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The U.S. Attack on Syria: Implications for the Next Administration

The raid by U.S. forces into Syria in late October was not only a major breach of international law, but has resulted in serious diplomatic repercussions which will likely harm U.S. strategic interests in the region. On October 25, four U.S. Army helicopters entered Syrian airspace from Iraq, firing upon laborers at the Sukkariyeh Farm near the town of Abu Kamal; two of the helicopters landed and eight commandoes reportedly stormed a building. By the time it was over, eight people had been killed, at least seven of whom were civilians, including three children.

It is believed to be the first time the United States has ever engaged in ground combat operations in Syria. And, though Congress did not authorize any operations against that country, there appears to be virtually no opposition in the Democrat-controlled Congress to President George W. Bush unilaterally deciding to attack Syria, even when the casualties appear to have been almost exclusively innocent civilians.

Claim of Counter-Terrorism

The apparent target of the raid, who was the sole non-civilian casualty (though no evidence of finding his body has been publicly reported), was Abu Ghadiya, whom the United States has accused of helping to smuggle foreign fighters into Iraq for the extremist Salafi Sunni group known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). There appears to have been no effort by the Bush administration, however, to ask the Syrian government to either arrest Abu Ghadiya or extradite him.

An administration official told the Washington Post, “You have to clean up the global threat that is in your backyard, and if you won’t do that, we are left with no choice but to take these matters into our hands.” In reality, there was no indication that Abu Ghadiya had any relationship with the branch of Al-Qaeda headed by Osama bin Laden which does have a global reach. (Many analysts see AQI as simply an Iraqi-led group that simply appropriated the name.) Furthermore, the Syrians have been quite aggressive in tracking down suspected al-Qaeda cells that did.

For example, former CIA director George Tenet had praised Syria for providing the United States with intelligence dossiers on al-Qaeda in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and had called for increased intelligence cooperation with the Syrian regime. In one example, intelligence provided by Syria helped thwart a potentially devastaing attack on the headquarters of the U.S. Navy’s 5th Fleet, based in Bahrain.

Syria’s secular government, which has itself been the target of the very kind of hard-line Salafi Sunni terrorists the U.S. claims they were targeting, would have little motivation to knowingly allow someone like that to operate within their territory. Nor would they want to facilitate the growth of such dangerous groups destabilizing their neighbor Iraq. Indeed, a recent National Intelligence Estimate noted how Syria had “cracked down on some Sunni extremist groups attempting to infiltrate fighters into Iraq through Syria because of threats they pose to Syrian stability.”

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem just completed a visit to Great Britain, where he and British foreign minister David Miliband issued a joint statement declaring that “tackling al-Qaeda and groups inspired by it was a high priority” and that the two governments had “agreed to work more closely together to tackle this threat.”

Syria is among a small minority of Arab countries which have formally recognized the Iraqi government, which also raises questions as to why they would seek to destabilize it. Furthermore, Syria’s closest regional ally is the

Shia government of Iran, which served as the exiled base for the major Shia parties which currently control the Iraqi government and which have been a target of hard-line Sunni groups like AQI, which are fanatically anti-Iranian and see Shiism as apostasy.

Iraqi President Jalal Talbani noted that Syria does not currently pose a threat to Iraq's stability. Indeed, the Iraqi government specifically condemned the attack, which originated in its territory, declaring that "The Iraqi government rejects U.S. aircraft bombarding posts inside Syria. The Constitution does not allow Iraq to be used as a staging ground to attack neighboring countries."

Guerrilla Infiltration

There is no question that there are places along Syria's 300-mile border of Iraq, much of which is sparsely-populated desert and mountains, where foreign fighters have illegally crossed the border, including some who have allied with groups like AQI which have engaged in acts of terrorism. Neither the Bush administration nor its Congressional supporters, however, have been able to make a convincing case that Syria has been encouraging such infiltration or why they would choose to do so.

In part, as a result of U.S. pressure, the Syrian government has moved as many as 10,000 troops to the Iraqi border to guard against such infiltration. The State Department has acknowledged that Damascus "upgraded physical security conditions on the border and began to give closer scrutiny to military-age Arab males entering Syria." In a report published late last year, the State Department also noted how the Syrian government had "worked to increase security cooperation with Iraq," including hosting "a meeting of technical border security experts representing Iraq's neighbors, the United States, and other countries" as well as participating "in two ministerial-level Iraq Neighbors' Conferences." In addition, high-level Syrian officials had been scheduled to meet with their Iraqi counterparts, as well as U.S. officials, later this month.

The report also noted that "According to U.S. and Iraqi officials, 2007 witnessed a marked reduction in the flow of foreign terrorists transiting through Syria into Iraq." This year, the number of foreign fighters reportedly entering Iraq from Syria, once estimated as high as 100 a month, had been reduced by more than 80 percent. General David Petraeus, commander of Central Command, which oversees U.S. security concerns in the Middle East, acknowledged that "Syria has taken steps to reduce the flow of foreign fighters through its borders with Iraq."

As a result, it makes little sense as to why the United States would choose to attack Syria now.

Diplomatic Fallout

The diplomatic fallout for the U.S. attack, a clear violation of Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, was widespread. French president Nicolas Sarkozy, expressing his "serious concern" over the U.S. attack, called for "the strict respect of the territorial integrity of states." European Union foreign affairs spokesman Javiar Solana also expressed his concern, as did the governments of Russia, China and a number of NATO allies, including Germany and Great Britain.

The attack may have put the Status of Forces Agreement into further jeopardy. In response to the attack, the Iraqi government is now demanding that the agreement include a specific ban on American forces using Iraqi territory to attack neighboring countries.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government ordered the Damascus Community School — the highly acclaimed American institution — be closed along with the U.S. Cultural Center. The U.S. Embassy has cut back its hours. The Syrians have also threatened to cut off cooperation with the United States regarding Iraqi border security.

The Silence of the Dems

Given that the October 26 raid was an unauthorized and illegal attack, killed innocent civilians, resulted in negative diplomatic fallout, and likely increased rather than decreased the threat of terrorism in Iraq, it would appear to be a great opportunity for the Democrats to attack the Bush administration for its dangerous and reckless action.

Yet, even in the course of the final dramatic week of the presidential campaign, neither Barack Obama nor Joe Biden uttered a word of criticism. And, despite contacting the offices of every single Democratic member on both the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, I was unable to find any criticism from any of these leading Congressional Democrats either.

This raises the serious possibility that, even under an Obama administration and an expanded Democratic Congressional majority, such militaristic policies may continue. This is particularly disappointing given that many observers had hoped that Syria would be the focus of a likely early diplomatic victory of an Obama administration.

Sabotaging the Next Administration

Indeed, this may have been what motivated the Bush administration's otherwise questionable timing for the attacks.

Obama has been critical of the Bush administration's efforts to sabotage peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, which would likely result in the return of Syria's Golan province, currently under Israeli military occupation, in return for full diplomatic relations, security guarantees, and an end of Syrian support for anti-Israeli extremists. Indeed, Obama would likely have the United States become actively involved in the peace process, currently under the auspices of Turkey.

In addition, the alliance by the secular Baathist regime in Syria with the mullahs of Iran has always been more of an alliance of convenience than one rooted in any common ideology, so there were those in Obama's foreign policy team that were hoping that they could wean Syria away from the Iranians and provide enough incentives for that country to become a more responsible member of the international community. Syria recently formally recognized Lebanon for the first time, a country which had historically been part of Syria until wrested away, in a classic divide-and-rule act of colonialism, just prior to independence by French occupation forces after World War I. Along with the renewed peace talks with Israel, there appeared to be signs that the Syrians would be willing to strike some kind of grand bargain with the West under a more enlightened U.S. administration.

Last month's attack may have been designed to make this more difficult. Not only has it set back moderate elements in Syria, it has emboldened those in Washington and the mainstream press to start egging on Obama to continue Bush's policy. For example, the Wall Street Journal editorialized, "Mr. Obama has promised he'll engage Syria diplomatically as part of an overall effort to end the conflict in Iraq. If he really wants to end the war faster, he'll pick up on Syria where the Bush Administration has now ended."

Obama's refusal to criticize the U.S. attack on Syria raises the troubling prospect that, rather than pursue the diplomatic route as hoped, he will instead take the newspaper's advice. This may be just what the Bush administration had planned.