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Life after Zarqawi

BRIAN BRADY AND IAN MATHER

AFTER receiving its orders, the first plane dropped a GBU-12 bomb carrying 500 pounds of explosives on a man known only as an "HVT" - a high-value target. The laser-guided weapon was precise and devastating enough to destroy its target. But, in an attempt to ensure they finished the job, the F-16's crew followed up with a second bomb, a 500-pound GBU-38, which reduced the surrounding area to smouldering rubble.

Within minutes, coalition forces on the ground were displaying the lifeless body of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, recording their work by taking pictures of a face that still showed blood oozing from one nostril. The Jordanian who brought incalculable misery to Iraq had been eradicated by two weapons costing barely £20,000.

The Butcher of Baghdad's reign of terror over the Iraqi people, his persistent defiance of US and British objectives, was over.

"This violent man will never kill again," President George Bush announced to America within hours of the strike. "The ideology of terror has lost one of its most visible and aggressive leaders."

Across the Atlantic, the president's closest ally in the troubled Iraq journey echoed the sentiment. "The death of Zarqawi is a strike against al-Qaeda in Iraq and, therefore, a strike against al-Qaeda everywhere," said Tony Blair, who was informed of the attack in Downing Street through a communication that also went through the Foreign Office and British military commanders on the ground in Iraq.

But when the celebrations tailed off, when the dust settled on the formerly peaceful village of Hibhib, and when the ashes smouldering beneath the rubble of Zarqawi's "safe house" finally began to cool, the value of "terminating" this cancerous element of the new Iraq was already being called into question.

The coalition has been here before. Its commanders remember

the extraction of Saddam Hussein from his spider-hole in Adwar in December 2003. More than two years after the ultimate humiliation of the old guard, democracy has signally failed to take root in the new Iraq.

Blair, at least, is aware of the dangers of overestimating the significance of what is, after all, the removal of only one of many committed opponents ranged against the coalition and the new government of Iraq.

"We should have no illusions," Blair cautioned, within hours of positive identification of Zarqawi's corpse through fingerprint analysis. "We know that they will continue to kill. We know that there are many, many obstacles to overcome."

As if to underline the warning, at least 12 Iraqis were killed and 14 wounded in bombings and shootings in Baghdad and Diyala on the day of Zarqawi's grisly death.

The two GBU-series bombs dispatched on Wednesday evening were not capable of resolving all the troubles confronting Iraq - or allowing coalition leaders to meet their key objective of an early withdrawal from their most problematic foreign-policy venture.

"One has to be cautious about the long-term impact of the operation on the Iraqi security situation as a whole," said Dr Stefan Wolff, Middle East expert at Bath University. "For one thing, Zarqawi's own importance may have been overestimated in the West. In other words, he may have been the most visible of al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq, but may have had just one or a few cells under his command, with many others being virtually unaffected by his death."

Zarqawi was already in the final hours of his life last week when a junior government minister took the opportunity to remind British peers that the UK did, after all, have a strategy for escaping from its Iraqi imbroglio. "The UK is committed to a conditions-based withdrawal of troops," Baroness Royall of Blaisdon told the House of Lords. "We will be there as long as the Iraqis need us. As the Iraqi security forces take over, our gradual withdrawal will happen at different times in different places."

UK military planners and politicians have had much time to finesse the plans over the past three years but, in the absence of the conditions demanded, they have been consistently denied the opportunity to put the plans into operation. Scotland on Sunday revealed last month that Blair hoped to use the restoration of democratic government in Iraq to begin the withdrawal of troops, on a province-by-province basis, from the British-controlled zone around Basra.

Unfortunately, the strategy depends almost entirely on the insurgency and the ability of the nascent Iraqi security forces to handle the job of bringing it under control.

But Scotland on Sunday has learned that the failings of those forces - particularly the police - are frustrating hopes of an early withdrawal. Although the process of assessing whether the Iraqis are ready to control their own country has begun, the first indications are not promising.

New figures from the Foreign Office reveal that Basra, the seat of the insurgency in the south, has only 9,500 out of a target figure of 16,300 police officers trained and ready for duty, while the neighbouring provinces of Maysan and Muthanna have managed to exceed the 85% target.

Officials in Basra have also failed to establish a police infrastructure, with effective systems, communications and even weaponry. In a telling comment on the gravity of the situation, a report on the local force's performance observed: "Progress in training and mentoring has been hampered by the security situation."

A senior source at the Ministry of Defence, which has the job of assessing the Iraqi army's performance against its own targets, said similar shortcomings had been identified - particularly in Basra. He added: "We are totally in their hands. We could stay there forever because we know we are doing a good job. The problem is we don't want to stay but we can't go because these forces just aren't ready to do that job when we've gone."

The result is that Blair still hopes to begin reducing Britain's 8,500-strong force in Iraq within weeks, but the overall withdrawal will be carried out more slowly and most of the troops will be moved from other provinces to Basra in the meantime.

When White House officials planned a "war summit" at Camp David for this week they had no idea it would meet against a background of optimism.

A reduction in the number of US troops to below the iconic figure of 100,000 is considered by Bush's political strategists to be essential if the Republicans are to stand any chance of limiting the backlash against the war among US voters in the mid-term elections in November.

But relentless waves of attacks by the insurgents, and the failure of the new Iraqi government to make appointments to the key posts of defence, interior and national security meant that the meeting was likely to be dominated by gloomy assessments.

Then came last week's double dose of rare good news. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government at last announced the three appointments, two Shias and one Sunni, which will enable the administration to trumpet the fact the new Iraqi government is genuinely multi-ethnic. Then came the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Nevertheless, it might have come too late. The two-day meeting at Camp David, which starts tomorrow, will be dominated by the troop withdrawal issue. With "Impeach Bush" signs appearing for the first time around the US, hanging on to congress in November has become an obsession for the administration.

Senior US commanders in Iraq will be hooked up to Camp David by video for the summit, which is to assess a claim by Maliki that Iraqi forces can be in charge throughout the country in 18 months. Already many have privately let it be known that they feel this is the wrong time to consider cutting back US troops.

Last autumn White House officials were hoping that cuts in troops numbers could start this summer so that when campaigning began for the mid-term elections Republican candidates would be able to return to their districts with the message the US was "on a glide path out of Iraq".

But that timetable was based on the assumption that Maliki's government, elected in January, would be completed immediately.

Officially, Bush insists that any decision on troop levels will be based on recommendations from military commanders.

Pentagon insiders now expect some sort of compromise with, in the best case scenario, levels reduced to 110,000 to 120,000 troops by the end of December, which they hope will be enough to enable Republicans to put a sufficiently optimistic spin on developments to hang on to their seats.

Yet the recent spate of bombings, killings and kidnappings has forced the US to send even more troops to Iraq, including a brigade of 3,500 troops from Kuwait. "In any way I look at it, I don't see getting down to 100,000 by December," one senior official who had been briefed on the most recent troop-reduction proposals said last week.

Senior military officers in Iraq also expect pressure from Washington to cut back the role of US military forces in security operations in the hope of reducing the number of body bags returning to the US. But the crucial factor in both Washington and London will be whether sufficient numbers of Iraqi security forces can be trained to take over from the Americans and British.

The key issue facing the coalition is the direction al-Qaeda in Iraq will take post-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was a psychopathic maverick who turned his group, Tawhid al-Jihad, away from attacking the foreign troops to attacking Shias, whom he described as snakes. "Sunnis, wake up, pay attention and prepare to confront the poisons of the Shi'ite snakes," he shouted in one notorious four-hour tape. His group's suicide bombers killed hundreds of mostly Iraqi Shia civilians with the aim of provoking all-out civil war.

Zarqawi's tactics had become too much even for Osama bin Laden, who told him in a letter that the slaughter of innocent Muslims was damaging al-Qaeda's reputation, and that the war against the West should take priority over fighting "heresy" within Islam.

Much now depends on who succeeds Zarqawi. As soon as the news of Zarqawi's death was broadcast, jihadist websites were flooded with messages from adherents pledging to "hear and obey" their new "emir", Abu Abdul-Rahman al-Iraqi, whose name has appeared in past statements from Zarqawi's al-Qaeda group in Iraq.

Abdel Bari Atwan, a London-based Arab journalist, who has interviewed Bin Laden, believes that if Iraqi takes over al-Qaeda will refocus on its "traditional" role of attacking US and other troops and less on beheadings and suicide bombings.

"Iraqi is more sophisticated than Zarqawi and he spent time with bin Laden in Afghanistan. He will be lower profile, but the suicide bombings are expected to continue because he is an extremist. I think he will focus on US and Iraqi forces," says Atwan, who is editor of the Arab newspaper al Quds.

"Zarqawi was a loose cannon who gave al-Qaeda in Iraq a bad name with gruesome beheadings. Bin Laden had to put al-Iraqi in place because he thought it would be wiser to have an Iraqi to help forge ties with other groups."

But Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, still flushed with confidence after the best possible start for his government, said it made no real difference who took over the leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

"Whenever there is a new Zarqawi, we will kill him," he told reporters.