

Unanswered questions in the killing of Zarqawi

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In the days since the killing of Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi, the official US account of the incident has repeatedly shifted. Information provided by US authorities on a number of key points is at odds with details given by witnesses and other sources, as well as the military's own initial explanation of the events.

What is known with reasonable certainty is that Zarqawi and Sheik Abdul-Rahman, his spiritual leader, along with several other individuals, are dead following a US bombing attack just after 6 p.m. last Wednesday evening on a "safe house" outside Baqubah, some 35 miles north of Baghdad. The US dropped two 500-pound bombs on the target, leaving a 40-foot crater.

Other important details, however, are not as clear: How and when did Zarqawi die? What were the number and identities of the other casualties? Who was first on the scene after the attack? Were US forces in the vicinity before the bombings took place? The answers—or evasions—provided by US authorities on these and other issues render the credibility of their version of the events of June 7 increasingly dubious.

At a press conference the day after the raid, early Thursday morning, June 8, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki announced that Zarqawi had been "terminated." He was joined by Gen. George Casey, the top US commander in Iraq, who said that Zarqawi was dead when US forces arrived on the scene. Maliki said that seven of Zarqawi's aides had also died in the attack.

At a press conference later that day, the military displayed oversized photos of the dead Islamist terrorist. The photos, while gruesome—showing Zarqawi's head and upper body lying in a pool of blood with several lacerations to the face and blood coming from his nose—did not seem consistent with someone who had been in a house that was obliterated by a bomb attack. A new image was released later that day, showing a more battered face resting on what appeared to be a sheet.

US military spokesman Maj. Gen. William Caldwell told reporters that seven had died in the attack, five men and two women, contradicting Maliki's statements that a total of eight had died.

The next day, Friday, the US account of when Zarqawi died changed. Maj. Gen. William Caldwell now reported that "Zarqawi did in fact survive the airstrike." He said that when

Iraqi police officers arrived on the scene ahead of American soldiers, they found him badly wounded, but still alive, and strapped him to a gurney.

Caldwell said Zarqawi mumbled unintelligibly and attempted to roll off the gurney, and was re-secured by US soldiers. He said Zarqawi "died almost immediately thereafter from the wounds he had received from the airstrike." "As far as anybody else," he added, "the report says nobody else survived." Caldwell disputed news reports that at least one child had been killed in the attack.

At a press briefing on Saturday, Maj. Gen. Caldwell reversed himself and said that one of the dead was a small girl, age five or six. The total number of dead was now reported as five, including Zarqawi, two other men and two women (including the child).

Appearing on "Fox News Sunday", Gen. Casey gave this version of the events. "Our soldiers who came on the scene found him being put in an ambulance by Iraq police; they took him off, rendered first aid, and he expired." He said Zarqawi "died while American soldiers were attempting to save his life."

By Monday, Caldwell was reporting that Zarqawi lived for almost an hour, about 52 minutes, after the initial bomb blast. He said American troops arrived 28 minutes after the bombing. "A coalition medic treated Zarqawi while he did lapse in and out of consciousness," he said. "The medic secured his airway, at which point Zarqawi expelled blood." Caldwell said the medic "noted the breathing was shallow and labored."

Also at Monday's briefing, the military released the results of the autopsies of Zarqawi and Abdul-Rahman by a five-member team of US military and civil forensic pathologists and medical examiners flown to Iraq to conduct the tests. According to the autopsy report provided by the military, Zarqawi died as a result of ruptured lungs and massive hemorrhaging throughout his body.

Col. Steve Jones, an army pathologist, displayed graphic illustrations of the autopsy results at a news conference in Baghdad. He said that shockwaves from the explosions caused severe injuries to Zarqawi's lungs that "were not survivable" and eventually caused his death. "He died of blast injuries and there was no evidence of beating," Jones said. The detailed

description was aimed at countering news reports of statements from an Iraqi witness at the scene that Zarqawi had been beaten by American soldiers.

The Associated Press, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* all reported an interview with a neighbor in the vicinity of the “safe house,” who gave his name as Mohammed. He told the *Times* that after the second bomb hit he rushed to the home and helped drag a heavy-set man away from the rubble. He believed the man was Zarqawi, and that “he was still alive.”

A few minutes later, Mohammed said, Iraqi police loaded the man into an ambulance. When US troops arrived soon after, they took the man out of the ambulance and cleared all the Iraqis away. He said he heard the Americans demand to know the man’s name, and that one struck him with his rifle butt.

One of the more peculiar elements of the US military’s account of the events of June 7 has been the insistence that American forces were not in close vicinity to the safe house at the time of the air strike, and that Iraqi police were the first to arrive on the scene.

However, a senior military official and a senior Pentagon advisor, both speaking to the *New York Times* on condition of anonymity, said there were a number of Special Operations troops near the house before the bombs hit. According to the *Times*, “At least two Iraqis living near the house described seeing American commandos sliding down ropes from helicopters and encircling the house before the bombs landed.”

A report in the June 19 issue of *Time* magazine corroborates this account. According to *Time*, before the air strike, “Fewer than half a dozen members of a US reconnaissance and surveillance team from Delta Force hid in a grove of date and palm trees, watching the building.”

The magazine reports that Zarqawi was being hunted for more than two years by “a secretive special-operations task force ... made up of military intelligence operatives, counterterrorism commandos of the Delta Force, and the Navy’s SEAL Team 6, plus Army Rangers.” It would be strange indeed if this task force was not present during the assault on the person named by the Bush administration the “most wanted” man in Iraq.

Time also states that military helicopters carrying US troops from the 4th Infantry Division “swarmed over the safe house immediately after the strike.” This would directly contradict Caldwell’s statements that US troops did not arrive on the scene until almost a half hour after the bomb strikes.

The *Time* account also reports that, according to a Jordanian security office, the dead included al-Zarqawi’s wife, only 16 years of age. The US military has maintained that it has no information to confirm or deny Iraqi news reports that Zarqawi’s wife and child were killed in the attack. In fact, aside from Zarqawi and Abdul-Rahman, US authorities have released no information about the conditions of the bodies of others killed in the attack.

Then there is the question of why US forces—knowing Zarqawi’s exact location—did not attempt to take him alive. If, as Washington maintains, Zarqawi was Iraq’s top terrorist and was responsible for much of the insurgent violence plaguing the country, intelligence gleaned from him and his close associates would be extremely valuable.

The explanations provided by US authorities for the decision to hit the house with precision air strikes are unconvincing. Maj. Gen. Caldwell said that an attempt to take Zarqawi alive might have resulted in many US casualties. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld commented last Thursday that he might have escaped.

Other explanations are possible. There is no reason to uncritically accept that Zarqawi was actually in the house when the bombs were dropped; he may already have been in US custody at the time. This would explain the fact that the photos of his face indicated that his body had not been pulverized in the bombing raid, which, according to video clips shown repeatedly on US television, decimated the target.

The US web site *Stratfor*, which has connections to the American military and intelligence establishment, wrote in its Morning Intelligence Brief for June 12, “Whether he was killed by two 500-pound bombs or a Delta Force makes little difference,” indicating its own skepticism about the official account of Zarqawi’s death and suggesting there is considerable speculation within these circles that American special operations forces killed the Islamist terrorist.

Perhaps the experience of the capture and trial of Saddam Hussein, and their unfortunate and unanticipated consequences for the US propaganda effort, had alerted US authorities to the fact that Zarqawi might reveal, in custody, uncomfortable truths about US operations in Iraq, or embarrassing facts about his own previous relations with the US when he was involved in the CIA-backed Mujahideen guerilla army fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. As the saying goes, dead men tell no tales.



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