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Analysis: Raid into Syria complicates Iraq's ties.

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SUKKARIYEH, Syria – A cross-border raid by U.S. special forces killed the al-Qaida-linked head of a Syrian network that smuggled fighters, weapons and cash into Iraq, an American counterterrorism official said Monday. Blood stained the earth in this border village as anguished Syrians buried relatives they said were killed in the U.S. helicopter attack Sunday. Some shouted anti-American slogans and carried banners reading "Down with Bush and the American enemy."

The operation targeted the home of Abu Ghadiyah, the nickname for the leader of a key cell of foreign fighters in Iraq, the U.S. official told The Associated Press from Washington. He spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive intelligence.

The U.S. Treasury Department has named Abu Ghadiyah as one of four major figures in al-Qaida's Iraq wing who were living in Syria.

U.S. authorities have said Abu Ghadiyah's real name is Badran Turki al-Mazidih, an Iraqi in his early 30s who served as al-Qaida in Iraq's head of logistics in Syria since 2004. His job included providing foreign fighters with passports, weapons, guides and safe houses as they slipped into Iraq and made their way to Baghdad and other major cities where the Sunni insurgency was raging.

Sunday's operation in Sukkariyeh, about five miles from the Iraqi border, came just days after the commander of U.S. forces in western Iraq called the Syrian border an "uncontrolled" gateway for fighters into Iraq and said efforts were being stepped up to secure it.

The raid was another sign the United States is aggressively launching military raids across the borders of Afghanistan and Iraq to destroy insurgent sanctuaries. In Pakistan, U.S. missile strikes have killed at least two senior al-Qaida operatives this year.

The Syrian government said Sunday's attack by four U.S. military helicopters targeted a civilian building under construction in Sukkariyeh shortly before sundown, and killed eight people, including four children.

However, local officials said seven men were killed and two people were wounded, including a woman. An AP reporter saw the bodies of seven men at the funerals Monday.

Amateur video taken by a villager on a cell phone Sunday showed four helicopters flying overhead as villagers pointed to the skies in alarm. The grainy images, viewed Monday by the AP, did not show the helicopters landing.

Another villager told the AP he saw at least two men taken into custody by U.S. forces, and whisked away by helicopter. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared for his life.

At the targeted building, the floor was bloodstained Monday, with abandoned tennis shoes scattered amid pieces of human flesh. A tent pitched near the site had bags of bread, pots and pans and wool blankets.

There was no visible security presence and visitors could move freely, a sign the normally tightly restrictive government wanted the damage seen.

About 30 women dressed in black wept in a small courtyard outside the home of Dawoud al-Hamad, who was killed in the bombing along with his four sons.

"They were innocent laborers who worked from dusk to dawn," said the man's wife, Rima. She said work at the

construction site started last week.

Asked about U.S. reports that an al-Qaida-linked group used the site, Siham, the widow of one of the man's sons, Ibrahim, said: "I don't know about any of that."

"All I know is that they went to work and never came back," said the mother of seven.

Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem denounced the raid as "cowboy politics."

"I hope it doesn't come to a confrontation, but if that's what they want, then we'll be ready," he told reporters in London.

Iran condemned the attack as did Russia, which has had close ties with Syria since Soviet times.

Iraqi officials said they had no advance warning of the raid, and the government responded carefully to the aftermath, seeking to contain diplomatic damage with Syria while not offending the U.S.

Chief spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said Iraq was seeking good relations with Syria but added that Baghdad had asked the Syrians in the past to "hand over terror groups operating on Syrian territory."

He also noted the attack occurred in an area where "anti-Iraq terror activity" had taken place.

"We cannot judge this operation at the moment," he said. "We must wait for our investigation to finish. We are in touch with the American side and we expect them to hand us a report on the raid."

U.S. and Iraqi officials have long been concerned about infiltration across the Syrian border. American special operations troops have been working for months to shut down Sunni extremist networks that smuggle weapons and fighters through Iraq's northern desert to Mosul, where al-Qaida and other Sunni militants remain active.

But the timing of the raid raised concerns it could hurt an uncertain U.S.-Iraq security agreement. Parliament must approve the measure before the U.N. mandate expires Dec. 31, but Iraqi Shiite lawmakers have expressed doubts the current version would pass.

"Now neighboring countries have a good reason to be concerned about the continued U.S. presence in Iraq," Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman said.

Associated Press writers Hussein Malla Sukkariyeh, Albert Aji in Damascus, Syria; Qassim Abdul-Zahra in Baghdad, Iraq, and Pamela Hess in Washington contributed to this report.

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Analysis: Raid into Syria complicates Iraq's ties

By ROBERT H. REID, Associated Press Writer Robert H. Reid, Associated Press Writer

9 mins ago

BAGHDAD – The deadly U.S. raid into Syria may complicate efforts to win approval for a new U.S.-Iraqi security deal by drawing attention to a fact many Iraqis detest — that they can't control everything American forces might do.

Iraq's government offered its first official criticism of the raid on Tuesday, two days after Syrian officials say U.S. troops and helicopters swooped into Syrian territory close to the Iraqi border, killing eight people.

The U.S. command in Baghdad would not comment, but a U.S. military official said American special forces targeted the network that smuggles fighters and weapons into Iraq. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the raid was classified.

In a sign of how sensitive such attacks can be for Iraq's government, Syria summoned the top Iraqi diplomat in Damascus and demanded that Iraq "shoulder its responsibilities" and prevent the use of Iraqi territory "for aggression against Syria."

On Tuesday, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said the government "rejects" the raid but urged Syria to crack

down on what he said are "organizations" on its territory that are trying to hurt Iraq.

A U.S. military official said the target was a network that smuggles fighters and weapons into Iraq.

That strikes at the heart of Iraqi criticism over the security agreement — that Iraqis cannot take control of their own country so long as big U.S. military forces remain on their soil.

The raid could also encourage Syria and Iran to step up pressure on Iraqi lawmakers to reject the deal. Parliament must approve the measure before the U.N. mandate expires Dec. 31, and Iraqi Shiite lawmakers have expressed doubts the current version would pass.

"It will be used against the agreement and will give the Iranians reason to increase their interference here against the agreement," Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman predicted.

"Now neighboring countries have a good reason to be concerned about the continued U.S. presence in Iraq," he said.

The Iraqi government has so far issued no formal statement about the raid, but the chief spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh noted that the reported target was a center of "anti-Iraq terrorist activity."

But another lawmaker — this one a prominent Shiite who has not taken a public stand on the deal — said the raid would hurt the security agreement's chances of approval because it sends "a message that Iraq is not in control of its own affairs." He spoke on condition of anonymity because the issues are sensitive.

The proposed deal would allow American troops to stay in Iraq through 2011 to help build up Iraq's own forces and fight the remaining al-Qaida militants and Shiite extremists.

But critics inside Iraq believe the agreement would tie Iraq to American political and military policies in the region. That could harm Iraq's efforts to build good relations with neighbors like Syria and Iran — who aren't on good terms with Washington.

U.S. officials insist the agreement respects Iraqi sovereignty.

But critics maintain that there is no way that Iraq will be anything but a junior partner. That's not an image Iraqis relish, even though many privately hope U.S. troops will stay here until Iraq's own security forces can maintain order.

On the other hand, the security agreement could help curb U.S. actions such as the Sunday raid. The draft agreement rules out the use of Iraqi territory as a base for U.S. aggression against other countries. Iraq insisted on such language to assure Iran that it would not assist any U.S. attack against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Also, the agreement would require the U.S. to coordinate military operations with a joint U.S.-Iraqi commission, giving Iraq the chance to raise objections before U.S. raids.

Regardless, opponents of the deal are likely to see the U.S. raid on Syria as reinforcing their view that Iraq would be powerless to prevent the United States from military action. For many Iraqis, the feeling they run their own country means more than the deal's fine print.

Complicating the situation is the complexity of Iraq's relations with Syria. When Saddam Hussein was in power, the two countries were ruled by rival wings of the Baath party.

Many former Saddam loyalists fled to Syria after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, and U.S. officials believe the country serves as a base for Sunni extremists to smuggle weapons and fighters to Iraq.

But relations between Iraq and Syria have improved somewhat, and earlier this month the Syrians sent an ambassador to Baghdad for the first time since the 1980s.

"We're trying to contain the fallout from the incident," a senior Iraqi Foreign Ministry official, Labid Abbawi told The Associated Press. "It is regrettable and we are sorry it happened."

Robert H. Reid is AP's bureau chief in Baghdad and has reported from Iraq since 2003.

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