

## Killing of al-Qaida Smuggler in Syria was Joint Syrian, U.S. Effort

Contributed by RICHARD SALE` (Middle East Times Intelligence Correspondent)  
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In spite of much angry public protest in Damascus, last month's killing of top al-Qaida operative Abu Ghadiya, was in fact a joint operation between U.S. Special Forces in Iraq and Syrian intelligence, according to former and serving U.S. intelligence officials.

Abu Ghadiya, a smuggler who for years had moved money, weapons and insurgents into Iraq from Syria, was killed by a U.S. helicopter raid on Oct. 26. Seven civilians were killed with him, and the resulting furor was immediate: Russia and the Arab League strongly protested the raid, and Syria accused the United States of "criminal and terrorist aggression" and lodged an official protest, according to U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack. Syria ordered the American School in Damascus closed.

But Syria's alleged anger was calculated to conceal Syrian complicity in the operation. Although the attack is still officially "classified," serving and former U.S. intelligence officials told the Middle East Times that Syria gave U.S. forces permission to fly into its airspace and even provided extensive targeting intelligence on Abu Ghadiya. "Syrian intelligence couldn't have been more cooperative," said a former senior CIA official.

McCormack recently referred to this new cooperation in veiled language that acknowledged Syria had taken "positive steps" to play a more constructive role in the region even though "there's still a ways to go." He did not expand his point.

Abu Ghadiya was an Iraqi born in 1978 or 1979 (accounts differ) in the Iraqi city of Mosul. His real name was Badran Turki Hishan al-Mazidih, and he was appointed the Syrian facilitator for al-Qaida by then senior al-Qaida leader Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. When the latter was killed, Abu Ghadiya began to work for Zarqawi's replacement, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, taking orders directly from him or through a deputy, U.S. officials said.

"Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Syria has become a transit station for al-Qaida foreign terrorists on their way to Iraq," said Stuart Levey, undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence in a public statement. "Abu Ghadiya and his network go to great lengths to facilitate the flow of money, weapons and terrorists intent on killing U.S. and coalition forces and innocent Iraqis."

According to U.S. Treasury Dept. documents, Abu Ghadiya obtained false passports, gave them weapons, guides, supplied them with safe houses and financial aid. He dealt with foreign fighter volunteers from Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other countries in the region. According to one U.S. official, Abu Ghadiya housed his recruits in Damascus and the Syrian port of Latakia with corrupt Syrian intelligence officers providing additional assistance, a U.S. official said.

According to the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Abu Ghadiya recruited as many as 500 foreign fighters, the estimate based on documents seized during a 2007 U.S. military raid on an al-Qaida hideout in the Iraqi village of Sinjar.

In 2006, Abu Ghadiya was hard at work attempting to launch an attack that would use rockets to blow up multiple coalition forces outposts and Iraqi police stations in western Iraq as part of a plan to take over the area, U.S. officials said. The attack was foiled.

By the spring of 2007, Abu Ghadiya was still filtering scores of foreign fighters over the Syrian border and into Iraq, several U.S. sources said. A subordinate of Abu Ghadiya took over the task of providing safe havens and supplies for the insurgents once they had entered Iraq.

Last February, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Abu Ghadiyah's network a high-value target under the provisions of Executive Order 1224 and promptly froze any of his assets under U.S. jurisdiction. In addition, any U.S. citizens were prohibited from engaging in business or transactions with Abu Ghadiya or his associates.

In the spring of 2008, Abu Ghadiya, working with his cousin, Saddah Jaylut al-Marsumi, transported several Syrian suicide bombers into Iraq. By then he was a marked man, U.S. sources said.

Last May Abu Ghadiya and a dozen gunmen attacked an Iraqi police station in Qaim, killing 12, some of whom were beheaded.

Then, in early October, U.S. intelligence learned that Abu Ghadiya was planning another cross-border attack, and back-channel discussions with Syrian officials began.

Washington has long run a back channel to Damascus through Syria's air force intelligence, the Idarat al-Murkabarat al-Jawiyya, U.S. sources said.

On Oct. 26, Syrian intelligence alerted U.S. forces in Iraq to Abu Ghadiyah's whereabouts, at which time, U.S. Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) operatives began to track him, probably through his satellite telephone.

Four Blackhawk helicopters took off for the northeastern Syrian village of al-Sukkiraya, about five miles from the Euphrates river, an area where a compound of new homes was being built, according to U.S. intelligence officials.

At this point, the raid went wrong. As the U.S. Special Forces poured out of the aircraft, shots were fired and a gunfight broke out that lasted for 10 to 15 minutes. Abu Ghadiya was to have been captured and flown to Iraq for interrogation. Instead he was killed in the fighting, along with seven Syrian civilians, including four children, most of them members of the same family.

"There weren't to have been any civilian casualties, no collateral damage," a U.S. intelligence official said. "We wanted the [expletive] alive." The U.S. raiding team carried off two captives for interrogation.

"The problem with these kinds of tactics lies with the fact that so many things can go wrong, and they usually do," said Middle East expert Tony Cordesman. "You don't want to solve one problem only to create a dozen others."

But the praise of U.S. officials for Syria's part was deeply appreciative. "The Syrians were perfect; they gave us the works," said one U.S. official familiar with the incident.

Syria's attitude toward al-Qaida has noticeably hardened since armed Islamic militants attacked the U.S. Embassy in Damascus last Sept. 11, killing one of Syria's anti-terrorism forces and wounding 11 others, including a policeman. No embassy employees were hurt. Then later that month, a car bomb went off in Damascus near the headquarters of Syrian Intelligence, killing 17.

During the late October raid, the Blackhawks were spotted when they crossed Syria's border and radar picked them up, prompting a request by the Syrian air force to intercept. It was denied.

CIA officials said that Syria has only recently begun to face its own internal threat from al-Qaida and said the al-Qaida presence inside the country is still "small and ineffective," in the words of one analyst.

But the cross-border raid of last month and similar U.S. Special Forces raids into Pakistan could provide a model for Syrian forces anxious to cross into Lebanon and raid al-Qaida groups, especially Fatah al-Islam, around the northern Lebanese port city of Tripoli.