



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (08/2006)

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## Al Qaeda's Exit Strategy?

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THE recent audio-taped message to the Americans from Osama bin Laden has generated an understandable amount of debate. The immediate concern to verify the authenticity of the message and the messenger, however, missed out one significant aspect: Osama might have taken a decisive position on the emerging strategic debate within Al Qaeda and its movement -- what is its exit strategy?

Osama has once again used his appearance to dramatic effect. His long absence has fuelled speculation that he was either dead or in very serious condition. However, the reports in the media about his death now appear to be unfounded. Osama's reference to the political debate in the United States about Washington's troop pull-out from Iraq proved that he is alive, albeit possibly in a very poor physical state. The important thing to consider about the message is Osama's truce offer to the Americans. His language is a rather typical mix of both carrots and sticks. In essence he is saying that the offer of truce is conditional on the US giving in to Al Qaeda's demands that it pulls out its troops from Iraq. For any government, this is hardly a credible basis for starting a negotiation.

### Bin Laden Morphs Gerry Adams

The real target of his message, however, is the larger jihadi community. Over the past year there has been an interesting debate going on within the Al Qaeda movement about whether to engage in politics or rely exclusively on armed struggle. The pro-politics camp is led by Ayman al Zawahiri. In an extraordinary series of letters to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, al Zawahiri, who is Al Qaeda's number 2, reprimanded both the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Iraq led by Zarqawi for not participating in the elections in their respective countries. This was seen by some in the radical circles as just a tactical shift in position, but it indicated a profound about-turn for the Egyptian, who broke with his co-national radicals many years earlier over this very issue. This line was rejected by Zarqawi, Al Qaeda's number 3, but the fact that such a senior member of Al Qaeda, and a long time associate of Osama even suggested the idea may imply that Al Qaeda was preparing the groundwork for its version of the IRA's armalite and ballot box strategy.

In the message, Osama stops short of endorsing a political approach, but he seems to acknowledge that the war is reaching an end. Osama said that he no longer expects to win the war, but he would not lose it either. He ventured further by stating that jihadists do not care if they win or lose (though Zarqawi may have a different view). Osama appears to be attempting to give in with honour, but cannot fully commit just yet. He has attempted to ease the rather shocking message by a strident rhetoric against President Bush. In case the

ranks of the jihadists were to be alarmed, al Zawahiri recited poems the next day, praising their struggle; a bit of sugar to mask the bitter pill being offered. Osama could therefore, essentially be asking for assistance to escape the violent dead end he has been so instrumental in creating.

### **The Road Ahead**

What does all this mean, and what can the allies do to exploit the rift? It is not surprising that Al Qaeda has reached a crossroads. Its top two leaders have been participating in radical struggles for over two and a half decades. They are now almost isolated, hunted, with most of its key leaders dead or on the run. Despite the rhetoric, there is no denying that its cadres are demoralised as they find all their efforts leading to nothing. Ordinary Afghans, Iraqis, and Palestinians have defied radicals and voted. Despite claims to the contrary, Muslims across the world now see the power of the ballot, and that they are beginning to realise that change can be achieved peacefully. This undermines claims by the radicals that armed struggle is the only way to achieve their objectives.

The best strategy for the allies is to stay out of Al Qaeda's way. They should point out the fact that if Al Qaeda states that it may not win, why continue the violence? What is the point of taking innocent lives including those of the Muslims? The question that needs to be asked: Is Al Qaeda's honour worth the price? The most important policy for the allies is to assist in fostering the political environment for this debate to take place, that is they must deliver on the promise to support democratic reform in the Muslim world.

None of this should be read as if the war is very close to the end. It took the Irish Republican Army almost two decades to move from armed struggle to a peaceful political movement. Al Qaeda and its acolytes are still very dangerous, and it is far from certain if Osama can move Al Qaeda, let alone the rest of the movement to a solely political strategy. But make no mistake -- the latest message, seen in the larger context, is a sign the allies are winning the vital political battle.

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