuwait. This change in the composition of Zarqawi's organization not only impacts on the fighting power—as mentioned, most of the suicide bombers are to be found amongst the foreign fighters; this change also has consequences for the strategic reorientation of the terror movement described above. For it is easier to succeed in recruiting fighters from other Arab states when the regimes in their home countries are included in the range of targets. This is one of the fundamental reasons why Zarqawi is not just training his sights on Jordan and Palestine. Already in September 2004 one of his followers described his leader's strategic vision in a conversation with the daily paper *al-Hayat* in the following manner: After the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq the victorious Islamists would erect an Islamic

state there. Following on from that they would extend the *jihad* to the neighboring Arab states, with the long-term objective of liberating Jerusalem. These messages have been confirmed by Zarqawi in numerous statements, in which the destabilization of his native country still seems to be particularly important to him.

Prospects of Success for Zarqawi's Strategy

In the long run the Islamist terrorists can only operate if they enjoy popularity and are supported by sympathizers in the population. Zarqawi's methods, however, which claim many completely uninvolved victims in Jordan as in Iraq, is now being criticized in both countries. After the vehement protests by the Jordanian people against the Amman attacks, the Zarqawi group reacted with a statement on the internet. In it they justified the deed by, amongst other things, pointing out that the hotels were supposed bases for American, Israeli and other Western intelligence services.

But in addition to this, Zarqawi's methods are also meeting with sometimes very sharp criticism in militant circles. The most sensational proof for this was the letter by bin-Laden's deputy Aiman al-Zawahiri, in which he bluntly requested Zarqawi to kill less Muslims, so as not to squander all sympathies in the Islamic world. Zarqawi's popularity amongst militant Islamists and their followers seems to be waning, so his overall strategy seems groundless for this reason alone.

Zarqawi doesn't command the resources to realize his vision of an Islamic state in Iraq. Alone the numerical inferiority of the Sunnis there makes this goal look illusory. Together with the other groupings of the resistance, his mere achievement can be to prevent a stabilization of the country. Already for this purpose his followers have been trying to provoke a civil war between Shias and Sunnis with anti-Shiite attacks since early 2004. So far, however, they have

not managed to provoke the Shiites into a corresponding counter-reaction.

Terrorist activities have markedly increased in Iraq's neighboring countries since the beginning of the Iraq war in the spring of 2003, mostly without the involvement of the Zarqawi network. In Saudi Arabia a terrorist campaign already began in May 2003, which has temporarily subsided since the winter of 2004/05. In Kuwait there were numerous firefights around the turn of the year 2004/05. Nonetheless, there are no indications for a destabilization of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Jordan. Merely in Syria is the situation more difficult. In the past months the news reports of fighting between Islamist terrorists and security forces have been multiplying. In light of Bashar al-Asad's regime coming under pressure since the murder of Rafik al-Hariri, Islamist terrorists could present a further risk to stability here. This is something that Western policy must bear in mind with every move towards Syria. In Iraq's neighboring states the terrorists may be too weak to take over power—popular support is in no way proportionate to the ambitious goals; but they are strong enough to use phases of instability in order to aggravate a bad security situation to completely chaotic conditions.

Extending the Reach into Europe?

By all means there is a danger that the Zarqawi group will extend its activities beyond Iraq and its Arab neighbors. This would especially be the case if the pressure on the group arising from American troops and their Iraqi allies should become too high there. Then the terrorists will switch to the neighboring countries, where they will, however, have great problems holding their own against functioning security forces. It would then be only logical if they moved on from there, possibly to Europe. The pressure of pursuit would be high there as well, but the free societies of the European Union cannot fight terrorist groupings nearly as repressively as the dictator-

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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ships of the Arab world. So far, such a development remains largely speculation, but Zarqawi has on numerous occasions made it clear that he wants to become active as a terrorist outside the Arab world too.

For example, in late 2001 the terrorist leader had tasked a small group of Palestinian followers in Germany to prepare attacks on Jewish establishments in Berlin and Düsseldorf. These plots, however, were thwarted. In August 2005 Turkish security services arrested a prominent follower of Zarqawi, the Syrian Luai Saqra, who had planned to blow up Israeli cruise ships in ports on the southern coast of Turkey. With these plots Zarqawi was obviously banking on the sympathy for attacks on Jews and Israelis amongst many Arabs and particularly Palestinians. It is conceivable that similar plots elsewhere in Europe will lead to success. Zarqawi's focus on Jewish and Israeli targets makes a lot of sense from his vantage point: whilst murdering Muslims has cost him a lot of sympathy, with this set of targets he could present himself as an advocate of the Palestinian cause and possibly win new supporters. In short, the increased activities of the Zarqawi network have aggravated the threat situation in the region and Europe also remains in the targeting spectrum.

Already European policy should now be preparing itself for the possible spread of the violence from out of Iraq. Next to measures by the security services it is most urgent to prevent a radicalization of sympathizers through smart policies on integration and religion. This holds for Germany and Europe, but also applies in a similar fashion to the neighboring states of Iraq. Governments there are taking action against the terrorist groupings and their surroundings, which is increasingly repressive, with sometimes great brutality and little accuracy, which in turn eases the recruitment of new terrorist supporters. Jordan has also announced corresponding measures. So despite a downward trend, the Zarqawi network and related groups can therefore still count on help from many

sympathizers. Germany and Europe must be insistent towards the governments of the region that they decrease the terrorist sympathizers' sphere by moderate counter-terrorism and supplementary political measures.