



**Intelligence and Terrorism  
Information Center**

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## **The killing of two Al-Qaeda leaders in Iraq and its implications**

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The Al-Qaeda leaders killed in Iraq. Left: Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the Al-Qaeda commander in Iraq; right: Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) organization (Fox News website, April 19, 2010)

### **Portrait of the two Al-Qaeda leaders and the circumstances of their deaths**

1. American and Iraqi sources reported that on April 18, 2010, **two Al-Qaeda leaders were killed in Iraq: Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri.**
2. The two were killed **in a joint operation carried out by US military and Iraqi security forces.** According to reports, they were killed by missile fire while staying in a building in the city of Tharthar, northeast of Baghdad. Abu Ayyub al-Masri's aide

and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi's son were also killed in the attack. According to one report, their hiding place was discovered by exposing a messenger who had contact with them (AFP, April 29, 2010).

3. **Following is a portrait of the two Al-Qaeda leaders:**
  - a. **Abu Ayyub al-Masri, a.k.a. Abu Hamza al-Muhajer, originally from Egypt, the Al-Qaeda commander in Iraq.** Abu Ayyub al-Masri, 42, joined in 1982 the Egyptian Jihad organization, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's deputy. The basic purpose of the organization is violent jihad against the infidels (which includes Muslims who supposedly are not pious enough), considering it to be a personal duty of every Muslim. Al-Masri was sentenced to death in Egypt (most likely in absentia) in 1994 for membership in the organization. He underwent training in Afghanistan in 2001-2002, where he met **Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi**.<sup>1</sup> His main specialization was preparing IEDs. After US forces killed Al-Zarqawi on June 7, 2006, he was appointed the Al-Qaeda leader in Iraq. In his capacity, he held contacts with operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda outside of Iraq, and was involved in relocating Al-Qaeda operatives from Syria to Iraq. He dispatched suicide bombers and car bombs to Al-Qaeda groups outside of Iraq. He appeared on the most wanted list issued by the US Central Command in February 2005, which placed a \$50,000 bounty on his head.
  - b. **Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, born in Iraq, headed an organization called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).** It is a loose umbrella organization of several radical Islamic organizations, the most prominent of which is Al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISI is a self-proclaimed alternative political-governmental framework to the Iraqi government. It appears that the hub of its activities was in the "Sunni Triangle", using that region as a basis for expansion and for a future takeover of the entire Iraq. Al-Baghdadi, whose real name

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<sup>1</sup> **Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi**, real name **Ahmad Fadheel Nazzal al-Halaylah**, born in Zarqa, Jordan, in October 1966. He was influenced by the Salafi jihadist movement which developed in his hometown. In 1989 he traveled to fight against the Russians in Afghanistan. In 1993, he returned to Jordan and was put in prison about a year after that for his radical Islamist activity. In 1999, he was released from prison and rejoined the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. In early 2000, he met with Bin Laden, but refused to join Al-Qaeda. In 2002, he came to Iraq after his supporters, Ansar al-Islam, created a stronghold in the Kurdish area of Iraq. After the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, he became the main element to declare jihad on US forces and their supporters. His activity focused on Iraq's "Sunni Triangle" region (i.e., the region situated between the cities of Baghdad and Mosul and from Baghdad to the west, until the Syrian border). He perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks against the Shi'ites as well. In late December 2004, he was officially declared by Bin Laden as the Al-Qaeda representative in Iraq. He was probably responsible for the November 9, 2005 terrorist attacks in Jordan, in which about 67 people were killed. He was killed in Iraq on June 7, 2006.

appears to be Hamed Dawoud Khalil al-Zawi,<sup>2</sup> adopted Salafi Islam and became a major proponent of that ideology in Iraq. He was expelled from Iraq by Saddam Hussein and relocated to Afghanistan in 1987 in order to join the jihad against the Russians. In 1991, he returned to Iraq, took part in battles in Fallujah (2004-2005), and suffered a head shot during the fighting. He then went on to serve in a key position in the Al-Qaeda leadership in Iraq, and became the leader (“emir”) of ISI.



A poster of Al-Qaeda in Iraq saying: “At your service, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi; at your service, the Islamic State of Iraq” (from an Al-Jazeera forum, September 15, 2007)<sup>3</sup>

## Reactions by US top officials

4. **US Vice President Joe Biden** said that the killing of the two Al-Qaeda leaders was a “potentially devastating blow” to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and that “the action demonstrates the improved security, strength, and capacity of Iraqi security forces”. **General David Petraeus**, the chief of the US forces in the Middle East, said that it was a milestone in the fight against Al-Qaeda. The commander of the US forces in Iraq, General **Raymond Odierno**, said that the killing of the two leaders could lead to a turning pointing in the fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. “There is still work to do”, he said, “but this is a significant step forward in ridding Iraq of terrorists”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The codename Abu Umar al-Baghdadi has been attributed to several people in recent years. US security officials formerly assessed that such a person did not exist at all. US officials claim that his real name is Hamed Dawoud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi, and that this was the person killed in the attack. Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki said in a press conference that Al-Qaeda attempted to cover Al-Baghdadi by giving that codename to several of its operatives (see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8630213.stm>).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/forum/showthread.php?t=71139>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/04/19/iraqi-al-qaeda-leader-killed-countrys-intelligence-team-pm-maliki-says/#/world/global-terror/ci.2+Most+Wanted+Al+Qaeda+Leaders+in+Iraq+Killed+by+U.S.+Iraqi+Forces.opinionPrint>, [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2010/04/19/2010-04-19\\_top\\_al\\_qaeda\\_operative\\_in\\_iraq\\_abu\\_ayyub\\_almasri\\_killed\\_says\\_prime\\_minister\\_.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2010/04/19/2010-04-19_top_al_qaeda_operative_in_iraq_abu_ayyub_almasri_killed_says_prime_minister_.html), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8630213.stm>

## Iraqi PM's reaction

5. Iraqi PM **Nouri al-Maliki** showed photographs of the two killed leaders during a press conference held in Baghdad on April 19, 2010. He said that a DNA test proved that the two people were indeed Al-Masri and Al-Baghdadi. According to Al-Maliki, Al-Masri was the highest-ranking Al-Qaeda operative in Iraq, while Al-Baghdadi was the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). He further added that the two of them were responsible for killing numerous innocent Iraqi civilians and US soldiers. He added that the attack on the house where the two had stayed was carried out by **infantry forces with the use of missiles**. He noted that computers seized during the attack proved that the two leaders **had held contacts with Al-Qaeda senior officials, including Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri**.<sup>5</sup>



Al-Maliki showing the photographs of the killed Al-Qaeda leaders (Al-Hurra TV, April 19, 2010)

## Global jihad threatens revenge

6. On April 27, a website affiliated with the global jihad published an announcement signed by the Abdallah Azzam Brigades and the Al-Fajr Media Center, expressing condolences for the martyrdom of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri. The Abdallah Azzam Brigades vowed to avenge the deaths and continue hitting Jews and their allies to the best of their ability (Al-Fallujah forum, April 30, 2010).
7. In a video released on YouTube by the Taliban in Pakistan, associated with Al-Qaeda, the organization claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack in the US (without going into details) in revenge for its terrorism against Muslim countries and the killing of global jihad leaders (**note**: some associate the claim of responsibility with the attempted terrorist attack on Times Square, New York, on May 2. **There is still no**

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2010/04/19/2010-04-19\\_top\\_al\\_qaeda\\_operative\\_in\\_iraq\\_abu\\_ayyub\\_almasri\\_killed\\_says\\_prime\\_minister\\_.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2010/04/19/2010-04-19_top_al_qaeda_operative_in_iraq_abu_ayyub_almasri_killed_says_prime_minister_.html),  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8630213.stm>

**proof** that a global jihad network is responsible for the attack). In the video, narrated by **Qari Hussain Mehsud**, one of the leaders of the Taliban in Pakistan, Mehsud says that the organization claims full responsibility for the “latest attack in the US”. Mehsud adds that the attack was a retaliation for the killing of senior mujahedeen (that is, Al-Qaeda operatives), particularly **Abu Umar al-Baghdadi**. In addition, he mentioned Bait Allah Mehsud (the leader of the Taliban-Pakistan alliance, killed in a US air strike in August 2009). The video also features a photograph of **Abu Ayyub al-Masri**, who is not mentioned by name.<sup>6</sup>



An image from a video uploaded on YouTube on April 30, 2010 (according to Long War Journal), apparently produced in late April 2010. In the video, Qari Hussain Mehsud, a leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, notes that the organization claims full responsibility for the latest attack in the US. He notes that the attack was a retaliation for the killing of top-level mujahedeen, particularly Abu Umar al-Baghdadi.<sup>7</sup>

8. Furthermore, in two other videos released on YouTube on behalf of the Taliban in Pakistan, Hakmollah Mehsud, one of the leaders of the Taliban in Pakistan, threatened a terrorist attack in the US. The videos were released on April 4 and 19, 2010.<sup>8</sup>



One of the videos in which Hakmollah Mehsud threatens terrorist attacks in the US<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvKIwNQvDsM>,  
[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/pakistani\\_taliban\\_cl.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/pakistani_taliban_cl.php)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvKIwNQvDsM>,  
[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/pakistani\\_taliban\\_cl.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/pakistani_taliban_cl.php)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/exclusive\\_tapes\\_show.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/exclusive_tapes_show.php)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/exclusive\\_tapes\\_show.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/exclusive_tapes_show.php)

## Summary and assessment

9. **The killing of the two Al-Qaeda leaders is an important operative and intelligence success for the US forces in Iraq, as well as an operative blow to Al-Qaeda in Iraq.** The two operatives killed managed to hide for a long time and direct Al-Qaeda's operative and propaganda activities in Iraq from their hiding place. Apart from the operative blow, **their killing is also a blow to the morale of Al-Qaeda**, since they were two of Al-Qaeda's major propagandists in Iraq and were well-known among global jihad operatives.
10. It is our assessment that their killing will weaken Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has operative difficulties as it is (logistic problems, loss of operatives on the ground, decrease in the amount of terrorist attacks). However, it is also our assessment that it will not result in Al-Qaeda's collapse, since the two killed leaders will be replaced—even if it takes some time, and even if the successors' operative capabilities fall short of that of their experienced predecessors.
11. **The retaliation threats issued by global jihad organizations against the US:** it is possible that various organizations affiliated with global jihad, having links to Al-Qaeda or Al-Qaeda in Iraq, **will make a concerted effort to carry out terrorist attacks in response to the killing of the two leaders in Iraq.** One must consider showcase terrorist attacks against US and/or Iraqi targets in Iraq itself, or US targets outside of Iraq (by local operatives and networks worldwide, such as the attempted terrorist attack on Times Square, if it was actually planned and directed by the Taliban in Pakistan). **In the Iraqi context**, Al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq as well as operatives who are affiliated with a radical Islamic ideology in Iraq may make a concerted effort in the coming period of time to increase the number of terrorist attacks in that theater. This would illustrate that Al-Qaeda in Iraq continues to operate despite the blow it took, thus strengthening its posture for the day after the American withdrawal.