

## **AL-ZARKAWI, OR THE END OF A SYMBOL**

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It is still too soon to forecast the medium-term consequences of the death of Abu Musab al-Zarkawi on the Iraqi jihad, and beyond that, for the international Islamist movement. As for the long-term consequences, in a world as volatile as the one that has been developing over the last five years or so, they are quite simply impossible to predict. In the heat of the moment, however, certain conclusions can be drawn:

The first is a clear fact: the American forces in Iraq have acquired intelligence capacities – recruitment and manipulation of sources, and the exploitation of the information thus received – they seem to have lacked until now. It is now three years that Zarkawi has been mocking the international coalition and the legitimate Iraqi authorities. Several times he has escaped (sometimes narrowly) capture or death. But American intelligence was finally able to localise this "Iraqi terrorist number one". The military machine swung into action with the efficiency we know it to possess when it is at its best: the information was verified, a strike was decided on and carried out very quickly, and it was successful. If other successes of this sort could be seen in the coming weeks, it could be a sign that the international coalition is in the process of taking back control of the situation, and the Iraqi terrorist scene could be seriously disrupted.

The second conclusion is a psychological one: the leaders of Al Qaeda from now on know that they are living on a knife-edge. That is important. Contrary to the glorious legend that jihadi propaganda tries to get us to believe, the leaders of the terrorists, on the whole, do not expose themselves to much danger. They do not take part in operations on the ground. It is possible to spend your whole life sending the faithful out to die as martyrs without at any time wishing oneself to pay the ultimate price "for the cause". Just in case they didn't get it before, Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and the rest will now have grasped that their distance from the battlefield will not protect them. They are the front line, and their time will come. The risks will probably push the leaders to take increased security measures, and thus to isolate themselves that bit more. Communication procedures with the leaders will become longer and more complicated, reducing still further their operational options.

The third conclusion – and this will also be a concern to terrorist chiefs -- moles and other "traitors" are being recruited right from the inner circle of their counsellors and bodyguards. Only someone close to Zarkawi was in a position to provide the key intelligence that led to his downfall. Whether for profit, for reasons of survival or for whatever other reason, the man who "sold" Zarkawi has injected a slow poison into the veins of the movement: the venom of suspicion.

And suspicion can rapidly be transformed, in conditions of clandestinity, into a real paranoia.

Fourth conclusion: even if in the end the death of Zarkawi has little real impact on terrorist operations, it has enormous symbolic impact. The high media profile of the head of Al Qaeda in Iraq turned him into an icon of the Iraqi "insurgency". Among jihad sympathisers, the reputation of Zarkawi had outstripped that of Bin Laden himself. His death is therefore a very hard blow for jihadi propaganda. From a purely operational point of view his death could also have consequences: Zakawi gave energy to his organisation and was, among other things, the brains and the ideology behind the bloody attacks carried out against Iraq's Shiite community. Who will be strong enough and charismatic enough to pick up where he left off?

Finally, it will be interesting to see who takes up the symbolic succession. An Iraqi? Osama bin Laden himself? Or perhaps a jihadi brought in from outside – why not from Somalia, for example? The next figurehead presented by terrorist propaganda will be an important illustration of the evolution of the jihadi movement, and be an indication of the grounds on which it intends to make its principal effort in the months to come. In Iraq, in any case, an important battle has been won, even though the war goes on. It is the first good news to come out of Baghdad for a long time.