

What is the US military doing on the Iraq-Syria border?

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For more than a week, the Bush administration has refused to provide any detailed account of a provocative US military attack on a convoy of vehicles in a remote area near the Iraq-Syrian border.

The operation took place on the night of June 18-19 and involved US special forces backed by helicopter and AC-130 gunships, armed Predator drones and ground attack aircraft. It wreaked havoc on the convoy and the nearby village of Dhib, destroying vehicles and buildings. US soldiers engaged in a firefight with Syrian border guards and detained five, including three who were wounded.

Nothing was said about the incident for days. News of the attack only emerged last Sunday when the British *Observer* newspaper published an article providing sketchy details of the operation and reporting that DNA tests were being conducted to determine if Saddam Hussein or his sons had been killed in the assault. US newspapers cited government officials as saying that US troops, who were engaged in “hot pursuit,” had actually crossed into Syria.

It was not until Tuesday that US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers confirmed at a press conference that the attack had taken place. Myers claimed that it had been mounted on “very good intelligence” but failed to say what. Rumsfeld, however, declared that he had “no reason to believe” that Hussein, his sons or former senior officials had been killed.

Neither Myers nor Rumsfeld would say how many people had been killed or wounded, who they were or provide any other details, claiming the matter needed to be further investigated. Rumsfeld refused to explain why US forces had engaged Syrian border guards, whether they had crossed into Syria or if they had been authorised to do so. He contemptuously dismissed the

issue of Syria’s national sovereignty, declaring: “Borders are not always distinct in life.”

No further information has been provided by Pentagon officials but several journalists who have visited the village and a hospital in the nearby town of Qaim found evidence of indiscriminate killing. According to survivors, the victims were smugglers and local villagers, not high-level officials from the Hussein regime. The area is notorious for smuggling, including by local shepherds who can get a higher price for their sheep across the border in Syria.

Ahmed Hamad, 27, speaking from his hospital bed, described how he watched US aircraft attacking trucks in the distance after being awoken by his mother after midnight. Then the first missiles hit his family’s compound, killing his sister-in-law Hakima Khalil, 20, and her one-year-old daughter Maha. Most of his family survived, but only because they were sleeping outside on the hot summer night.

“During the war, they [US warplanes] flew over our village and never attacked us. Why now?” Ahmed asked angrily. He denied that the village had given sanctuary to Hussein or other former government leaders. “We are not guilty. Why are they attacking families? We want to know the reason they’re attacking families.”

Dhib is a tiny hamlet of about 20 houses just eight kilometres from the Syrian border. By the time the air assault on the village had ended, four houses had been destroyed, along with two storage shacks and a number of vehicles. Residents told the *Washington Post* that at least two more people died in the attack on the trucks near the border.

The US military has taken over part of the village, forcing five families to leave their houses, with no explanation. A *New York Times* reporter who

approached the occupied area was bluntly told: “Stop right there. If you take a picture, I will break your camera.” The approaches are guarded by armoured vehicles and, on Tuesday, a convoy of some 20 transports with earth-moving equipment arrived, fueling speculation that the US was intending to turn the village into a military base.

Near the Syrian border were the charred remains of three vehicles—a pickup truck, a large transport truck and a tanker—which, as the *New York Times* noted, were “typical of those used for smuggling sheep”. About 20 Iraqis were detained in the course of the raid on the convoy and the village. According to the US military, most have since been released, after it was ascertained that they posed no threat—a tacit admission that those attacked were completely innocent.

Although the Bush administration dispatched an envoy, Elizabeth Dibble, on Monday for talks in Damascus, the five Syrian border guards are still in US custody in Iraq. Again, no reason has been given. As one US official told the *Washington Post*, the tone of the diplomatic discussions was “not apologetic”. Rather, Washington has taken the opportunity to lay down the law to the Syrian government, insisting on full collaboration in closing off the border and hunting down former Iraqi officials.

As the official told the newspaper: “Regret was expressed, but no apology. This was hot pursuit. They made clear to the Syrians that we’re going to have to take action from time to time to capture members of the former regime.” In other words, the US military fully intends to continue its aggressive operations on the border and even inside, Syria, with or without approval from Damascus.

For its part, the Syrian government has strived to play down the incident and to placate Washington. Nothing was said until the story broke internationally. On Wednesday a mild official protest was issued, requesting a clarification and the return of the five border guards. As of Friday, the Bush administration had provided no explanation and the Syrian guards were still in the hands of the US military.

The latest clash follows a string of menacing statements from Washington in mid-April accusing Damascus of allowing weapons and Islamic militants to enter Iraq and top Iraqi officials to flee to Syria. President Bush accused Syria of having a chemical

weapons program. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer followed up by branding Syria “a rogue state,” warning that it needed to “seriously ponder the implications” of its actions.

Given the propensity of White House and Pentagon officials to lie, it is impossible to determine, at this stage, precisely what was the purpose of last week’s operation. What is clear, however, is that it was carried out with wanton disregard for human life. Despite the Pentagon’s claims to have had “very good intelligence,” neither the US special forces nor the US warplanes were in a position to determine in the dead of night who was in the convoy of trucks or the village compounds.

The tragic episode not only demonstrates the ruthlessness with which the US is imposing its rule in Iraq but underscores Washington’s intention to extend its sphere of operations into Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.



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