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## **Was Zarqawi better alive than dead?**

**By For The Straits Times, John Harrison**

THE death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi could not have come at a better time for the United States. The ongoing war in Iraq has created major domestic pressure on President George W. Bush. The American public has largely maintained a negative view of the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq, which is perceived as not being waged successfully and as having little end in sight.

In addition, the debate over pre-war intelligence continues; domestically, as in the indictment of Vice-President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff for alleged crimes relating to the so-called Valerie Plame affair, and internationally, as in the recent German intelligence leaks regarding their concerns over pre-war intelligence.

The negativity hanging over the whole campaign makes the need for a victory all the more necessary.

The death of the new face of Al-Qaeda, and perhaps some of his senior operatives, may provide that required good news.

Zarqawi has been a rising star within Al-Qaeda circles since the late 1990s. While his original focus was on Jordan, he rose to international prominence during the run-up to the Iraq War, when then-US secretary of state Colin Powell mentioned him by name as a senior Al-Qaeda operative in Iraq during his briefing to the United Nations Security Council in 2003.

Zarqawi resurfaced shortly after the invasion to lead the Al-Qaeda in Iraq grouping. While the size of this force has always been disputed, the skill and dedication to the jihadi cause has not. His organisation has been linked to kidnappings, beheadings, suicide operations and sectarian attacks - all designed to plunge Iraq into a civil war to advance the objectives of jihad.

There has long been a dispute over the nature of the relationship between Zarqawi and the Al-Qaeda senior leadership. Letters exchanged between Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Zarqawi have made for fascinating reading. While Al-Qaeda through Zawahiri seemed to be evolving a political strategy to complement the armed struggle - a strategy that includes alliances with the Shi'ite community - Zarqawi appeared to be devoted to the more extremist view.

This view rejects any political component to the struggle and views Shi'ites in the same light as all other apostates. This lack of political sensitivity can be seen in attacks on Jordan by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the ham-fisted reaction to the outcry against them as well as Zarqawi's increasing isolation in Iraq due to his violent opposition to the electoral process. This uncharacteristic tone-deafness led to some armed clashes between the Sunni resistance in Iraq and Zarqawi's forces. The capstone in his isolation was his apparent removal as the leader of jihadi forces in Iraq.

Following these events, the reports on Zarqawi throughout the past year have been intriguing. Earlier this year, Zarqawi barely escaped an air strike on a safe house and it was a few weeks ago that the alleged right-hand man of Zarqawi was killed in a raid on another safe house, a raid that Zarqawi barely escaped.

In the past, the US did not launch a raid unless it had visual confirmation or 'eyes on the target'.

While operational necessities have most likely caused that standard to be relaxed, the number of frequent and almost successful operations indicates there was increasing, accurate and timely intelligence regarding the militant's whereabouts. Certainly, technical intelligence was providing some of this, but at least some must have come from human sources.

What this means is that possibly, in the long term, the jihadis have overstayed their welcome. The extreme violence introduced by foreign fighters may have led to a split with local fighters. Furthermore, the political strategy adopted by Zawahiri may be widening this divide.

Local Sunni resistance seems to be becoming more amenable to a political solution to the war and this may lead to the coalition's long sought 'exit strategy'. The Sunnis, the Iraqi government and the coalition forces have all been sending signals about this and most seem to agree that the foreign fighters do not represent any segment of Iraq. All parties also seem to have accepted long ago that there can be no military solution.

However, all parties have requested time to see if the political process is productive. As this appears to be the case, there may now be grounds for a settlement. The largest obstacle to this remains the jihadis, a small minority who can still delay the emerging peace process while causing massive suffering.

It seems clear that while intelligence on the local Sunni insurgents will remain difficult and spotty, the opposite may be true with regard to foreign fighters. After all, the uninvited 'brothers' do not share the same objectives as the local resistance, thus permitting an Iraqi providing intelligence on Al-Qaeda in Iraq to be free of any taint concerning betrayal of the Iraqi resistance.

In the short term, removing the top two leaders in such a short period of time will have a significant impact on Al-Qaeda's capacity to fight in Iraq. If nothing else, it will have to examine its operational security in light of the potentially changed environment. The subtle political changes in Iraq along with the egregious miscalculation of the attacks carried out in Jordan will cause difficulties and some strategic reassessment.

Therein lies the paradox.

Zarqawi's inability and unwillingness to calculate the political impact of his actions provided the most powerful counter tool to Al-Qaeda. His hatred for the Jordanian government blinded him to the potential consequences of the attack. Thus, quite perversely, he might have been more valuable alive than dead.

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