

U.S. Cross-Border Raid Highlights Syria's Role in Islamist Militancy

By Anonymous

AN OCTOBER 26 RAID by U.S. special forces on Syrian territory highlights the long-festering issue of foreign jihadist networks operating between Syria's Deir ez-Zour region and Iraq. According to various press reports, a group of U.S. military helicopters attacked the al-Sukariyya Farm, which lies approximately five miles west of the Iraqi frontier in Syria's Deir ez-Zour Province. Al-Sukariyya is near the Iraqi border city of al-Qaim, which the U.S. military has identified as a major crossing point for foreign fighters and supplies from Syria into Iraq. During the raid, U.S. forces reportedly killed eight people,¹ including Badran Turki Hishan al-Mazidih (also known as Abu Ghadiya), an Iraqi national sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in February for "facilitating and controlling the flow of money, weapons, terrorists, and other resources through Syria to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)."² Another unconfirmed report identified the dead as members of the Mashahda tribe, which has members in the Tikrit area of Iraq.³ The Syrian government statement claimed that the raid killed eight civilians, and denied any relationship between al-Qa`ida and those killed.⁴

According to an anonymous U.S. military official speaking to the Associated Press, the raid demonstrated that the United States was "taking matters into our own hands" to shut down the network of al-Qa`ida-linked foreign fighters moving between Syria and Iraq, and using the former country as a safe haven.⁵ This article will examine the

publicly available information about the raid, Syria's role in border security and whether Syria risks "blowback" by foreign fighters who, after being forced out of Iraq, may be turning their sights on the Syrian government.

The Syria-Iraq Border Region

According to a November 9 *New York Times* report, the attack was the latest in a dozen of previously undisclosed U.S. special forces raids on al-Qa`ida militants in Syria and Pakistan.⁶ The only previously reported raid in Syria occurred on June 18, 2003, when a U.S. task force penetrated 25 miles inside Syrian territory in pursuit of a convoy of SUV's suspected of carrying senior Iraqi Ba`athists. Unlike the October 26 attack, which could be justified as "self-defense" under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, that raid was carried out under the rules of "hot pursuit," which allows security officials to cross international boundaries to apprehend criminals.

While Syria thus far has been more forthcoming about its version of the raid, getting to the bottom of U.S. accusations of al-Qa`ida activity in Deir ez-Zour Province is difficult given the regime's tight grip on security affairs in the region. The regime, together with its local informant network, tightly controls independent access by foreign media and diplomats to the area unless they have authorization from the Syrian government. State minders are assigned to "protect" visiting foreigners. All Syrian territory east of the Euphrates River is the domain of Syrian Military Intelligence, headed by President Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law, Asif Shawqat. The regime's concern with Deir ez-Zour is based on the allegiance of the area's residents to tribes that extend eastward into Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. The largest Sunni tribes in Syria with brethren on both sides of the border include the al-Baggara (Mosul and Tikrit), al-Ughaydat (Mosul) and al-Mashahda (Tikrit).⁷ Despite the region's oil wealth, which accrues directly to the state's coffers, Deir ez-Zour is historically Syria's poorest province. The state has encouraged

Syrian tribes to give up their nomadic life in favor of settlement in and around the Euphrates River and its (often dry) tributaries. Farms in the area produce cotton and wheat, and the arid lands and dry streambeds from which the tribes hail are particularly good for smuggling livestock and contraband. To shore up support for the government, the Assad regime, which is led by Alawites, an obscure offshoot of Shi'a Islam, employs a large proportion of the region's Sunnis in the country's army and security services, creating much needed jobs in Syria's poorest region.⁸

Leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Syria publicly gathered "volunteer" fighters by the busload to wage "jihad" against coalition forces.⁹ This was later confirmed by U.S. forces who captured or killed hundreds of fighters with passports showing they had transited Syria into Iraq. As security worsened in Iraq, and coalition intelligence lapsed, the degree of Syrian support for the Iraqi insurgency remained unclear. In response to repeated accusations by the United States that it was allowing foreign fighters to travel across its borders, the Syrian government constructed a four foot high "sand berm" along the frontier and laid fallen electricity poles to flip smugglers' fast moving vehicles.¹⁰ Damascus repeatedly claimed that it was doing all it could to patrol the 375-mile border, comparing its task with unsuccessful U.S. attempts to keep foreign migrants crossing its border with Mexico.

With the advent of Iraq's Awakening Councils, greater details of foreign fighter flows through Syria have emerged. This includes the Sinjar Records, documents that coalition forces in Iraq seized during a raid on a suspected al-Qa`ida safe house in Sinjar, an Iraqi town 10 miles east of the Syrian frontier. The records, compiled by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, indicate that hundreds of foreign fighters between September 2006 and September 2007 transited through Syria.¹¹

1 Bill Roggio, "US Strike in Syria 'Decapitated' al Qaeda's Facilitation Network," *The Long War Journal*, October 27, 2008.

2 "Treasury Designates Members of Abu Ghadiyah's Network - Facilitates Flow of Terrorists, Weapons, and Money from Syria to al Qaeda in Iraq," U.S. Department of Treasury, February 28, 2008.

3 "Syrian Witness Reacts to Raid," BBC News, October 27, 2008. In this case, family means "extended family" or a subsection of a tribe.

4 Albert Aji, "U.S. Special Forces Launch Rare Attack Inside Syria," *Associated Press*, October 26, 2008.

5 Ibid.

6 Eric Schmidt and Mark Mazzetti, "Secret Order Lets U.S. Raid Al Qaeda in Many Countries," *New York Times*, November 9, 2008.

7 Personal interview, resident of eastern Syria, August 2006.

8 Ironically, eastern Syria's oil production makes the area technically Syria's richest region. According to Syrian law, however, all oil proceeds accrue to the state.

9 Neil MacFarquhar, "For Arabs, New Jihad Is in Iraq," *New York Times*, April 2, 2003.

10 Personal observation, Abu Kamal, August 2004.

11 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida's Foreign*

Reduction in Foreign Fighter Flow?

During the past few months, U.S. officials have said that there has been a sharp reduction in foreign fighters in and out of Iraq. Yet it remains unclear how much of the reduction is due to the *sabwa* (awakening) in Iraq and how much is due to a recently announced “change” in Syria’s policy on border security. Beginning with a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her Syrian counterpart, Walid Mouallem, at the May 2007 Iraq neighbors conference in Sharm al-Shaykh, the United States has repeatedly asked Syria to improve its border security. This has primarily involved two areas: scrutinizing single military-aged males entering Syria from Arab countries, and closing off smuggling routes across the Syrian frontier.

The degree of Damascus’ compliance with Washington’s request remains unclear. In July, a group of Syrian academics in good favor with the Syrian regime visited Washington and claimed that Syria had shifted its policy and had now secured the border “to the best of our abilities.”¹² One delegation member claimed Damascus has “its own interest to play a stabilizing role” and that Syria had done a “very good job” on policing the border.¹³ They claimed that “several U.S. field commanders” at the border had even shared such kudos with Syrian officials.¹⁴ Such claims come in sharp contrast to U.S. statements before and after last month’s raid. A U.S. military official told the Associated Press that “the one piece of the puzzle we have not been showing success on is the nexus in Syria.”¹⁵ This was supported by statements in the days leading up to the raid by U.S. Major General John Kelly, who said that Syria’s border was “uncontrolled by their side” and was

a “different story” from the security situation on Iraq’s borders with Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which have tightened security considerably.¹⁶

Adding to the confusion, in the days following the raid Western journalists based in Syria and Lebanon published stories attributing the raid to secret security cooperation between Damascus and Washington. One report in London’s *The Sunday Times* said that Syrian security personnel seemed to be complicit in the raid, which was confirmed by anonymous “sources in Washington.”¹⁷ The report claimed that “Abu Ghadiya was feared by the Syrians as an agent of Islamic fundamentalism who was hostile to the secular regime in Damascus. It would be expedient for Syria if America would eliminate him.”¹⁸ Another report from the Damascus-based correspondent of the Abu Dhabi-based *The National* also alleged Syrian complicity. It quoted a U.S. intelligence officer, Major Adam Boyd of the third armored cavalry regiment responsible for Mosul and a 236-mile stretch of the Iraqi-Syrian border in Ninawa Province, as saying that Syria had “been relatively good in the near recent past, arresting people on their side of the border.” Boyd also explained the “gray area” surrounding Syria’s position on foreign jihadists traveling in and out of Iraq from Syria:

For every example of cooperation from Syria, there are an equal number of incidents that are not helpful...We just captured someone who was trying to escape into Syria and found out that he’d been arrested last November on the Syrian side after they caught him with a bunch of fake passports. But he bribed his way out and managed to get back in. But, again, I don’t know I necessarily attribute that to the government as to an individual Syrian border patrol unit.¹⁹

Damascus Facing Threat of Blowback?

Although it appears that Syria has taken some steps to limit the number of foreign fighters crossing the border into Iraq, the October 26 raid highlights the role of Syria in Iraq’s insurgency, a point often eclipsed by announcements of indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel and political dialogue in Syria’s western neighbor, Lebanon. In light of recent successes in defeating al-Qa`ida in Iraq, Syria’s role as a staging ground for the Iraqi insurgency threatens to endanger its own interests. As coalition efforts continue to push foreign jihadists out of Iraq, and U.S. Arab allies tighten controls on the return of foreign fighters to their home countries, Syria could become the foreign fighters’ refuge of last resort.

If Damascus’ claims that it is doing more to crack down on foreign jihadists and similar militant groups is true, this could help explain the motivations behind a number of recent violent incidents in Syria: the September 27 suicide bombing near a new military security bureau outside Damascus;²⁰ an October firefight between security forces and Sunni militants that claimed four lives in the Yarmouk Palestinian camp;²¹ and the mysterious July riot by Islamist prisoners at Syria’s Saydnayya military prison. Syria’s role in Islamist militancy could present Damascus with increased security problems, as radicalized foreign fighters could turn their skills against their hosts, especially in an era of diplomatic talks between Syria, Israel, and the United States.

Anonymous²² is a researcher and journalist who has worked in Syria for the past seven years.

Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

¹² “Engaging Syria: New Negotiations, Old Challenges,” The Brookings Institution, July 23, 2008. In a subsequent article, one of the delegation’s members, Sami Moubayed, put “recognition of Syria’s cooperation on border security with Iraq” on a 10-point list of demands that President-elect Barack Obama must do for Syria to receive him in Damascus “like Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Aji, “U.S. Special Forces Launch Rare Attack Inside Syria.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marie Colvin and Uzi Mahnaimi, “Questions Raised over Syrian Complicity in U.S. Raid,” *The Sunday Times*, November 2, 2008.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Phil Sands, “Syria Stops Insurgents on Iraq Border,” *The National*, November 2, 2008.

²⁰ On November 8, Syrian state television aired “confessions” of members of Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni Islamic militant group that grew out of Fatah Intifada, a Palestinian militant group closely controlled by the Syrian regime. The report claimed Saudi support for the attack channeled via Saad Hariri, Rafiq Hariri’s son. The report remains highly controversial and unconfirmed.

²¹ “A Puzzling Raid,” *Economist*, October 30, 2008.

²² The author’s name has been withheld to protect the sources involved in the research.