

Letter Exposes New Leader in Al-Qa`ida High Command

December 11, 2005

[Please note: Images may have been removed from this document. Page numbers have been added.]

On 7 June 2006, American military forces executed an air strike on an al-Qa`ida safe-house near Baqouba, Iraq, killing Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, al-Qa`ida's commander in Iraq. U.S. and Iraqi forces subsequently acquired numerous documents from that safe-house. On 18 September 2006, the Iraqi National Security Advisor, Muwaffaq al-Rabi`i, released one of those documents to Iraqi media.¹ As part of an ongoing collaboration with the Department of Defense to declassify, collect, and disseminate documents that provide new insights into the internal functioning of salafi-jihadist organizations, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point has made this letter available at <http://ctc.usma.edu>.

The captured letter sheds new light on the friction between al-Qa`ida's senior leadership and al-Qa`ida's commanders in Iraq over the appropriate use of violence. The identity of the letter's author, "`Atiyah," is unknown, but based on the contents of the letter he seems to be a highly placed al-Qa`ida leader who fought in Algeria in the early 1990s. `Atiyah's letter echoes many of the themes found in the October 2005 letter written to Zarqawi by al-Qa`ida's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri; indeed, it goes so far as to explicitly confirm the authenticity of that earlier letter.

`Atiyah's admonitions in this letter, like those of Zawahiri in his letter to Zarqawi, also dovetail with other publicly available texts by al-Qa`ida strategists.² Although `Atiyah praises Zarqawi's military success against coalition forces in Iraq, he is most concerned with Zarqawi's failure to understand al-Qa`ida's broader strategic objective: attracting mass support among the wider Sunni Muslim community. `Atiyah reminds Zarqawi that military actions must be subservient to al-Qa`ida's long-term political goals. Zarqawi's use of violence against popular Sunni leaders, according to `Atiyah, is undermining al-Qa`ida's ability to win the "hearts of the people."³

According to `Atiyah, Zarqawi's widening scope of operations, culminating with the November 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan, has alienated fellow Sunnis and reduced support for the global al-Qa`ida movement. In this vein, `Atiyah instructs Zarqawi to avoid killing popular Iraqi Sunni leaders because such actions alienate the very populations that al-Qa`ida seeks to attract to its cause.⁴ `Atiyah also encourages Zarqawi to forge strategic relationships with moderate Sunnis, particularly tribal and religious leaders, even if these leaders do not accept Zarqawi's religious positions.⁵

`Atiyah instructs Zarqawi to follow orders from Usama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri on major strategic issues, such as initiating a war against Shiites; undertaking large-scale operations; or operating outside of Iraq. `Atiyah goes on to criticize Zarqawi's board of advisors in Iraq for their lack of adequate political and religious expertise, and he warns Zarqawi against the sin of arrogance. Because al-Qa`ida is in what `Atiyah calls a "stage of weakness," `Atiyah urges Zarqawi to seek counsel from wiser men in Iraq— implying that there might be someone more qualified than Zarqawi to command al-Qa`ida operations in Iraq.

`Atiyah closes with a request that Zarqawi send a messenger to "Waziristan" (likely, Waziristan, Pakistan) in order to establish a reliable line of communication with Bin Laden and Zawahiri. `Atiyah confirms in the letter that al-Qa`ida's overall communications network has been severely disrupted and complains specifically that sending communications to Zarqawi from outside of Iraq remains difficult. Interestingly, he explains how Zarqawi might use jihadi discussion forums to communicate with al-Qa`ida leadership in Waziristan.

`Atiyah's unequivocal confirmation of the Zawahiri letter's legitimacy, his authoritative tone, and his insider knowledge, indicate that he is among the highest ranking leaders in al-Qa`ida. But unlike most of al-Qa`ida's known senior leadership, who remain isolated in the tribal areas of Pakistan or under house arrest in Iran, `Atiyah appears to have remarkable freedom of movement and a functional communication network.

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