

# US military forces attack Syrian village, killing eight

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A ground assault conducted Sunday by the US military on a Syrian village saw eight people shot dead, four of them reportedly children, and others wounded. The raid has all the earmarks of a calculated provocation by the outgoing administration of US President George Bush aimed at derailing moves by the European powers to normalise relations with the Syrian government.

Syrian state media reported that two US helicopters landed on a farm near the eastern village of Abu Kamal, about five miles from the Iraqi border, on Sunday afternoon at 4.45 PM local time. Another two helicopters flew overhead throughout the raid.

Special forces reportedly emerged from the helicopters and fired on construction workers at a building site, killing seven, before also killing a fisherman outside the building. After the attack, the four US helicopters flew back across the Iraqi border.

Syrian officials said that all those killed were civilians. Local doctors reported that another seven people were hospitalised with bullet wounds. State television showed bullet casings littering the ground at the scene of the raid.

The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported the comments of villager Souad al-Jassem, whose husband was killed: "We were surprised at five in the evening when two helicopters landed near where we live. A number of American soldiers, some of whom spoke Arabic, came out of the helicopters and entered the tent where I live with my children and husband, who works as groundkeeper for the building."

Another local resident, Jumaa Ahmad al-Hamad, told the Associated Press: "Shooting then started ringing for more than ten minutes." AP reported that after the helicopters left the area, al-Hamad and other villagers went to the site and discovered the bodies of his uncle, Dawoud al-Hamad, and four of his uncle's sons, who he said were killed in the raid.

Hundreds of villagers participated in funerals held yesterday for those killed. Mourners reportedly chanted slogans including "Death to the criminal Bush" and "We will not go down on our knees before the Americans."

The Syrian government accused the Bush administration of "terrorist aggression." The Arab League also denounced the attack, as did several governments in the region, including the Lebanese and Iranian.

The Russian government condemned the incident, saying "the war against terror must not be used as a cover for attacking sovereign nations." Other countries expressed their concern, including France, which called for restraint and "strict respect" of nations' territorial integrity. President Nicolas Sarkozy sent condolences to the victims' friends and families.

Neither the Bush administration nor the military has officially acknowledged responsibility for the attack, but unnamed US officials confirmed the cross-border raid.

A military official told the Associated Press that a "foreign fighter logistics network" was targeted and that due to Syrian government inaction, the US was "taking matters into our own hands." Another official told Agence France-Presse that Abu Ghadiya, "one of the most prominent fighter facilitators in the region" and an alleged senior member of Al Qaeda in Iraq, had been targeted. The source added, "The operation was successful. He is believed to have been killed... Look, when you've got an opportunity, an important one, you take it."

Under the banner of the "war on terror," Washington has claimed the right to disregard fundamental precepts of international law and conduct aggressive military operations, including assassinations, in any part of the world. Sunday's raid in Syria follows a series of bombings and ground attacks in recent months inside Pakistan.

A number of military analysts have questioned the timing of the Syrian raid. Ever since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has complained of foreign

fighters crossing the Syrian border into Iraq, but a cross-border military operation of this character has never been carried out before.

The raid comes as the level of active resistance in Iraq's western districts is significantly lower than in previous years, due to the US military's bankrolling of local Sunni tribal militias which previously fought against the occupation. According to the Associated Press, in July a senior US military intelligence official reported that just 20 foreign fighters now came into Iraq each month, 50 percent fewer than six months earlier and down from 100 a month in mid-2007. The shift was partly due to the Syrian government and military's compliance with US demands that it step up its border control efforts.

After referring to these developments, the US-based strategic think tank Stratfor stated, "In other words, the raid appears to be bizarre."

There is every possibility that the military operation was intended to heighten tensions internationally. The *Guardian* noted yesterday: "The attack comes as Syria takes another step in from the cold today when its foreign minister, Walid al-Mualim, visits London to hear praise for its newly conciliatory policies in Lebanon—and to be urged to distance itself from Iran. In recent months Syria has established diplomatic relations with Lebanon and held several rounds of indirect talks with Israel, with Turkey acting as broker. In July, President Assad was invited to an EU summit in Paris."

French President Sarkozy has been at the forefront of efforts to integrate the Syrian regime into the European Union's strategic orbit through the development of a negotiated settlement with Israel and the severing of Assad's ties with Tehran. France's ruling elite also has significant economic interests in its former colony, with oil company Total licensed to exploit Syrian gas fields up to 2021.

For the Bush administration, Syria remains a potential target in the "war on terror." Many leading neo-conservatives regarded the country as the logical next target following the invasion of Iraq and have labelled the Assad government "low hanging fruit" that is ripe for regime change. Damascus is seen as an obstacle to Washington's strategic interests in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, where Syria wields significant influence, including through its support for Hezbollah.

There are sharp tactical divisions within the US foreign policy establishment on how to deal with Syria.

According to Syria expert and University of Oklahoma Professor Joshua Landis: "Both the State Department and

DOD [Department of Defense] have consistently pushed for intelligence sharing with Damascus only to be shot down by the vice president's office."

In May 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked Syria's foreign minister if two US generals could visit Damascus to resume intelligence sharing, but the proposal fell through after Washington refused to meet the Assad government's condition that moves towards diplomatic normalisation be initiated. Professor Landis also reported that in December 2007, General David Petraeus wanted to speak with Syrian officials in Damascus but was refused permission by the White House.

One of the central recommendations of the 2006 Iraq Study Group report, drawn up by a bipartisan panel headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, was that direct talks be initiated with the Assad government as part of a broader "new diplomatic offensive" in the region aimed at bolstering US imperialism's standing in the Middle East after the Iraq debacle.

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has endorsed this call. Two Obama foreign policy advisors have this year visited Syria. In February, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, reportedly met with President Assad as part of a RAND Corporation delegation. Daniel Kurtzer, who served as US ambassador to Israel for four years following his nomination to the post by President Bush in 2001, is Obama's senior advisor on Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Kurtzer visited Syria in July and met with the country's foreign minister.

In this context, the US military attack on Sunday may mark an attempt by the Bush administration to present an incoming Obama administration with a *fait accompli* by destabilising the Syrian government, inflaming regional tensions, and encouraging the most militaristic sections of the Israeli political establishment amid their national election campaign.



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