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US Missile Strikes On High Value Targets: Zarqawi

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Zarqawi Air Strike

Wednesday's precision air strike on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his spiritual advisor Sheik al-Rahman appears to have been the result of a combined Iraqi and US intelligence effort. A US special-forces team - 'Task Force 145' - acting on a tip-off from Iraqi sources, is said to have identified Zarqawi's safe house 8 km north of Baquba early on Wednesday afternoon. 'Task Force 145' - under the direction of US Joint Special Forces Command - is a unit whose sole mission is to locate and neutralise 'high-value' or 'VIP' insurgent targets within Iraq. The unit is believed to be co-located alongside 101st Airborne units at Balad Airbase in the US Multinational Division North area of operations outside of Baghdad.

It is believed that leaders of the main insurgency groups in the so-called 'Sunni Triangle' – predominantly Baath'ist loyalists – were incensed by recent mass killings of fellow Iraqi Sunni Muslims by fanatical foreign 'jihadis' loyal to Al Qaeda and Zarqawi. In response, it is believed that details of a pre-arranged meeting between Zarqawi and his spiritual advisor al-Rahman were leaked to US forces. It is also claimed that Jordanian intelligence corroborated the Iraqi tip-off, helping to further locate Zarqawi's 'safe-house' through analysis of a propaganda film released by Zarqawi in April of this year.

Task Force 145, relying on this fast-moving combination of intelligence and timing would have been very conscious of previous attempts by US forces to eliminate prominent high profile targets by air-strike. In the early hours of March 20th 2003, the invasion of Iraq began with an intelligence-driven attempt to 'decapitate' the Iraqi regime by means of a combined cruise-missile and 2000lb bomb attack on one of Saddam's 'safe-houses'. The attack – which was highly 'time-sensitive' or simply stated, late - failed to kill Saddam but flattened a large area of down-town Baghdad.

A further attempt to kill Saddam by air-strike in July of 2003 employed four massive 'bunker-buster' bombs which destroyed a number of houses in the Mansour district of Baghdad. The crater left by these munitions measured 40 metres wide by 20 metres deep and US forces – had they successfully 'neutralised' the Iraqi leader – would have been faced with the prospect of conducting an intensive forensic search for minute particles of DNA to confirm Saddam's death.

Subsequent to these attacks, the US military developed an especially lightweight missile, the GBU-38 JDAM or 'Guided Bomb Unit 38, Joint Direct Attack Munition' specifically for use in urban environments such as those found in Iraq. The GBU-38 missile was designed to provide 'focused lethality' – a less clumsy and more accurate, smart, laser guided weapon – to be launched by air at small 'point-destruction' targets.

US forces used two such missiles on Wednesday to kill Zarqawi. The missiles 'neutralised' their target but did not completely destroy the evidence. US troops from the 101st Airborne were able to fingerprint Zarqawi and to photograph his face for the domestic and international audience. As Iraqis brace themselves for a possible backlash from Al Qaeda in the coming days, the US military will perhaps take heart from what may be the beginning of a split within the insurgency in Iraq. tclonan@irish-times.ie