

Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: Major General William Caldwell's Baghdad Press Conference

Full Transcript

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MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM CALDWELL, SPOKESMAN, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ

COMBINED PRESS INFORMATION CENTER, BAGHDAD, IRAQ

GEN. CALDWELL: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Today is a great day in Iraq. Congratulations go out to everyone, for the efforts of both the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces have resulted in the elimination of a major threat to the stability, the security and the prosperity of the Iraqi people now and in the future. Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi is dead, no longer able to terrorize innocent Iraqi civilians.

Just as significantly, the prime minister, Prime Minister Maliki, today submitted, and the Council of Representatives confirmed, the ministries (sic) for Defense, Interior and National Security. Today, Iraq takes a giant step forward — closer to peace within, closer to unity throughout, and closer to a world without terror.

As you know, coalition forces killed Zarqawi and one of his top lieutenants, Sheikh Al Rahman, yesterday, on June 7th at 6:15 p.m. in an airstrike against an identified, isolated safehouse. The success was the product of painstaking intelligence-gathering from local sources and from within Zarqawi's network, made possibly both by the Iraqis who have made the determination to uphold the legitimate authority of their own nation and the slow, deliberate exploitation of leads and opportunities, person-to-person, through evidence since December of 2003. The elimination of Zarqawi has dealt a serious blow to al Qaeda in Iraq.

If I could, first chart, please.

Just to orient everybody so we can talk about the same location. Obviously, this is Baghdad here, this is Baqubah up here. This is the location in which the strike occurred last night at 6:15.

Next slide. Flip, please.

Just a second, please.

This is Baqubah right here. Approximately eight kilometers to the west of Baqubah, in an isolated date palm area, what you find was a single home that was being used as a safehouse by Zarqawi.

Next chart, please.

To knock the picture down a little further, this is the location where the house is right here. As you can see, it's a very isolated area, single home. That locations right here along a road that's absolutely — actually very accessible.

Next chart, please.

I'll show you a picture of the house itself. And this is a picture of the home in which the strike occurred by the United States Air Force last night at 6:15, eliminating Zarqawi and his top lieutenant, Al Rahman.

If you would, please, next chart.

From that strike that occurred last night, Zarqawi's spiritual adviser was killed. This gentlemen was key to our success in finding Zarqawi. As a top lieutenant of his, he was identified several weeks ago by — through military sources from somebody inside Zarqawi's network. Through painstaking intelligence effort, they were able to start tracking him, monitoring his movements and establishing when he was doing his link-ups with Zarqawi. Last night, he made a link-up again at 6:15, at which time the decision was made to go ahead and strike that target, eliminating both of those members of al Qaeda at that time.

Next chart, please.

This is a picture of Zarqawi. As you can see, generally the same facial expression in both there, but's that's from last night, as you can see, taken approximately 6:17 P.M.

Next slide on the chart here, please.

This is an additional photo, too, taken last night of Zarqawi.

Okay, next chart, please.

The question was asked: What exactly did the strike do to the al Qaeda network?

Just in the last 90 days, if you take a look at some of the key elements of the al Qaeda network that the coalition forces have painstakingly continued to go after, taking a niche at a time, this gives you a quick summary of just 90 days, with key mid-grade-level members of the al Qaeda network.

What we have realize and remember here is that this has been an ongoing effort since December 2003. Coalition forces, after hearing what Zarqawi said in his letter at that time, stating that he was going to incite civil war between the Sunnis and Shi'ites — it became very apparent that this was an element that did not have a place here with the people of Iraq.

They have — we have continually worked on this organization, going after mid-grade-level personnel to disrupt, disorganize, and so that would be ineffective in its targeting of innocent civilians in Iraq. That has continued on, and it resulted in the strike last night, in which we took out the two top members of that organization.

Although Zarqawi's capture is reason to rejoice, we must be — caution not to be overly

optimistic, as one man's life does not signify an end to an insurgency.

As we have seen with countless apprehensions of Zarqawi's lieutenants, the regeneration of theirs is, in itself, very interesting. It was likely that Zarqawi had planned for his capture for some times. He probably has identified somebody as his replacement, and we're sure that they'll try to incite violence over the next few days, to reassert themselves, to show that they are still a viable insurgent organization.

But if you take the prime minister and listen to what he has said, he has said security is his first priority. He said, "Security is my second priority. Security is my third priority."

The elimination of Zarqawi is neither the beginning nor is it the end, but it is a stride in the direction of law and order, an Iraq that is primed for the future, by a government that respects the rights of all Iraqi citizens.

The commanding general of the Multinational Force said today it is a step forward, and General Casey is exactly right. The elimination of Zarqawi is a step forward.

Ridding Iraq of Zarqawi will not instantaneously stop the violence. The Iraqi people have the greatest role to play in shaping the future of Iraq. To echo the prime minister's thoughts, it is too late to say maintaining security is only the responsibility of the government.

As he said, it is also the responsibility of those who elected the government. Iraqis helped eliminate Zarqawi, and now they must help eliminate the violence associated with threats like Zarqawi.

Iraqis can rejoice today. They have earned it with their blood, their sweat, their tears. But tomorrow — tomorrow we must continue to march forward — the march forward towards an Iraq that is free, that is for all, that exemplifies unity, prosperity and security. The days of Zarqawi are over, and now Iraqis, from their neighborhoods to the halls of their government, can rejoice and take great pride at what has been accomplished by both them and the coalition forces in eliminating that threat.

With that, I'll take any questions you all have.

Yes, ma'am.

Q (Off mike) — with The Washington Post. Can you run down more detail about how exactly he died? How many airstrikes there were, and if Zarqawi died instantly or if he died later, just a little bit more detail on the operation itself?

GEN. CALDWELL: Sure.

If you would, technical crew, would you assist me in bringing up the video? I'd like to show you a video of the airstrike on the building that occurred last night at 6:15.

As you observe the target here, there was a flight of two F-16s from the United States Air Force. They have now been told where the target is. They have identified it. The lead aircraft is going to engage it here momentarily with a 500-pound bomb on the target. At this point, they're making an assessment as to whether or not the target had been fully engaged and whether they need to reengage it one more time. The decision has been made now by the commander, the pilot in charge up there, that they are going to do a re-attack, and you'll

see the second 500-pound bomb go in shortly.

Okay, thank you.

Following this strike, Iraqi security forces, and specifically Iraqi police, responded to that location. They were the first ones to arrive on the scene. That was followed very shortly thereafter by elements of the Multinational Force North, specifically troopers from the 4th Infantry Division, which were a part of the 101st Airborne Air Assault Division up there. They then moved to the location, swept through the site, and identified six persons that had been killed in that strike at that time.

Site exploitation occurred. Zarqawi's body was then removed, brought back to a secure location. By visual identification it was established that that probably was him. But they went ahead and brought him back, did further examination of his body, found more scars and tattoos consistent with what had been reported and which we knew about him. They then did fingerprint identification, and that came back at about 0330 this morning as positively identified as Zarqawi having been killed.

Q So there was no firefight? It was two airstrikes.

GEN. CALDWELL: It was an Air Force strike that eliminated that target, and there was no further direct-fire engagement at that point.

Yes, sir?

Q Rod Nordland from Newsweek. Who were the other victims? Can you tell us anything about them and their identity?

GEN. CALDWELL: At this point, we have positively identified two of the six, which I can talk about. The other four we are still trying to make identification on. It's been about 20 hours since the strike occurred, and they are trying to do the identification on other four at this time.

Q Are they all adult males?

GEN. CALDWELL: No. There's a woman in the group and a younger person, a child.

Q How old — (off mike)?

GEN. CALDWELL: We have absolutely no idea.

Yes, sir?

Q (In Arabic.)

GEN. CALDWELL: I tell you, the coalition forces are very fortunate in this country in that we have a lot of nations that are very actively involved in supporting the effort here to establish a free and prosperous Iraq. There is no question that other countries are providing information and are assisting in our fight on the global war on terrorism.

It would be inappropriate for me to discuss the very specifics of those relationships, but Jordan is an extremely important friend and partner and a good friend of Iraq's as they fight

this global war on terror.

Yes, sir?

Q (Through interpreter.) (Name and affiliation inaudible.) Have you found any documents or information — intelligence information? Did you find anything that can help you to eliminate terrorism?

GEN. CALDWELL: We did. We, in fact, were very fortunate. We did find some information. I think what everybody needs to understand is the strike last night did not occur in a 24-hour period. It truly was a very long, painstaking, deliberate exploitation of intelligence, information gathering, human sources, electronic signal intelligence that was done over a period of time — many, many weeks — that led us last night to that target.

Last night, as a result of striking that target and in having confirmation early in the evening that we had in fact killed Zarqawi, we then conducted 17 simultaneous raids within Baghdad proper and just on the outskirts, utilizing both Iraqi security forces and coalition forces. And in those 17 raids last night, a tremendous amount of information and intelligence was collected and is presently being exploited and utilized for further use.

It was — I mean, it was a treasure trove, no question. And we had identified other targets we had previously not gone after to allow us to continue staying focused on getting Zarqawi. But now that we have got him, it allows us now to go after all these other targets we have been using in order establish his movements, his patterns, his habits and where we could find him like we did last night.

But it was about 17 targets that we immediately launched, executed, literally within hours after our initial identification of him.

Yes, sir, in the back.

Q Me?

GEN. CALDWELL: Yeah.

Q Richard Engel from NBC News.

Could you classify in any way the information — could you classify in any way the treasure trove that you found? Did you find phone books, computers? And these 17 targets — were they all in Baghdad? And did you have any doubt at all that this was Zarqawi?

GEN. CALDWELL: We had absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Zarqawi was in the house. There was 100 percent confirmation.

Q Were you going for Zarqawi? We've heard that you may have been going for some other people, and then there was some luck involved. Or did you know, "We're going for Zarqawi. He's going to be there"? And then if you could classify what you found.

Thank you.

GEN. CALDWELL: We knew exactly who was there. We knew it was Zarqawi, and that was the deliberate target that we went to get.

We also knew, from having watched the movements of Al Rahman, that he was there, too, in that house.

The information that we were able to gather over the last 24 hours is currently being used and exploited. It will influence future operations, so it'd be kind of inappropriate at this point to talk about future ops, for operational reasons.

Yes, ma'am.

Q (Through interpreter.) The results of looking at the DNA — that will prove that it is in fact Zarqawi that was killed?

GEN. CALDWELL: That's a great question, and we in fact are doing a DNA analysis. And we would hope within 48 hours to have that information back to us from now.

Q General — (off mike).

GEN. CALDWELL: The question was, DNA analysis is obviously the most reliable means to establish the identity of a person.

Although we did do a fingerprint 100 percent identification match, we are also doing a DNA analysis, and we should have that in about 48 hours now is the goal to have that back here to us. Yes, sir?

Q Tom (Moore ?), Los Angeles Times. Can you tell us a little bit more about Rahman? Can you tell us a little bit more about Al Rahman, and how long you've been following him and, you know, exactly that his relationship to Zarqawi was?

GEN. CALDWELL: He was the spiritual adviser to Zarqawi. He was brought to our attention by somebody within the network of Zarqawi's. For operational reasons, I probably can't specify exactly when. But we had clear enough evidence about a month and a half ago that allowed us to start (making ?) down to the point where we were able to prosecute the action last night against that safe house.

Q Is he Iraqi?

GEN. CALDWELL: Pardon?

Q Is Al Rahman an Iraqi?

GEN. CALDWELL: I'd have to get his nationality. He is not, though. But I need to confirm for you his nationality. If you'd take that.

Yes, sir, in the back?

Q (In Arabic.)

GEN. CALDWELL: If I can make sure I have your question correct, you're asking why did we not take out Zarqawi before now?

Q (In Arabic.)

GEN. CALDWELL: Last night was the first time that we have had definitive, unquestionable

information as to exactly where he was located, knowing that we could strike that target without causing collateral damage to other Iraqi civilians and personnel in the area. And so therefore the decision was made to strike last night.

Yes, ma'am?

Q (Through interpreter.) (Name inaudible) — BBC.

You mentioned in your briefing that the killing of Zarqawi does not mean an end to the (al Qaeda ?) in Iraq and that the coming days would witness attacks on a wide scale in Iraq. Would you take the particular — (inaudible)? Did you agree with the Iraqi government? Are there any coordination between the two to confront these attacks?

GEN. CALDWELL: There is. In fact, the prime minister himself has developed a plan, which he calls the Baghdad Security Plan, that I know that he has been talking about in the press and he's planning to execute. He's asked coalition forces to work in support of his efforts. We're going to be tightly working with the Iraqi security forces within Baghdad as the prime minister moves forward with that.

Obviously today, now that he has designated a — and had verified by the Council of Representatives — a minister for national security, a minister for Defense and a minister for Interior, I mean, the coalition forces are just so excited for the government of Iraq and what can happen here in the future by having that leadership in place, firmly established and able to make those kind of decisions about exactly what they want to do.

Yes, sir? Right there, in the green shirt.

Q General, Jon Finer from The Washington Post. I was wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about the unit that was actually doing the tracking of Rahman and then eventually Zarqawi. There's all kinds of descriptions that are thrown out that they're a Special Operations Forces unit. Is there anything else you can say about who exactly was involved with that process?

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, what I can tell you is this. We have a policy — we don't talk about when Special Operating Forces are involved in an operation. But this was truly a coalition effort, along with the Iraqi forces. This was not one particular unit. If you just stop to think about it, it was an Air Force element that dropped that bomb or bombs on the house. It was Iraqi police that responded the first time on the scene. It was Multinational Division North that had the Quick Reaction Force that came into that location in case there was anybody still alive or — was going to continue to fight or anything else at that location.

To get to that point took tremendous amounts of intelligence gathering and collection and analysis that was done not only by coalition forces but with the Iraqi elements and a lot of our nations that are helping us fight this global war on terror.

Q One quick follow-up. Sorry. The president said in this speech just 10 minutes ago that the Special Operations — (off mike).

Sorry. I said the president said in his speech that it was Special Operations forces that tracked these targets to the location that was bombed. Is that the case? And —

GEN. CALDWELL: If my — if the president of the United States said it was, then I — then I'm

sure it was.

Obviously, there are Special Operating Forces, as the president stated, that were involved in this operation.

Yes, sir?

Q Paul Schemm, AFP. Working on the assumption that most of the insurgency has nothing to do with al Qaeda, is this going to substantially change the U.S. coalition forces' strategy, counterinsurgency strategy? Are we going to see a change in coming weeks, or is this not really going to affect matters?

GEN. CALDWELL: What this will affect is — Zarqawi indiscriminately would kill Iraqi civilians. He had no compunction at all about taking the life of innocent people on the streets. His whole attempt was to incite violence between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. In his most recent volumes that he just published here in the last few weeks, he specifically told them: Sunnis, rise up against the Shi'ites before you even go after the coalition forces.

So to us in the coalition force, we realized Zarqawi was somebody that had to be dealt with because he was killing innocent Iraqi civilians. He wasn't interested in going after coalition forces by what he said himself, he was just interested in killing people. And so to us, yes, it was very critical that we eliminated Zarqawi.

There is no question that the entire idea of the Iraqis being able to take a much greater lead is going to occur as we continue forth from here. The prime minister continually talks about the need for unity, for national reconciliation. I mean, he has said it time and time again over the last few weeks. He now has a minister of Defense, a minister of Interior, and a minister of National Security that can in fact lead those efforts for him now to help him achieve the vision he has for the people of Iraq. He's not had that up till now. He now has a fully in place Cabinet. I mean, the prime minister now has a very unique opportunity to see a lot of his ideas put into action. And those of us here in the coalition force are ready and want to support him and his ministers as they move forward with their ideas and vision for the people of Iraq.

STAFF: Excuse me. We have time for one more question.

GEN. CALDWELL: Right there.

Q Thank you. Larry Kaplow with Cox Newspapers. You know there's been this background that we've heard about splits within the militants and between Iraqis and foreign fighters. And I'm wondering if any of that led to the intelligence you got today. because you've referred a few times to intelligence from Zarqawi's network, and I'm wondering on that, were those people who were under interrogation in custody or people who came forward from Zarqawi's network to tell — describe them?

GEN. CALDWELL: It would be inappropriate for me to talk about where the information actually came from and who provided it to the intelligence sources.

Q How about the overall whether it was affected by these splits we hear between militant groups?

GEN. CALDWELL: I actually haven't talked to any of the personnel that have come forward

with the information, so I wouldn't really know what the motivation was or what may have driven some of that to have been made available to us.

Let me just take one more here then.

Yes, ma'am?

Q Trudy Rubin from the Philadelphia Inquirer.

I've been told that Arab talk shows and TV networks are discussing a lot of conspiracy theories, that somehow this was timed to coincide with the naming of the ministers, and that the Americans knew where to find him earlier and they didn't do so and so forth.

Can you say something to dispel these theories about — a little bit more about the development and the timing and how this came about?

GEN. CALDWELL: I would only wish we were that good to have timed everything between what the government of Iraq was doing, and what coalition forces were doing, and what Iraqi security forces were doing. That's quite a compliment that we would have that capability this early in a stage of a new government forming like this, which clearly has some challenges ahead of it, but also some great opportunities.

No, there was absolutely nothing at all that was in collusion with the idea that we would wait until the announcement of the ministers, 'till — that we would go after Zarqawi. Zarqawi has been a primary target that we have continually looked for. Obviously, we've always gone after the mid-level kind of great leadership in the al Qaeda network because we realize if we can eliminate it there, that that's going to cause the higher-level structure to tumble. And Zarqawi's whereabouts and his movements and things came about through obviously Sheikh Al Rahman, through various means of other intelligence over the last couple weeks that allowed us to take that step.

But no, there is nothing at all in terms of timing between those two events.

How about way there in the back?

Q (In Arabic.)

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, first of all, let me say that, obviously, when coalition forces in coordination with Iraqi security forces made the decision last night to go after that target, we had long before that begun to think through — okay, if there is no Zarqawi, who would be next — because we had, obviously, were going to start trying to identify where that person is that will try to rise up and move into the power position there that Zarqawi was occupying.

Probably Abu al-Masri, if you had to pick somebody, would be the person that is going to try to occupy the position that Zarqawi had.

He's the most logical one out there, as you look at that structure and how they operate, that will probably try to move into there. And that's something that the coalition forces, along with the Iraqi government, have been already talking about and anticipating could possibly occur.

As far as the body itself, in terms of the explosion of the bomb, I mean, the pictures we provided to you were obviously — we had wiped off a lot of the blood and other debris because there was not a need to portray it in any kind of de-humanizing his body. The intent was to show you that he, in fact, had died in that explosion. But there are far worse, graphic pictures that are very inappropriate, we felt, to share with anybody that were the result of the immediate strike.

Okay, you, sir.

Q General, Rich Oppel from The New York Times. Just two questions. One, could you talk a little bit about Abu al-Masri and his background? And also I just want to be clear, when the Iraqi security forces arrived right after the bomb went off, Zarqawi was dead when they got there. Is that correct?

GEN. CALDWELL: That is correct. He was dead when we — when we arrived there.

Yeah, al-Masri, Egyptian Arab. He's not an Iraqi. Born and raised in Egypt. He was trained in Afghanistan, went through his training there. We know he has been involved with IEDs and making here in Iraq. Probably came here around 2002 into Iraq, probably actually helped establish maybe the first al Qaeda cell that existed in the Baghdad area. And there's obviously a lot more, because we've been looking at him fairly closely for a while, about him.

But key thing that we realize is he's not an Iraqi. You know, he's from a different country, he's come into Iraq and he's been out killing innocent Iraqi civilians. He's not the kind of person that the government of Iraq, the Iraqi people themselves, nor the coalition forces care to have existing in this country.

All right. Well, listen, I just — I want to thank everybody very much. We are extremely excited about the fact that the government of Iraq has announced and has had today confirmed the ministries of the last three, both in Defense, Interior and National Security, which gives them that opportunity to truly take a step forward. And then it was complemented by the fact that a terrorist that was out there killing Iraqi civilians today no longer exists.

Thank you very much.

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