

# **The Zawahiri Letter and the Strategy of al-Qaeda**

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THE STRATEGY AND IDEOLOGY OF AL-QAEDA have evolved constantly since it was formed. The direction of this evolution has been determined by a number of factors: the theater in which the organization operated, the operational opportunities that presented themselves, and the ideological and practical predilections of the religious and operational leaders of both the radical Islamic camp in general and al-Qaeda in particular.

The jihad in Iraq, coming on the heels of the destruction of the Taliban and the shattering loss of al-Qaeda's Afghan safe haven, is arguably the most profound development that the "global jihad" movement has undergone since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It has, predictably, generated an unprecedented amount of new strategic thinking within various wings of the movement. Some have expressed single-minded enthusiasm for the goal of reestablishing an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq, the historical land of the Abbasid Caliphate, and they have focused methodically on devising a plan for achieving this victory. Others have engaged in genuine soul-searching regarding the strategic mistakes that contributed to the downfall of the Taliban's Islamic emirate, and have attempted to learn practical lessons from that defeat and implement changes.

The letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>1</sup> to Abu Musab Zarqawi, recently intercepted and published by the United States, fits into this picture of al-Qaeda's strategic planning on the one hand, and its attempt to learn lessons from the Afghan debacle on the other. Since the letter was released, many experts have analyzed its content and raised questions regarding its authenticity. The aim of this article is not to enter into that rather heated debate about whether the letter is authentic or, rather, American or Iranian "black propaganda"—though the questions raised by those who doubt its genuineness are treated. In fact, textual and contextual analysis alone cannot prove authenticity in this case, but nothing in the letter's style or content definitively show it to be a part of an influence operation. Given that the letter may well be genuine, it deserves serious study in the context of the radical Islamic movement's ideological flux in Iraq and elsewhere, and of a tension that has arisen between the "old guard" of al-Qaeda and the operational echelon in "the field."

## **The Zawahiri Letter**

On July 9, 2005 a 6,500-word letter from Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command, to Zarqawi, the "emir" (commander) of the organization in Iraq, was intercepted. It was later published on October 6. The letter has aroused much debate, not only over its authenticity, but also—for those who accepted its authenticity—over its strategic implications.

The language of the letter is a mixture of Islamic eschatological thought and political pragmatism. It opens with an "update" on Zawahiri's situation. He reassures Zarqawi

that the arrest of Abu Faraj (Abu Faraj al-Libbi), the purported No. 3 in the al-Qaeda organization, has not led to additional arrests. He also expresses concern about the activities of the Pakistani army against the mujahidin, and discusses some financial matters. At the end of the letter, Zawahiri offers Zarqawi a “bibliography” of his works to read. Most of the letter, however, presents a sophisticated, logical analysis of the goals of the jihad in Iraq and the strategies for achieving those goals.

The short-term goal of the jihad, according to the letter, is the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq and the establishment of an emirate—an Islamic political entity commanded by an *emir*—that will eventually become the nucleus of a Caliphate. The long-term goal is the toppling of the secular regimes in the neighboring countries and uniting them into one Caliphate.

The letter links the struggle in Iraq to prophecies in the Quran and the Hadith. Fulfilling these prophecies is a necessary condition for Islam’s final victory. It is a great honor for Zarqawi to lead this struggle, therefore, which is so significant because it is within the “heart of the Islamic world.” This area includes “al-Sham [greater Syria], Egypt, and the neighboring states of the [Arabian] Peninsula and Iraq,” and Zawahiri likens the area to “a bird whose wings are Egypt and Syria, and whose heart is Palestine.” It is where “the greatest battles in the history of Islam” have been fought. It is also the land where the “greatest battle of Islam in this era” is now being waged, and the great battles between Islam and atheism foretold in the Hadith will take place. Iraq is, therefore, more important to the final victory of Islam than the battles taking place on the periphery of the Arab Muslim world—in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia.

In Zawahiri’s assessment, the enemies of Islam in this great struggle are both the external enemy—“idolatrous infidels” (*al-kufr al-mushrikin*)—and the enemies within Islam. The latter, he says, are “traitorous apostates” (*almurtadin al-kha’inin*) who belong to “the community of renegade deviation” (*ahl al-zigh al-mariqin*) and embrace polytheism (*shirk*) and secularist beliefs (*aqa’id ‘almaniya*). They are “corrupters” (*mokharifin*) of God’s word—usually a reference to the Jews and Christians who “corrupted” the word that God gave them—and “forgers” (*wid’ain*) of the Hadith. The letter does not specifically name the political groups or figures who correspond to these appellatives, but it seems that they are the secularists and the Shia.

Zawahiri divides the work of the mujahidin in Iraq into four distinct stages that represent short- and medium-range goals. The first order of business is to expel the Americans from Iraq, which may happen more quickly than expected if the United States follows the pattern it set in Vietnam. Secondly, the *mujahidin* must establish an Islamic authority or emirate over whatever Sunni territory in Iraq can be brought under its control. This stage must be prepared for during the struggle to expel the Americans, Zawahiri warns, in order to prevent other forces from taking power. Because the United States may repeat the kind of abrupt and hasty withdrawal it executed in Vietnam, Iraq may well become subject to whatever party is most effectively organized to take control. The fledgling emirate must also expect to be in a constant state of war with an enemy who is trying to prevent the stability necessary for the emirate to become a Caliphate. The third stage of the struggle is extending the jihad to the secular (*‘almaniya*) countries neighboring Iraq. And the fourth stage, which could be launched simultaneously or later, is the clash with Israel.

Although Zawahiri focuses on these short- and medium-term goals, two long-term aims can be deduced from the letter as well. The first objective entails “homogenizing” Islam by “correcting mistakes of ideology” among Muslims that is, the “re-conversion” of all Muslims not simply to Sunni Islam, but also to the Wahhabi school and the elimination of the ‘Ashari-Matridi school and others. This goal cannot be achieved by force or in a short time; it is not the role of the mujahidin, but calls rather for generations of proselytizing (*dawa*) and education. The second objective is the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate throughout the whole of Iraq, al-Sham—Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine—Egypt, and the Arabian peninsula. Even these are not final borders, however, as the Caliphate is eventually supposed to spread its domain over the entire Land of Islam (Dar al-Islam) from North Africa to Southeastern Asia, and ultimately, over the entire world.

The letter delves into the structure of the future emirate or Caliphate and the desired form of governance in Iraq. Zawahiri stresses that the *mujahidin* cannot rule by force or take power directly. The government should adhere to the Islamic principles of *shura* (consultation) and of “commanding good and forbidding evil” (*amr bil-ma’aruf wa-nahi ‘an al-munkar*). It should also be based on the *ahl al-al wal-aqd ahl ar-ray* (those who allow and bind) and the *ulama* who are experts in sharia.

### **Criticism of Zarqawi’s Strategy**

Zawahiri’s description of the objectives of the jihad in Iraq serves as a background for his critique of Zarqawi’s strategy. Zawahiri does not speak to Zarqawi as a superior officer or commander, or as the deputy of the man to whom Zarqawi has given his oath of allegiance (*bayah*). Rather, he speaks as a concerned colleague who advises from afar with a certain degree of trepidation, knowing that he is not “in the field” and does not know all the facts. Zawahiri does not attempt to exert authority over Zarqawi; rather, he tries to lead him through an argument that is calculated to bring him to certain conclusions.

Zawahiri does not in any way challenge the religious justification for Zarqawi’s actions; his arguments against certain tactics are purely pragmatic and political. While noting that “purity of faith and correct way of living” may be a necessary condition for Islamist victory in Iraq, he cautions that it is not in itself sufficient. As proof of this fact, he reminds Zarqawi of three early would-be Caliphs who fell short of achieving their goals, and of the mistakes of the Taliban and contemporary *mujahidin* organizations that disintegrated when their leaders were killed. Drawing on the quotes of great scholars, that success can be achieved only if one keeps an eye on the target and does not succumb to his emotions; “courage in a man does suffice but not like the courage of one who is wise” and “circumspection precedes courage.”

According to the letter, the success of the *mujahidin* in all four stages mentioned above depends on support of two main sectors—the Muslim population and the *ulama*. Zawahiri says the jihad in Iraq cannot succeed without gaining a minimal level of popular support. The enemy—particularly the secular regimes in the region—knows this and attempts to discredit the jihad movement among the masses. It is important to recognize, furthermore, that the Muslim masses unite against an external enemy, particularly if that enemy is Jewish and/or American. This hostility, rather than true Islamic objectives, is the real motivation behind the insurgency. Zawahiri warns against repeating the mistakes of the Taliban who, because they restricted

participation in government to their tribal affiliates from the Kandahar region, were then unable to rally the population against the American invasion. Equally critical is not offending the ulama of any school. Zawahiri proposes downplaying the differences between the schools (*madhab*, pl. *madhahib*) on the grounds that the masses do not understand why such differences matter. To prove his point, he reminds Zarqawi of a series of eminent *ulama* of the ‘Ashari or Matriddi schools who have played prominent roles in jihad, including the Taliban leader Mullah Omar who was a Hanafi-Matriddi.

On the basis of this analysis, Zawahiri takes issue with three elements of Zarqawi’s strategy toward the Iraqi jihad: The indiscriminate massacre of Shia and desecration of their mosques, the very structure of the jihadi movement as a movement led by non-Iraqis, and the public beheadings of hostages. These actions, the letter suggests, are counterproductive to the short-term goal of the jihad—that is, the expulsion of the Americans and the creation of a Caliphate in Iraq. The letter discusses the first two issues with a great deal of circumspection, but registers disapproval of the beheadings much more forcefully.

The arguments regarding the attacks on the Shia address both theological and practical matters. On the theological level, Zawahiri does not disagree with most elements of Zarqawi’s *takfir* (excommunication) of the Shiite leaders. He describes the Shia pejoratively as the “twelver Rafida school” that is based on “excess and falsehood” (*ghulu, kadhb*), maligns the companions of the Prophet, and believes in an infallible and omnipotent hidden Mahdi. The Shia, he says, collaborated with the enemies of Islam both in the past, during the Crusades, and in the current invasion of Iraq. In the end, the conflict between an Islamic state and the Shia is inevitable.

Despite these facts, however, the letter proposes that the conflict with the Shia be delayed until the short-term goals are achieved. At the present stage, this conflict is counterproductive. It alienates the Sunni “common folk” whose support is, as noted above, a prerequisite for success; it distracts the mujahidin from the primary goal of expelling the Americans; and it is impractical because it is impossible to kill all the Shia in Iraq. Zawahiri distinguishes between the leaders of the Shia and the “common folk.” The former are apostates of Islam. The latter have simply been misled ideologically and, therefore, are to be forgiven due to their ignorance. They can be redeemed by *dawa*. To this Zawahiri adds that Iran is holding over one hundred al-Qaeda prisoners and may take revenge on them if Shia in Iraq are indiscriminately murdered. The second issue is also approached with circumspection. Zawahiri asks, in the light of his observation that the real motivation of the Iraqi insurgency is nationalist and not truly Islamic, whether it is prudent that the non-Iraqi Zarqawi serve as leader of the insurgency. Zawahiri does not expand on this subject, but his position is clear. The third issue is addressed with much more firmness. Zawahiri clearly states that even Zarqawi’s supporters among the Muslim population will not accept the scenes of slaughter of hostages. While he allows that such actions may be religiously-justified revenge for the enemy’s sins against Muslims, he assesses them according to the calculus of political pragmatism. The benefit that comes from “putting fear into the hearts of the Crusaders” does not counterbalance the damage that these actions cause the *mujahidin* in the media; the effect of these pictures in the media undermine the battle for the “hearts and minds” of the worldwide Muslim Umma.

## The Letter's Context

It is important to recognize that this letter does not stand on its own, and should be scrutinized in relation to a growing corpus of documents that reflects the evolving strategic thought of al-Qaeda. The letter responds to the ideological doctrine that motivates Zarqawi, a doctrine spelled out in a series of audiotapes on the meaning of jihad and its laws.

The tone of the letter also supports what is known about the relationship between Zawahiri and Zarqawi. While it is not a relationship between equals, neither is it one between a commander and his subordinate. It is reminiscent of the relationship between al-Qaeda and its "affiliate" organizations, which cooperate with the main al-Qaeda but are not subordinate to it—organizations that are empowered for independent action but open to counsel. Zawahiri sees himself as able and even obliged to offer advice by dint of his age, scholarship, status in al-Qaeda, relations with bin Laden and experience in waging jihad—first in the Egyptian Jihad, and then in al-Qaeda. Due to the pivotal role of the Iraqi jihad, moreover, he cannot remain indifferent to the question of how to wage it. But the centrality and potential of the Iraqi jihad also increase Zawahiri's fear of alienating Zarqawi, and thus inhibit him from offering firmer advice.

Radical Islamic doctrine seems to many outside observers to lack a strategic plan for implementing either its vision of an Islamic state or a set of rules for according any one theater of jihad precedence over another. Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan are all seen as equal victims of the "crusader" attack on Dar al-Islam and of the Crusaders' Muslim collaborators. Each arena, therefore, is to be dealt with equally by whomever happens to be there.

On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the mujahidin movement does indeed engage in strategic thinking and establish priorities among the theaters of jihad. During the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the jihadist Shaykh Abdullah Azzam ruled that the arena for jihad was to be chosen on the basis of political and military considerations, rather than emotion:

*It is our opinion that we should begin with Afghanistan before Palestine, not because Afghanistan is more important than Palestine....but there are some pressing reasons that make Afghanistan the [preferable] starting point. These reasons are: (1) The battles in Afghanistan are still raging and have reached a level of intensity, the likes of which have not been witnessed....(2) The raising of the Islamic flag in Afghanistan is clear, and (3) the aim is clear: 'To make Allah's words uppermost.'*

Bin Laden himself employed a similar logic when he explained why he chose to focus on eliminating American influence within the Arabian peninsula before trying to liberate Palestine: "the occupation of the two holy places is nearer than the occupation of al-Aqsa Mosque, and this made it more important, given its role as the direction of prayer of all Muslims." The strategy and ideology of al-Qaeda have evolved constantly since it was formed in late 1988, due largely to the region in which it was operating. Until the early 1990s, al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, but was then able to move closer to the Arab Middle East by taking advantage of the rise of Hasan al-Turabi's Islamic regime in Sudan. This change of its operational hub increased its

emphasis on the struggle against the regimes in the Middle East. Later, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1994 allowed al-Qaeda to relocate back to that country, a move that was then reflected in its terrorist agenda in Asia. Different theaters of jihad—Bosnia, Chechnya, and others—have also influenced the organization’s overall strategy. It may well be said that al-Qaeda’s strategy was formed first and foremost by the serendipitous opening up of new opportunities for jihad.

Since the early 1990s al-Qaeda’s terrorist strategy has been based on spectacular attacks meant to undermine the sense of security of the Arab regimes and their populations. This strategy was largely determined by opportunity, however, and did not have a center of gravity in any one theater. Operational feasibility, rather than any specific value attached to the targets, generated attacks in such places as Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Mombasa. The conflict in Iraq finally provided al-Qaeda with a geographical focus for jihad that it had lacked ever since the end of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The jihad in Iraq plays a much more important role in al-Qaeda’s strategy than any previous jihads, including Afghanistan in the 1980s. The “pressing reasons” that brought the spiritual forefathers bin Laden and Zawahiri to concentrate on Afghanistan are similar to those that now place Iraq at the epicenter of the jihadi effort: It is the main arena of actual fighting and the theater in which the jihad has the greatest chance of success. It is, furthermore, the first time that an opportunity has arisen to establish an Islamic state based on the jihadi ideology in “the heart of the Muslim world” and in an Arab country. And, perhaps most importantly, the jihad in Iraq provides the radical Islamist movement with an unprecedented opportunity to implement their political objectives by establishing an Islamic state that will serve either as the core for a future Caliphate or the Caliphate itself.

The importance of Iraq is amplified by its having been the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. A victory in Iraq would be perceived as a quantum leap for the jihad movement; it would provide a base inside the Arab world and in the immediate vicinity of al-Qaeda’s traditional targets—Saudi Arabia (*balad alharamayn*, the land of the two holy cities); the al-Aqsa Mosque; and the land of al-Sham, or the fertile crescent. Muslim armies would be on the border of the land of *ribat* (the border between dar al-Islam and dar al-Harb); control of Iraqi oil would fund the jihadi movement’s activities; and a “domino effect” in neighboring countries would lead to the eventual establishment of a Caliphate in the entire Arab world.

Zawahiri’s letter is consistent with the thinking attributed to the radical Islamic leaders surrounding him, and the stages of action he lays out are consistent with their strategic game plan, which includes seven stages leading to the ultimate victory of Islam over the West in 2020. These stages are: (1) The “awakening,” which refers to the attacks of 9/11, designed to make the Islamic movement a central player on the global scene; (2) “opening the eyes,” the period from 2003 to 2006 that will transform al-Qaeda into a “mass movement”; (3) “arising and standing up,” the period from 2007 to 2010 that will focus on terrorist destabilization of existing Muslim regimes; (4) the toppling of the moderate regimes of Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and other Muslim states from 2010 to 2013; (5) the formation of a new world order between 2013 and 2016, based on an Islamic Caliphate as a world power and the weakening of the

United States and Israel; (6) a total confrontation between Islam and the West in 2016-2020; and (7) a “Decisive Victory” for Islam in 2020.

The centrality of the Iraqi jihad has also affected al-Qaeda’s strategic thinking regarding terrorism outside Iraq. While the Zawahiri letter does not refer to jihad theaters outside of Iraq, other documents have pointed out how jihadi missions in the West should support the goal of weakening the coalition in Iraq and speeding up the American defeat. This thinking differs significantly from the classic rationale for such attacks, which is simply to “strike fear in the hearts of the enemies of Allah.”

The perception of the feasibility of victory in Iraq has led to a “proactive” jihad to establish a Caliphate replacing the “defensive jihad” to protect Muslim lands—the core principle of Abdullah Azzam, the leader of the Afghan mujahidin. Though the establishment of a Caliphate was an element of al-Qaeda’s ideology in the past, it remained in the background because it seemed to them less achievable than it does today. The Caliphate’s new prominence has far-reaching ramifications for intra-Muslim relations: while a Muslim regime may conceivably tolerate different Islamic sects, a Caliph is obliged to define the one true form of Islam that can be followed within the realm. The adoption of the Caliphate as a goal for al-Qaeda, therefore, imposes on the organization a fatal confrontation with other, heterodox Islamic schools.

Zawahiri’s criticism of the indiscriminate attacks on the Shia is not unique in al-Qaeda circles. More than a few salafi *ulama* have stated that the massacre of Muslims, including Shiite Muslims, is counterproductive to al-Qaeda’s strategy of gaining mass Muslim support for its struggle. The older generation of al-Qaeda-linked salafi *ulama* is clearly growing uneasy. Included in this group are Abu Basir al-Tartusi, who took a stand against the London bombings on the basis of his interpretation of Islamic law on jihad; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who criticized Zarqawi, his erstwhile disciple, in a public statement on the same basis; and Mohammed al-Masari, one of the fathers of the Saudi reform movement in London. These scholars hold undeniable salafi-jihadi credentials and are close to Zawahiri ideologically and organizationally. It is conceivable, therefore, that they influenced Zawahiri’s decision to add his weight to their arguments.

Zawahiri approaches Zarqawi’s actions from a more practical and political standpoint than his colleagues, who rely almost exclusively on Islamic jurisprudence, but all their objections are rooted in both religious conviction and their bitter experiences in Afghanistan. They are aware that the Taliban, by their Pashto particularism, had forfeited the support of the wider population, thus facilitating the American invasion and occupation. In their eyes, the likelihood of making a similar mistake in Iraq is compounded by the large proportion of Shia in the population.

### **The Authenticity of the Letter**

The above analysis assumes, of course, that the letter is authentic—an assumption that many reject. Some claim that the very fact that the letter supports American portrayals of the jihadists in Iraq is cause enough to doubt its authenticity. Another argument is that a website generally accepted as reflecting al-Qaeda’s positions categorically denied the authenticity of the letter, describing it as work of the “Black House”—i.e., the Shia. Other arguments are based on some positions taken in the document that

seem unrealistic. For example, Zawihiri's claim that he misses Zarqawi sounds disingenuous, as Zarqawi had not been an integral part of al-Qaeda when he was in Afghanistan and had refused to send funds back to al-Qaeda when he was developing his infrastructure in Europe. Moreover, the suggestion that a non-Iraqi should not be leading the Iraq insurgency also sounds incompatible with an Islamist ideology that rejects all forms of nationalist identification. More persuasive arguments that the letter is Shiite, or Iranian, disinformation are based on a number of linguistic usages and religious references that seem out of place in a Sunni Sala. document: (1) the reference to the son of the fourth Caliph and the first Shiite Imam, 'Ali, Hussein bin 'Ali, as "Imam"; (2) the blessing of the Prophet's family ('*ala alihi*) in the opening greeting of the letter; and (3) the use of historic allusions relating to the Shia.

These arguments do not disprove the authenticity of the document, however, and some of them are basically flawed. The *cui bono* argument that, because the document serves its interest, the U.S. administration must have forged it should not be taken seriously; the strategy outlined in the letter is played out in the field in Iraq and in terrorist attacks in neighboring countries. The disowning of the letter by al-Qaeda also should not hold much weight. It would be natural for the organization to deny the existence of disagreements between a senior figure in al-Qaeda and the leader of the organization in the most important theater of jihad. The exposure of such disagreements would be particularly unwelcome when they concern such a central operational policy as the killing of Shia. Because of the decentralized nature of the organization today, moreover, it is also quite possible that its propaganda arm of the organization is not even aware of these internal debates and reacts on its own to safeguard the image of ideological unity.

The arguments based on textual analysis carry greater weight, but still do not tip the scales in favor of a forgery verdict. While it is true that "salla Allahu 'alayhi wa alihi wa sallam" (the blessings and peace of God be upon him and his family) is a Shiite form of the blessing of the Prophet—because of the Shiite adulation of the household of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*)—the form used in the letter includes the companions of the Prophet (*al-salah wa al-salam 'ala rasuli'llahi wa a-lihi wa sabhihi*), whom a Shia would never include. This form is prevalent among Sunnis and can be found abundantly both in books and preaching by al-Azhar shaykhs and even in previous letters by Zawihiri himself, the authenticity of which was not debated. Mention of "Imam Hussein" can also be found in many Sunni books—it not unusual or necessarily indicative of a Shia origin. The Sunni reference to Hussein as Imam does not correspond, of course, to the Shia concept of Imam. Finally, the gallery of historic figures suggests a Sunni, rather than Shia, origin. All three are would-be Caliphs, and Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr is considered one of the archenemies of the Shia. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ashath was a general of the Umayyads who rebelled against the Caliph 'Abd al-Malika in the year 81 H and succeeded in occupying much of Iraq. He declared himself Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful, Caliph), but was unable to consolidate his rule and was eventually defeated.

Most of the letter uses typical Wahhabi terminology and seems to refer to Zarqawi's own arguments about the Shia ("the most evil of mankind") that he made in a February 2004 letter to Zawihiri, the authenticity of which has not been challenged. Certainly, the strategy discussed in the letter is compatible with authentic al-Qaeda thinking regarding the short- and long-term objectives of the struggle in Iraq. And a

series of statements made by Zarqawi in July, seemingly in response to Zawahiri, provide additional circumstantial evidence in favor of the letter's authenticity. In these statements, some of which appeared on audiotape, Zarqawi elaborates on the principles and practice of jihad. He attacks the ulama whose fatwas are disconnected from the realities of the Islamic Umma and who distort the "legal concept" of jihad, which, he insists, relies on martyrdom operations against all the enemies of Islam. He seems to allude to Zawahiri's critique of killing Muslims when he argues that Muslims who are affiliated with infidels or who are killed in the context of an attack on infidels are not "protected" persons according to sharia.

The forgery theory encounters another problem: If the goal of the forgery was to create uncertainty among the rank and file of Zarqawi's men about targeting Shia, its interception by Western intelligence services would not achieve that goal. The letter was written and received in July, and the "forgers" made no attempt to leak it in other ways during the months before the United States finally divulged its contents. Although there is no final proof that Zawahiri did indeed write the letter, it is legitimate to say that there is no strong basis for disproving its authenticity, and to conclude that he could have written it.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of the Iraqi jihad is not a matter for debate within the radical Islamic movement, but the best strategy for achieving victory is. Zawahiri's letter joins other documents, some of which are mentioned above, that are engaged in this controversy. Though its authenticity cannot be proved or disproved, it expresses views that are entirely consistent with other al-Qaeda voices whose authenticity is not in doubt. The letter confirms a development that is becoming more and more evident: al-Qaeda's current strategic thinking transcends the traditional religious and eschatological framework of the jihadi movement. Today, al-Qaeda devotes significant attention to strategic military planning, which, it believes, will achieve its aims and which plays a central role in its operational decisions.

The controversy expressed in the letter touches on one of the root causes of the contemporary jihadist movement: the crisis of religious authority within Islam. It was this crisis of authority that gave birth to the first generation of radical shaykhs who rejected the religious establishments within Muslim regimes and followed Abdullah Azzam to the jihad in Afghanistan. Though radical, the first generation of the Afghan jihad deferred to the supremacy of "objective" jurisprudence to justify their actions. The devolution of authority could not be stemmed, however, and now lesser *ulama* and even field operatives such as Zarqawi are now calling the shots and refusing to submit to the authority of the older generation of Afghan veterans. Indeed, the letter highlights the contrast between the elder, seasoned mujahid and the zealous, ideologically motivated but politically inexperienced younger man.

To what extent Zarqawi sees himself as duty bound to accept or at least to consider this advice is a moot question. Zarqawi has proven his mettle in Iraq and is clearly the main asset that al-Qaeda has there. His motley army of Arab volunteers is reminiscent of the original Arab mujahidin movement that coalesced around Abdullah Azzam in Afghanistan. It makes him a principal figure, not only in the Iraqi context, but also in the context of the countries from which the volunteers come—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Gulf states and the nations of North Africa.

*Note: Please refer to PDF document for source information.*

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