

# Time Finally Ran Out for 'Atiyah'

**Exclusive:** President George W. Bush's post-9/11 pivot from targeting al-Qaeda to invading Iraq left behind two open-ended wars and bought al-Qaeda's leaders time to regroup and recuperate, a reality recognized by one named "Atiyah," whose fate turned as President Barack Obama shifted U.S. assets back to Pakistan, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The reported death of "Atiyah," considered al-Qaeda's second-in-command and its chief of global operations, ironically underscored the wisdom of his earlier insight into the need to keep the United States bogged down in Iraq, rather than freed up to go after the terrorist group's leaders in Pakistan.

The Libyan-born terrorist, whose full name was Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, was killed last week by an American drone strike in the Waziristan tribal region in northwest Pakistan, according to U.S. officials who called the death another blow to al-Qaeda following the killing of its founder, Osama bin Laden, on May 2.

But Atiyah's demise also is a reminder of how foolhardy President George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisers were in diverting U.S. military resources away from the post-9/11 mission of tracking down al-Qaeda's leadership hiding in Pakistan and toward the vainglorious mission of conquering Iraq.

It was Atiyah who wrote to al-Qaeda's commander in Iraq on Dec. 11, 2005, urging the hyper-violent Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to operate more patiently with the goal of tying down U.S. forces indefinitely, while al-Qaeda's leaders strengthened their hand both in Iraq and at global headquarters back in Pakistan.

"The most important thing is that the jihad continues with steadfastness and firm rooting, and that it grows in terms of supporters, strength, clarity of justification, and visible proof each day," Atiyah wrote. "Indeed, *prolonging the war is in our interest.*" [Emphasis added.]

The Atiyah letter was discovered by the U.S. military after Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in June 2006. [To view the "prolonging the war" excerpt in a translation published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, click [here](#). To read the entire letter, click [here](#).]

In 2006, however, with President Bush and the neocons still dominating U.S. foreign policy, the "prolonging the war" phrase was ignored by major U.S. news organizations which only reported other aspects of the Atiyah letter.

At that time, the notion that al-Qaeda was benefiting from locking down U.S. troops in Iraq while also draining hundreds of billions of dollars from the American treasury and rallying young Arabs to the anti-U.S. cause clashed with the then-popular view among Bush's supporters that it was important to "stay the course" in Iraq.

Yet, staying the course or in Atiyah's phrase, "prolonging the war" was exactly what bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders wanted. As long as U.S. troops were fighting and dying in Iraq, al-Qaeda could benefit from both the anti-U.S. sentiment in the Muslim world and the relative safety of al-Qaeda's leaders in Pakistan.

As it turned out, bin Laden was enjoying life, accompanied by several of his wives and children in the quiet garrison community of Abbottabad, Pakistan, not far from the capital of Islamabad. The longer that Bush and the neocons insisted that Iraq was "the central front in the war on terror," the longer bin Laden and other top al-Qaeda leaders could continue plotting and breathing.

The Atiyah letter drove home that point to Zarqawi while upbraiding him for his excessive violence against Shiite Muslims and his disrespect for moderate Sunni clerics. Atiyah wanted Zarqawi to slow down, to build alliances and to drag out the war in Iraq.

### **Prescient Advice**

Atiyah's advice turned out to be prescient, though it ultimately would not save bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders (apparently not even Atiyah) who have been increasingly targeted by U.S. Special Forces attacks in Pakistan since the United States began its drawdown in Iraq.

Though President Barack Obama's wider use of drones and other intelligence assets inside Pakistan has been controversial upsetting Pakistani leaders and many anti-war activists in the United States the strategy appears to have had its intended effect of decimating al-Qaeda's global leadership.

Obama's refocusing of U.S. assets on Pakistan and away from Iraq also sharpens the question about what might have happened if Bush and the neocons hadn't lurched into Iraq in the first place. If the Bush administration had kept its eye on al-Qaeda, rather than letting its gaze stray to Iraq and Saddam Hussein, the United States might not have experienced a full decade of continuing war.

But that question remains largely unasked in the mainstream U.S. news media. Even in dealing with the Atiyah letter in the context of his reported death, American news outlets have dodged this point. There is still no reference to Atiyah's key phrase, that "prolonging the war" in Iraq is "in our interest."

The New York Times did make reference to the letter in its Tuesday article on Atiyah/Rahman's death, but not that quote. The Times reported that a "senior American official said that Mr. Rahman acted as Al Qaeda's 'human Rolodex,' an assessment bolstered by documents seized from Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

"For instance, in late 2005, Mr. Rahman chastised Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda's wing in Iraq, for carrying out attacks against Shiite Muslims, which he [Atiyah/Rahman] worried would fracture the insurgency against American troops in Iraq.

"Mr. Rahman wrote a letter to Mr. Zarqawi, whom he had known for years, threatening to remove him from the top of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia if he did not change his ways.

"More recently, according to the Abbottabad documents, Mr. Rahman weighed in about who should be in charge of Al Qaeda's group in Yemen, and he even helped broker the partnership between Al Qaeda and a North African militant group that eventually agreed to rename itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

But the Times avoids any analysis of whether Bush's post 9/11 obsession with Iraq, which had nothing to do with the terror attacks on New York and Washington, had been a godsend to al-Qaeda's leaders after they fled Afghanistan in late 2001. [For more, see Consortiumnews.com's "The Curious Bush/Bin Laden Symbiosis."]

### **'Staying the Course'**

The Atiyah letter like a previously intercepted message attributed to al-Qaeda's then-second-in-command (and now top leader) Ayman Zawahiri suggested that a U.S. military pullout from Iraq in 2005 or earlier could have been disastrous for al-Qaeda's terrorist bands.

The "Zawahiri letter," which was dated July 9, 2005, said a rapid American military withdrawal could have caused the foreign jihadists, who had flocked to Iraq to battle the Americans, to simply give up the fight and go home.

"The mujahaddin must not have their mission end with the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq, and then lay down their weapons, and silence the fighting zeal," said the "Zawahiri letter," according to a text released by the office of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence.

Similarly, the Atiyah letter noted al-Qaeda's fragile foothold in Iraq and the need to gain allies.

“Know that we, like all mujahaddin, are still weak,” Atiyah told Zarqawi. “We have not yet reached a level of stability. We have no alternative but to not squander any element of the foundations of strength or any helper or supporter.”

The letter strongly cautioned Zarqawi “against attempting to kill any religious scholar or tribal leader who is obeyed, and of good repute in Iraq from among the Sunnis, no matter what.

“The long and short of the matter is that the Islamic theologians are the keys to the Muslim community and they are its leaders. This is the way it is, whether you like it or not. If you appear before the community in the guise of a pariah to the class of religious scholars, contradicting them, disrespecting them, and insulting them, then you will lose the people and you will fail in any call [to religion] or political act.

“It is highly advisable to be polite and to show complete respect, regret, compassion, and mercy and so forth. You must incline yourself to this, and be humble to the believers, and smile in people’s faces, even if you are cursing them in your heart, even if it has been said that they are ‘a bad tribal brother,’ and what have you.”

Beyond the significance of Atiyah’s wish for a “prolonged” war, the letter underscored how al-Qaeda’s tenuous position in Iraq depended on an ongoing U.S. military presence, just what the American neocons continue to demand as the current U.S.-Iraqi “status of forces agreement” calls for a complete departure of American troops by the end of this year.

The neocons, who remain influential in Washington, want the Obama administration to renegotiate the agreement to permit thousands of U.S. troops to remain in Iraq as “trainers” and “advisers.” So far, Iraqi politicians have not agreed out of fear that they would be denounced as traitors to Iraqi sovereignty and strengthen extremist factions. But U.S. officials keep pushing for the extension.

What Atiyah understood was that nothing helped al-Qaeda more than America’s bloody occupation of Iraq. Indeed, it appears it was the ability of the United States over the past few years to largely extricate itself from the quicksand of Iraq and finally turn back toward al-Qaeda-central in Pakistan that cost Atiyah his life.

**[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry’s *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]**

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the**

Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

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