

## Iraq's Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Syrian-Iraqi Border Since 2003

By James Denselow

THE PRECISE FRAMEWORK of Iraq's territorial integrity is currently facing both old and new challenges. In the northern Kurdistan Regional Governorate (KRG), problems of sovereign control are characterized by regular and often deadly incursions by the Turkish military in pursuit of PKK fighters. Iraq's borders with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are characterized by new and developing high-tech border security solutions.<sup>1</sup> The Iranian border dispute over the delineation of the Shatt al-Arab waterways resulted in British naval personnel being held captive in May 2007. The main focus of this article, however, is the Syrian-Iraqi border—the source of the majority of foreign fighter transit and therefore one of the driving factors shaping present U.S.-Syrian relations.<sup>2</sup>

### The Syrian Connection

The triangle of Syrian-Iraqi-U.S. relations has proved an ever-changing narrative. It demonstrates Washington's ideological-strategic conundrum in dealing with Syria with respect to its Iraq policy. U.S. policy in Iraq has shifted away from reliance solely on hard power to becoming increasingly varied and pragmatic. Yet the desired nature of such engagement is somewhat disputed, currently consisting as it does of low-level regional conferences and Washington's "green light" to the establishment of improved and more public bilateral ties between the respective states.

Therefore, where does the narrative concerning the Syrian-Iraqi border troubles begin? Arguably, the most obvious trigger was the much debated Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) "Order 2," which disbanded the Iraqi security forces, including the 35,000-strong Iraqi border guard that

had been responsible for six international borders. Dr. Mustafa Alani, formerly of the Royal United Services Institute, described this action as having turned Iraq's 2,270 miles of international boundaries into an "open house."<sup>3</sup> The opening of the borders also included the dissolution of trade barriers.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of this, compounded by vagueness over the role and responsibilities of the replacement border force, have affected all of Iraq's borders and its relationships with its neighbors.

The collapse of the Iraqi state in 2003 saw the rapid emergence of a (largely Sunni) insurgency. The insurgency proved a multi-factional entity consisting of a variety of groups: former regime loyalists, disenfranchised Sunni Arab

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nationalists and the participation of al-Qa`ida-inspired foreign jihadists. The insurgent movement that emerged post-war constituted a largely indigenous force, with foreign elements playing regular—and deadly—cameo appearances as "force multipliers": those carrying out comparatively rare but highly destructive suicide attacks.

How does Syria fit into this? In February 2006, John Negroponte, as director of U.S. National Intelligence, delivered the annual threat assessment to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. His appraisal of the Syrian role was illuminating. He described it as that of a "pivotal—but generally unhelpful—player in a troubled region." The statement echoed that of historian Philip Hitti, who, in 1951, painted Syria as "perhaps the largest small country on the map, microscopic in size but cosmic in influence."<sup>5</sup> Moreover,

visiting London in September 2006, Syrian Information Minister Dr. Mohsen Bilal responded to a question as to why the United States should engage Syria by confirming that Syria did indeed have influence "beyond its borders."<sup>6</sup> Other commentators, however, have contrasted a Syrian inability to steer the region with a capability to "thwart the ambitions of others."<sup>7</sup>

Synthesizing these views in order to define a policy approach to Syria suggests the importance of balancing Syria's potential constructive role with its pivotal role as a spoiler. The legacy of the policies of the Bush administration's first-term, however, was the transformation of border securitization, theoretically a functional issue, into a political dispute with the Syrian regime, with little input from either the nascent Iraqi government or its fledgling border guard.

### Fences in the Sand

The Syrian-Iraqi border is 376 miles in length and, despite poor relations between Baghdad and Damascus in the past, has historically been more of a line on a map rather than any physical reality. In terms of population and socio-economics, it is worth emphasizing the general poverty of the borderland area, as well as recognizing the tripartite division in terms of physical and social dynamics:<sup>8</sup>

1. From the Jordanian tri-point to the Euphrates River, the border runs through full desert. It is a sparsely populated and challenging environment, home to small Bedouin settlements, nomadic farming and little else.

2. North of the Euphrates is a more built-up area with villages on and along the border line. Villages such as al-Baguz are examples of settlements whose houses virtually cross the international border line itself. Unsurprisingly, perhaps,

<sup>6</sup> Mohsen Bilal, press conference, London, September 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See "Syria and Iran: An Enduring Alliance - 1979 to Present," speech by Dr. Jubin Goodarzi, Chatham House Event, October 2, 2006. Goodarzi is a Middle East analyst and author of *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> This information was obtained through participant observation. Living in the region, the author visited all sections of the border at various times between 2005 and 2007.

<sup>1</sup> Harry de Quetteville, "Saudis Build 550-mile Fence to Shut Out Iraq," *Daily Telegraph*, September 30, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The paper is based on research carried out in Syria during the past four years that examined the evolution of the geopolitics of this borderland as well as political relations between Damascus, Baghdad and Washington.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview, Dr. Mustafa Alani, March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "Let's All Go to the Yard Sale: Iraq's Economic Liberalization," *Economist*, September 27, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Hitti, *History of Syria, including Lebanon and Palestine* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 4.

this section of the border witnesses the highest incidence of illegal trade and border crossings.

3. The northeast corner of Syria, called the Jazira, is characterized both by a history of more organized border control measures on either side as well as by the worst incidence of national poverty. The greater security both at and behind the border itself is linked to internal Syrian concerns with the indigenous Kurdish population and its connections with other Kurdish groups across the borders with Turkey and Iraq.

#### Syrian Border Control Measures

Border security starts with a good, solid strategy along the border itself, reinforced by policing and intelligence-gathering behind it. Syria claims to have made significant progress in tightening security along its frontier since 2005. There are also some glaring negative characteristics of Syria's border security arrangements, which allow the issue of foreign fighters crossing from Syria into Iraq to remain. Syrian adjustments to their border have changed its functionality from a line in the sand to a semi-effective filter to the illicit transfer of people and/or materials.

Syria has constructed 557 border posts, each spaced between 0.6 and 1.5 miles apart, as imposed by the topographical nature of the terrain.<sup>9</sup> Each post is manned by between five and eight soldiers equipped with personal weapons and one fixed heavy weapon.<sup>10</sup> The main weakness of such a personnel-heavy approach is that the Syrians have neither the training nor the equipment to conduct patrols at night, when the largest percentage of illicit transit occurs.

The overall size of the Syrian border security force has hovered around 10,000, mostly troops that were redeployed to the east following the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon. To put this reinforcement in context, it should be noted that prior to the war, the guard on the Iraq border stood at only 700 men. Furthermore, both British and U.S. officials in Syria have admitted that the Syrians have deployed over time and that a "satisfactory" system of border coverage is in place.<sup>11</sup>

9 Personal interview, Syrian defense official, Damascus, June 2007.

10 Ibid.

11 Personal interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, Au-

The Syrians also constructed a sand berm (earth fence) at a height of between 6-12 feet along large parts of the border in 2005. The rudimentary and temporal nature of the structure, however, has meant that large parts have suffered natural weathering, thereby reducing its effectiveness as a barrier. The berm is easy to traverse by foot and there have been frequent reports of 4x4s also gaining access.<sup>12</sup>

Two of the three official crossing points have been steadily improved, although security concerns at al-Qaim mean continued closure. Al-Yaroubiyeh, in the northeast of the country, and al-Tanf, close to the Jordanian tri-point, have seen steadily increasing flows of both people and goods in both directions. In particular, the need for building materials and other goods in the relatively stable KRG-controlled north has seen a boom in traffic at al-Yaroubiyeh. This is characterized by regular queues of more than 18 miles of lorries backed-up on the Syrian side.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there is a rail service that travels across this border with two trains a day, mainly carrying freight cargo.

The Syrian Ministry of Interior has also introduced a new integrated computer system for all border entry points.<sup>14</sup> This helps to compensate for the fact that Arab nationals are not required to have visas to enter Syria. In October 2005, however, the Ministry of Interior issued a circular informing immigration and security officers that non-permanent resident males between the ages of 18 and 30 could be denied entry under a number of conditions, including traveling alone, student or recent graduate status, residence in a country other than their own, or suspicious travel abroad.<sup>15</sup>

By 2006, according to security officials,<sup>16</sup> Syrian efforts to control the border have resulted in the detention of more than 1,300 "extremists" of different nationalities who were handed over to

gust 2006.

12 Personal interviews, Syrian residents of Jazira area, Damascus, September 2006.

13 Personal observation, June 2007

14 J. Denselow, "From Stone Age to Space Age," *Syria Today*, May 2006.

15 Personal interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, May 2006.

16 Personal interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, August 2006.

their country of origin through embassies and security channels. Seventy non-Syrian nationals remained in Syrian detention and more than 4,000 Syrians attempting to travel to Iraq illegally had been interrogated.

The secretive nature of the Syrian regime means that there has been little follow-up confirming these statistics. The work that has been done to look at the numbers and backgrounds of would-be fighters has pointed to Saudi Arabia as the largest country of origin.<sup>17</sup>

#### Future Developments

Since 2003, the Syrian-Iraqi border has developed into a security filter that has reduced the number of would-be fighters gaining access into Iraq. In February 2008, General David Petraeus revealed that the number of foreign fighters traveling into Iraq to join al-Qa`ida had dropped by 50%. To see further improvements to the level of border security, there would have to be a warming in U.S.-Syrian relations—or at least in EU-Syrian relations—to address both the technological and the political shortcomings in securing the line.

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17 Ian Black, "Saudis Make Up 41% of Foreign Fighters in Iraq," *Guardian*, November 23, 2007.