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### What Makes Zarqawi Tick?

By [Hind Haider](#)  
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As Iraq teeters on the precipice of a civil war, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's leader in Iraq, continues to search for ways to push the country over the edge.<sup>1</sup> Yet questions linger about Zarqawi's ultimate motivation: Is it his loathing of foreign occupation forces that make him tick? Or is his hatred of Iraq's Shia the essential and irreducible sentiment that sustains his violent jihad? This distinction between Zarqawi's quest to promote a Sunni-Shia civil war and al Qaeda's broader goal of waging a universal battle that unites all Muslims against Western "infidels" has many implications, not merely for the future of Iraq, but also for the Middle East and the war on terror itself.

In cooperation with the Middle East Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the [Muslim World Initiative](#) at USIP invited [Gilles Kepel](#), director of the Middle East-Mediterranean Program at Sciences-Po in Paris, to present his analysis of al Qaeda operations in Iraq. [Dan Brumberg](#), special advisor at USIP and professor at the Department of Government at Georgetown University, and Dan Byman, professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, commented on the implications of Kepel's analysis for the broader struggle against radical Islamism. This event was moderated by Haleh Esfandiari, director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Kepel focused on three main issues:

- i. Zarqawi's efforts to mobilize the (Sunni) masses in Iraq;
- ii. Ideological divergences within al Qaeda precipitated by Zarqawi's violent tactics;
- iii. The prominent role Iran is playing in Iraq, and Iran's effect on the political process.

### **Mobilizing the Masses**

While al Qaeda emerged dramatically onto the world stage with the September 11, 2001 attacks, it has never made the transition from a vanguard terrorist group to a mobilized political movement.

Indeed, in his speeches and statements, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy and the chief ideologue for al Qaeda, argues that al Qaeda's primary failure has been its inability to mobilize the masses. But this changed once Zarqawi emerged to take advantage of the power vacuum created by the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of Iraq's military. Establishing himself and his followers in Sunni strongholds like the al-Anbar province in western Iraq, Zarqawi worked to recruit Iraqis along with foreigners to carry out his military operations throughout the country. By 2003, the country had come to resemble a no-man's land with lack of national security forces and stumbling



Daniel Brumberg, advisor to USIP's Muslim World Initiative, left, provided commentary on Kepel's analysis of Zarqawi, right, at a [briefing held at USIP on March 16, 2006](#).

political institutions, and terrorists groups and criminal gangs operated virtually unimpeded.

In addition, the **continuing delay** in forming a unified, democratic government caused by sectarianism and power struggles between the various political groups has provided an opportunity for creating discord. In 2003, the once-powerful Sunni minority saw itself being dethroned by Kurdish and Shia forces, and by a political process that seems destined to isolate or disenfranchise the Sunnis. Determined to sabotage this process, Iraq's **Sunni insurgents** forged a tactical alliance with Zarqawi's al Qaeda, which calls itself the al-Qaa`idatu fi biladial-Rafidayn, or al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. This alliance has pursued a two-front battle, one against the U.S.-backed coalition forces and the other against Shia political parties, their armed militias, and Shiite civilians.

Al Qaeda's uncompromising stance against any foreign presence in an Islamic country assisted the insurgents' fight against coalition forces while scoring points for al Qaeda as a pan-Islamic movement seeking to unite all Muslims. But Zarqawi's hatred of the Shia and his violent tactics provoked a backlash as Arabs and Muslims expressed revulsion against al Qaeda. An example of this is the November 2005 hotel suicide bombings in Amman, Jordan, which killed numerous civilians, many of them members of a large family attending a wedding. Moreover, while Zarqawi's operations complemented the insurgents' goal of pressuring the Shia-dominated central government to yield more power and share of the oil in the country, this was detrimental to al Qaeda's universal message. As Kepel explained, "Zarqawi has become a tool for Sunni insurgents by effectively becoming a sectarian killer-for-hire."

### **Divergences within al Qaeda**

Daniel Brumberg discussed the implications of Zarqawi's war against the Shia and the potential impact on the Muslim world. Deviating from al Qaeda's goal of ridding the Muslim world of foreign occupiers and secular governments, Zarqawi is waging a jihad in one country rather than the broader Islamic world. He has achieved mass mobilization, but not for the right cause. This was in fact a major point in Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi in which he attacked Zarqawi for promoting fitna, or conflict between Muslims, and warned that such unrestrained violence could very well alienate both Shiites and Sunnis alike.

Such warnings were certainly justified given the attacks against Sunnis perpetrated by Zarqawi's forces. Even before the destruction of the al-'Askari mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006 (for which no group has claimed responsibility), Sunni tribes in Iraq had tired of al Qaeda's terror and began turning their forces against foreign fighters. Ignoring Zarqawi's threats, large numbers of Sunnis voted in the January elections, heeding the calls of their religious and political leaders. And beyond the borders of Iraq, people in Amman, Jordan demonstrated vigorously against the hotel bombings carried out by al Qaeda in November 2005. By far, the most disastrous development for al Qaeda in Iraq has been the participation of the Sunnis in the new Iraqi government. This growing disenchantment of al Qaeda might also help the efforts of the United States to pit moderate Sunnis against radical Islamists.

### **Iran's Political Influence in Iraq**

The Samarra attacks tore asunder the veil that had been thinly hiding **Iran's influence in Iraq**. In fact, the mosque bombing destroyed the facade of political optimism in Iraq, revealing the deep fissures of Sunni-Shiite conflict in every branch of government, including the security forces. In the aftermath, Iran emerged as the most influential regional player in Iraq's internal political struggles through its connection to the powerful Shia parties in government.

Since 2003, Iran had been pumping millions of dollars per month into Iraq in a bid to become a player on Iraq's political stage. With the emergence of the Iranian-backed Shia parties like Dawa and SCIRI as the most powerful forces in Iraq's government, Iran can rest assured that it has played its cards right. While the United States could deal with one enemy, it now has to deal with factions within Shia parties taking up arms and forming new policies with absolute disregard for the government and rule of law. This is evident in Basra, the second largest city in Iraq, where religious leaders and militias loyal to Shia political groups are the de facto rulers, imposing strict observance of Islamic law. It is also apparent that the Iraqi

security forces and army are heavily infiltrated by militia members serving their political leaders rather than the citizens of the country.

As the security situation deteriorates, U.S. forces may be forced to take sides in order to protect the Sunnis. Already, actions aimed at leveling the playing field have only embittered Shiite leaders and reinforced the influence of Iran. This turn of events, Brumberg suggested, may make U.S.-Iranian talks over the future of Iraq a necessary, if bitter, pill for the United States to swallow.

### **Dissecting Terrorist Organizations**

The global attention given to the war on terror has elevated the status of some terrorist groups in the international political arena. By standing in the spotlight shone by major Western powers, terrorist groups like al Qaeda are casting shadows that exaggerate their true capacity. Byman analyzed this phenomenon by examining the life-span of terrorist groups and the idea of the vanguard alluded to by Kepel.

The idea of themselves as the vanguard of a revolutionary political movement is a universal vision shared by terrorist groups. Terrorists typically use two approaches to insinuate themselves onto the public stage: one is the "propaganda of the deed," by which the simple act of striking shows the enemy's weakness. The second approach is by inciting the enemy to strike back, thereby incurring the hatred of the people and bringing success to the terrorist group. In reality, however, terrorist groups do not control the reaction to events they perpetrate and they almost never begin a mass movement. Such failings are often a consequence of the huge disconnect between what such groups preach and what they do.

Terrorist organizations rely on ideology as a tool to inspire and recruit followers, said Byman, but their operations are driven more by pragmatic calculations. Ideological justifications usually reveal gaping holes in their logic, a dynamic that often alienates or confuses potential followers. One example is the justification Zarqawi gave for the hotel suicide bombings in Amman. In his statement, he accused the victims of being Israeli-Arabs (they were Jordanian-Palestinian) and at the least of not being real Muslims, and he accused them of collaborating with the enemy by holding a function in places frequented by foreigners. This inflamed popular sentiments against radical Islamists in Jordan, thus helping to shore up the government's campaign against radical Islamists.

Byman explained that strategic goals are diluted and control of operations are lost when groups expand to the global arena. Limiting an insurgency to local issues and to local religious or nationalist idioms is far more effective than conducting operations that ignore boundaries and cultures in a bloody struggle to engender a clash of civilizations.

### **Conclusion**

Kepel's talk, drawn in large measure from his recent book, *Al-Qaida dans le Texte*, provides a look at the ideological, tactical, and strategic tensions that animate al Qaeda's leaders and their strategies, especially in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Brumberg and Byman's analyses expanded on these themes, and pointed, in particular, to their contradictory, and at times paradoxical, implications for U.S. Middle East policy.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>. At the time of writing this piece, al-Jazeera, the Arabic satellite news channel, had reported that Zarqawi had recently been demoted from his position as the political head of al Qaeda in Iraq to leader of military operations.

<sup>2</sup>. Gilles Kepel, *Al-Qaida dans le Texte : Ecrits d'Oussama ben Laden, Abdallah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri et Abou Moussab al-Zarqawi*, Paris: PUF, 2005.

### **Related Resources:**

[What Makes Zargawi Tick? Gilles Kepel on Biography, Ideology, and Violence](#)

USIP Event, March 16, 2006 (Audio, transcript and photos)

[Who Are Iraq's New Leaders? What Do They Want?](#)

Special Report, March 2006

[Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor](#)

Special Report, November 2005

[Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq](#)

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Hind Haider](#), program specialist with the [Political Oppositions in the Arab World](#) project at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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