

Military Plays Up Role of Zarqawi

By [Thomas E. Ricks](#)

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Editor's note

The following article published last April in the Washington Post reveals the contents of leaked internal military documents pertaining to Zarqawi. While official Washington and the media present Zarqawi as an evil enemy and "terror mastermind", the leaked documents confirm that Zarqawi was a central figurehead in the Pentagon's propaganda campaign. This role has been previously documented by a number of independent studies.

What the Washington Post article conveys is that the role of Zarqawi has been deliberately "magnified" as part of a Pentagon PSYOP program. The hidden agenda was to distort the nature of the Iraqi resistance movement.

The Washington Post report also suggests that most of the media coverage of "Who is Zarqawi", following his death, are grossly biased and inaccurate. These reports fail to acknowledge how Zarqawi as an "evil outside enemy" has served to provide legitimacy to America's "War on Terrorism".

Moreover, upholding Zarqawi as the terrorist mastermind, leader of the insurgency, provides a humanitarian mandate to the US in its global crusade against "Islamic terrorism". The "villainise Zarqawi" Pentagon operation, presenting him as a killer of innocent civilians also serves to distract public opinion from the extensive war crimes committed by US and British forces in Iraq.

Michel Chossudovsky, Global Research , 8 June 2006

Military Plays Up Role of Zarqawi

Jordanian Painted As Foreign Threat To Iraq's Stability

By Thomas E. Ricks

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The U.S. military is conducting a propaganda campaign to magnify the role of the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, according to internal military documents and officers familiar with the program. The effort has raised his profile in a way that some military intelligence officials believe may have overstated his importance and helped the Bush administration tie the war to the organization responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The documents state that the U.S. campaign aims to turn Iraqis against Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian, by playing on their perceived dislike of foreigners. U.S. authorities claim some success with that effort, noting that some tribal Iraqi insurgents have attacked Zarqawi loyalists.

For the past two years, U.S. military leaders have been using Iraqi media and other outlets in Baghdad to publicize Zarqawi's role in the insurgency. The documents explicitly list the "U.S. Home Audience" as one of the targets of a broader propaganda campaign.

Some senior intelligence officers believe Zarqawi's role may have been overemphasized by the propaganda campaign, which has included leaflets, radio and television broadcasts, Internet postings and at least one leak to an American journalist. Although Zarqawi and other foreign insurgents in Iraq have conducted deadly bombing attacks, they remain "a very small part of the actual numbers," Col. Derek Harvey, who served as a military intelligence officer in Iraq and then was one of the top officers handling Iraq intelligence issues on the staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told an Army meeting at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., last summer.

In a transcript of the meeting, Harvey said, "Our own focus on Zarqawi has enlarged his caricature, if you will — made him more important than he really is, in some ways."

"The long-term threat is not Zarqawi or religious extremists, but these former regime types and their friends," said Harvey, who did not return phone calls seeking comment on his remarks.

There has been a running argument among specialists in Iraq about how much significance to assign to Zarqawi, who spent seven years in prison in Jordan for attempting to overthrow the government there. After his release he spent time in Pakistan and Afghanistan before moving his base of operations to Iraq. He has been sentenced to death in absentia for planning the 2002 assassination of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley in Jordan. U.S. authorities have said he is responsible for dozens of deaths in Iraq and have placed a \$25 million bounty on his head.

Recently there have been unconfirmed reports of a possible rift between Zarqawi and the parent al-Qaeda organization that may have resulted in his being demoted or cut loose. Last week, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said that it was unclear what was happening between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda. "It may be that he's not being fired at all, but that he is being focused on the military side of the al-Qaeda effort and he's being asked to leave more of a political side possibly to others, because of some disagreements within al-Qaeda," he said.

The military's propaganda program largely has been aimed at Iraqis, but seems to have spilled over into the U.S. media. One briefing slide about U.S. "strategic communications" in Iraq, prepared for Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the top U.S. commander in Iraq, describes the "home audience" as one of six major targets of the American side of the war.

That slide, created by Casey's subordinates, does not specifically state that U.S. citizens were being targeted by the effort, but other sections of the briefings indicate that there were direct military efforts to use the U.S. media to affect views of the war. One slide in the same briefing, for example, noted that a "selective leak" about Zarqawi was made to Dexter Filkins, a New York Times reporter based in Baghdad. Filkins's resulting article, about a

letter supposedly written by Zarqawi and boasting of suicide attacks in Iraq, ran on the Times front page on Feb. 9, 2004.

Leaks to reporters from U.S. officials in Iraq are common, but official evidence of a propaganda operation using an American reporter is rare.

Filkins, reached by e-mail, said that he was not told at the time that there was a psychological operations campaign aimed at Zarqawi, but said he assumed that the military was releasing the letter "because it had decided it was in its best interest to have it publicized." No special conditions were placed upon him in being briefed on its contents, he said. He said he was skeptical about the document's authenticity then, and remains so now, and so at the time tried to confirm its authenticity with officials outside the U.S. military.

"There was no attempt to manipulate the press," Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, the U.S. military's chief spokesman when the propaganda campaign began in 2004, said in an interview Friday. "We trusted Dexter to write an accurate story, and we gave him a good scoop."

Another briefing slide states that after U.S. commanders ordered that the atrocities of Saddam Hussein's government be publicized, U.S. psychological operations soldiers produced a video disc that not only was widely disseminated inside Iraq, but also was "seen on Fox News."

U.S. military policy is not to aim psychological operations at Americans, said Army Col. James A. Treadwell, who commanded the U.S. military psyops unit in Iraq in 2003. "It is ingrained in U.S.: You don't psyop Americans. We just don't do it," said Treadwell. He said he left Iraq before the Zarqawi program began but was later told about it.

"When we provided stuff, it was all in Arabic," and aimed at the Iraqi and Arab media, said another military officer familiar with the program, who spoke on background because he is not supposed to speak to reporters.

But this officer said that the Zarqawi campaign "probably raised his profile in the American press's view."

With satellite television, e-mail and the Internet, it is impossible to prevent some carryover from propaganda campaigns overseas into the U.S. media, said Treadwell, who is now director of a new project at the U.S. Special Operations Command that focuses on "trans-regional" media issues. Such carryover is "not blowback, it's bleed-over," he said. "There's always going to be a certain amount of bleed-over with the global information environment."

The Zarqawi program was not related to another effort, led by the Lincoln Group, a U.S. consulting firm, to place pro-U.S. articles in Iraq newspapers, according to the officer familiar with the program who spoke on background.

It is difficult to determine how much has been spent on the Zarqawi campaign, which began two years ago and is believed to be ongoing. U.S. propaganda efforts in Iraq in 2004 cost \$24 million, but that included extensive building of offices and residences for troops involved, as well as radio broadcasts and distribution of thousands of leaflets with Zarqawi's face on them, said the officer speaking on background.

The Zarqawi campaign is discussed in several of the internal military documents. "Villainize

Zarqawi/leverage xenophobia response,” one U.S. military briefing from 2004 stated. It listed three methods: “Media operations,” “Special Ops (626)” (a reference to Task Force 626, an elite U.S. military unit assigned primarily to hunt in Iraq for senior officials in Hussein’s government) and “PSYOP,” the U.S. military term for propaganda work.

One internal briefing, produced by the U.S. military headquarters in Iraq, said that Kimmitt had concluded that, “The Zarqawi PSYOP program is the most successful information campaign to date.”

Kimmitt is now the senior planner on the staff of the Central Command that directs operations in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East.

In 2003 and 2004, he coordinated public affairs, information operations and psychological operations in Iraq — though he said in an interview the internal briefing must be mistaken because he did not actually run the psychological operations and could not speak for them.

Kimmitt said, “There was clearly an information campaign to raise the public awareness of who Zarqawi was, primarily for the Iraqi audience but also with the international audience.”

A goal of the campaign was to drive a wedge into the insurgency by emphasizing Zarqawi’s terrorist acts and foreign origin, said officers familiar with the program.

“Through aggressive Strategic Communications, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi now represents: Terrorism in Iraq/Foreign Fighters in Iraq/Suffering of Iraqi People (Infrastructure Attacks)/Denial of Iraqi Aspirations,” the same briefing asserts.

Officials said one indication that the campaign worked is that over the past several months, there have been reports that Iraqi tribal insurgents have attacked Zarqawi loyalists, especially in the culturally conservative province of Anbar. “What we’re finding is indeed the people of al-Anbar — Fallujah and Ramadi, specifically — have decided to turn against terrorists and foreign fighters,” Maj. Gen Rick Lynch, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, said in February.

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