

## Al Qaeda's Travel Agent - w/Video

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The United States is at last making significant progress against al Qaeda in Iraq -- but the road to victory now requires cutting off al Qaeda's road to Iraq through Damascus.

Thanks to Gen. David Petraeus's new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, and the strength and skill of the American soldiers fighting there, al Qaeda in Iraq is now being routed from its former strongholds in Anbar and Diyala provinces. Many of Iraq's Sunni Arabs, meanwhile, are uniting with us against al Qaeda, alienated by the barbarism and brutality of their erstwhile allies.

As Gen. Petraeus recently said of al Qaeda in Iraq: "We have them off plan."

But defeating al Qaeda in Iraq requires not only that we continue pressing the offensive against its leadership and infrastructure inside the country. We must also aggressively target its links to "global" al Qaeda and close off the routes its foreign fighters are using to get into Iraq.

Recently declassified American intelligence reveals just how much al Qaeda in Iraq is dependent for its survival on the support it receives from the broader, global al Qaeda network, and how most of that support flows into Iraq through one country -- Syria. Al Qaeda in Iraq is sustained by a transnational network of facilitators and human smugglers, who replenish its supply of suicide bombers -- approximately 60 to 80 Islamist extremists, recruited every month from across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, and sent to meet their al Qaeda handlers in Syria, from where they are taken to Iraq to blow themselves up to kill countless others.

Although small in number, these foreign fighters are a vital strategic asset to al Qaeda in Iraq, providing it with the essential human ammunition it needs to conduct high-visibility, mass-casualty suicide bombings, such as we saw last week in northern Iraq. In fact, the U.S. military estimates that between 80% and 90% of suicide attacks in Iraq are perpetrated by foreign fighters, making them the deadliest weapon in al Qaeda's war arsenal. Without them, al Qaeda in Iraq would be critically, perhaps even fatally, weakened.

That is why we now must focus on disrupting this flow of suicide bombers -- and that means focusing on Syria, through which up to 80% of the Iraq-bound extremists transit. Indeed, even terrorists from countries that directly border Iraq travel by land via Syria to Iraq, instead of directly from their home countries, because of the permissive environment for terrorism that the Syrian government has fostered. Syria refuses to tighten its visa regime for individuals transiting its territory.

Coalition forces have spent considerable time and energy trying to tighten Syria's land border with Iraq against terrorist infiltration. But given the length and topography of that border, the success of these efforts is likely to remain uneven at best, particularly without the support of the Damascus regime.

Before al Qaeda's foreign fighters can make their way across the Syrian border into Iraq, however, they must first reach Syria -- and the overwhelming majority does so, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, by flying into Damascus International Airport, making the airport the central hub of al Qaeda travel in the Middle East, and the most vulnerable chokepoint in al Qaeda's war against Iraq and the U.S. in Iraq.

Syrian President Bashar al Assad cannot seriously claim that he is incapable of exercising effective control over the main airport in his capital city. Syria is a police state, with sprawling domestic intelligence and security services. The notion that al Qaeda recruits are slipping into and through the Damascus airport unbeknownst to the local Mukhabarat is totally unbelievable.

This is not the first use of the Damascus airport by terrorists. It has long been the central transit point for Iranian weapons en route to Hezbollah, in violation of United Nations Security Council sanctions, as well as for al Qaeda operatives moving into and out of Lebanon.

Now the Damascus airport is the point of entry into Iraq for most of the suicide bombers who are killing innocent Iraqi citizens and American soldiers, and trying to break America's will in this war. It is therefore time to demand that the Syrian regime stop playing travel agent for al Qaeda in Iraq.

When Congress reconvenes next month, we should set aside whatever differences divide us on Iraq and send a clear and unambiguous message to the Syrian regime, as we did last month to the Iranian regime, that the transit of al Qaeda suicide bombers through Syria on their way to Iraq is completely unacceptable, and it must stop.

We in the U.S. government should also begin developing a range of options to consider taking against Damascus International, unless the Syrian government takes appropriate action, and soon.

Responsible air carriers should be asked to stop flights into Damascus International, as long as it remains the main terminal of international terror. Despite its use by al Qaeda and Hezbollah terrorists, the airport continues to be serviced by many major non-U.S. carriers, including Alitalia, Air France, and British Airways.

Interrupting the flow of foreign fighters would mean countless fewer suicide bombings in Iraq, and countless fewer innocent people murdered by the barbaric enemy we are fighting there. At a time when the al Qaeda network in Iraq is already under heavy stress thanks to American and Iraqi military operations, closing off the supply line through which al Qaeda in Iraq is armed with its most deadly weapons -- suicide bombers -- would be devastating to the terrorists' cause.

Simply put, for the U.S. and our Iraqi allies, defeating al Qaeda in Iraq means locking shut Syria's "Open Door" policy to terrorists. It is past time for Syria to do so.

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Joe Lieberman on Al Qaeda and Syria  
and talks about Iranian Weapons Coming  
through Damascus Airport to Militias in  
Lebanon

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