

## Zarqawi's Children

Alain Bauer<sup>A</sup>

**I**SIS (Islamic Army in Iraq and the Levant), longtime described as an insignificant guerrilla force in Iraq that then attacked the Syrian regime without much success, even as it stymied its “allies” of the Free Syrian Army, has just achieved several spectacularly successful victories and captured territory in northern Iraq and Syria. They have also been in control of Fallujah for several months. All of the Sunni triangle, plus an area somewhat extended beyond this, now appears to be in the hands of groups that are heavily armed and increasingly well trained. In addition, they have also caused the Iraqi “army,” which looks increasingly like that of Mali, to flee.

Until today, much credence has often been given to the significant simplifications of analysts who depict an opponent or enemy that corresponds to what the West wants it to be rather than what it really is.

This enemy has been underestimated or ignored, or fables about a lone-wolf group have been made up, in order to avoid trying to understand the dynamic complexity of the hybrid realities on the ground.

Since the Algerian civil war, defining an opponent or enemy of this kind has not been easy.

The nature of terrorism has changed, models have evolved, and although the detection and gathering of intelligence is still of a very high standard, there has been little analysis of this intelligence, a result more due to cultural prejudice than a lack of competence.

The easy option—the temptation of the enemy of convenience who, in spite of everything, is supposed to fit a particular

mold—has been adopted all too often.

And there has been very little success in resisting the sophisticated manipulations of the Algerian, Saudi, Turkish, Jordanian, and Pakistani secret services, which for the most part outclass their Western counterparts.

Zarqawi appears to be a major player in recent events, having managed, it seems, to win a posthumous victory over his main opponents, namely Bin Laden and what remains of what is believed should be called Al Qaeda.

According to biographical accounts, which are to be treated with great caution, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was born Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh in October 1966, in Zarqa, Jordan (hence the last name of his alias).

His family belongs to the Bani Hasan tribe, composed of Bedouins scattered across the Middle East, in particular Syria and Iraq. The tribal element, especially given the complexity of local boundaries and their porosity, is not to be underestimated.

A petty criminal turned street boss, Al Zarqawi was sent to a Koranic school, where he apparently discovered the ideology of jihad and soon, like many other young Muslims, went off to fight in Afghanistan.

Although Al Zarqawi met Azzam, the founder of the Afghan Services Bureau (forerunner to the Al Qaeda network), and Bin Laden, there appear to have been major clashes between their ambitions. He returned to Afghanistan, which was then controlled by the Taliban, and created Tawhid wal-Jihad (Unification and Holy War).

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<sup>A</sup> Professor of Criminology at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, New York and Beijing

In 2002, Al Zarqawi moved to Syria after a stay in Iran, according to the confession of his lieutenants who were arrested by Jordanian police.

He then made it to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. He claimed responsibility for the August 19, 2003, bombing of the building housing UN personnel in downtown Baghdad, in which 22 people were killed, including the representative of the secretary general of the UN, Sergio Vieira de Mello. An attack on the Ali mosque in the Shiite holy city of Najaf on August 29, 2003, claimed 85 victims.

In July 2004, his organization suffered heavy losses during the siege of Fallujah.

On October 19, 2004, his group, Tawhid wal-Jihad, was recognized by Bin Laden as the “*representative of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia*”—a local emir.

Al Zarqawi would be killed on June 7, 2006, during a U.S. bombing.

A few months later, in October 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was created through the alliance of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, other small Islamic groups, and Sunni tribes in Iraq’s Anbar province. Its military leader was Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, and its political leader Abu Abdullah Al Baghdadi (born Hamid Dawud Mohamed Khalil al Zawi), supposedly a former police general under Saddam Hussein, and “Emir of the ISI and Prince of the Faith” according to his official designation.

Not only did the group distance itself from Al Qaeda, but it also quickly became a ferocious enemy of Ayman Al Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s successor, who never missed an opportunity to distance himself from it, condemn its actions, or call for reconciliation.

Following the elimination of its leader in April 2010, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi Al-Husseini (Ibrahim Awad Ali Al Badri), a forty-something Iraqi, became leader (the

term Al Baghdadi, “from Baghdad” is as common as Smith or Johnson).

In April 2013, ISI became ISIS, installing itself in Syria after absorbing a large part of the Al Nusra Front. Since then, it has been involved in a latent conflict with the Free Syrian Army as well as a legitimist branch of Al Nusra.

However, ISIS’s very different nature relative to other Sunni groups on the ground goes beyond the settling of scores that usually takes place between jihadist groups.

In addition to having a structured and internationalized apparatus, ISIS seems to have modeled itself on a synthesis of Hezbollah, the Ba’ath Party, and the Bolshevik Party. Characterized by a true level of organization in a pyramid structure, the implementation of an internal and external reign of terror, and its bringing together of seasoned brigades (Libyans, Chechens, Westerners, and so forth), the structure is best known for its brutality, particularly against its closest enemies, namely militants who have remained loyal to the last leadership group of what remains of Al Qaeda, a network whose swan song was performed several years ago.

In fact, ISIS seems to have completed a perfect hostile takeover of what remains of Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, at the same time as attracting increasingly young jihadists from around the world.

The war in Syria against the Assad Regime is lost, something all the belligerents have known since Syrian loyalist forces won the battle of Yabrud, near the Lebanese border, in mid-March 2014.

But the war in Iraq has only just begun. Fallujah has been held by ISIS since early 2014, and it now holds Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, Tikrit, the nucleus of Saddam Hussein’s family, and perhaps Samarra. Baghdad was almost in range. After the Afghan political disaster, the United

States is preparing for its next colonial defeat. However, we have to look beyond this episode and its mixture of national and anticolonial demands, vengeance against the former Ba'ath regime, and committed jihadists.

For many fighters engaged in jihad look like young Zarqawi. Much more than moving into terrorism, what these petty criminals are preparing for is a return of their criminal world. There have been very few cases recorded of such criminals becoming terrorists since the Algerian civil war.

No one knows who really invented Al Zarqawi: is it a case of manipulation, destabilization, or a Golem invented by the secret services and who inevitably turned bad?

One thing is clear: Zarqawi's children are here. They will be for a long time—and not just in the Middle East.