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## Hitting Syria, Five Years Late

*Soliciting Assad was one of Bush's biggest war mistakes.*

After five years and six months during which Syria has been an active accomplice to the insurgency in Iraq, the U.S. has finally struck back. Historians will be left to ponder how the course of the Iraq war might have changed if President Bush had acted sooner.

U.S. military sources are confirming that on Sunday U.S. special forces raided a location in eastern Syria that was being used by a network of Syrian military officials and al Qaeda-connected groups to smuggle foreign jihadists into Iraq. The Syrians, predictably, denounced the raid as "an outrageous crime" and an "unprovoked" attack on a "sovereign country."

The Syrians have an interesting definition of unprovoked and a curious notion of sovereignty. Even before U.S. troops took Baghdad, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explicitly warned that Syria was shipping military equipment to help Saddam Hussein, including night-vision goggles and antitank weapons. Only days after Baghdad fell, Mr. Bush warned Damascus against becoming a safe haven for top Iraqi Baathist officials. "We expect cooperation," he said, "and I'm hopeful we'll receive cooperation." Siding with Secretary of State Colin Powell over Mr. Rumsfeld, Mr. Bush dispatched Mr. Powell to Damascus in a show of postinvasion diplomatic goodwill.

President Bashar al Assad did not reciprocate, and Damascus soon became the capital in exile from which the Sunni insurgency was financed, organized and directed. In late 2003, Cofer Black, the State Department's Counterterrorism Coordinator, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Syria "needs to do a lot more" to stop terrorist infiltration, but added that he "remained optimistic that continued engagement with Syria will one day lead to a change in Syrian behavior."

It didn't. The following May, Mr. Bush ordered the minimum possible sanctions on Damascus under the Syria Accountability Act of 2003. Though Damascus offered some token intelligence cooperation, it also turned Damascus International Airport into the central hub through which jihadists from Morocco to Saudi Arabia could reach Iraq. Insurgent leaders were brazen enough to hold meetings, in Damascus hotels, that were known both to Syrian and U.S. intelligence.

Administration hawks urged more forceful action, including Predator missile strikes against terrorist hideouts in Syria. But the CIA and others valued ties to Syrian intelligence, and in January 2005 Mr. Bush decided instead to send then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to Damascus to read Mr. Assad the riot act. Mr. Armitage succeeded in getting the Syrians to turn over Saddam's half-brother, Sabawi Ibrahim Hassan, a ringleader of the insurgency. This token cooperation, along with episodic Syrian efforts to police their border with Iraq, served mainly to disguise their ongoing support for the insurgency.

By the time the insurgency reached its height in 2006, more than 100 jihadists were coming into Iraq from Syria every month. According to U.S. military estimates, they accounted for between 80% and 90% of the suicide attacks, mainly against Iraqi civilians. Thanks to a combination of the surge, the Sunni Awakening and better internal monitoring by the Saudis and others of just who was boarding planes to Damascus, that flow has now slowed to about 20 a month.

Yet the Syrians continue to show little interest in aiding the U.S., despite recent efforts by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to court her Syrian counterpart, Walid Al-Moallem. Those efforts include inviting Syria to last year's Annapolis conference on Arab-Israeli peace and face-to-face meetings in Egypt and, just last month, New York.

Little wonder, then, that even the Iraqi government, which has sought good relations with its neighbor, has lost patience. "This area was a staging ground for activities by terrorist organizations hostile to Iraq," said Ali al-Dabbagh, the Iraqi government spokesman, in reference to the American raid. "The presence in Syria of groups that are hostile to Iraq and who contribute to terrorist activity against Iraqis hinders the progress of our relationship."

We wonder how differently the war in Iraq might have gone had the U.S. conducted this kind of raid as often as necessary in 2003 and 2004, or if it had put Mr. Assad on notice that his survival in power was at risk if he continued to support the insurgency. Our guess is that the war would have been shorter, far less bloody for American and Iraqi troops, and less politically costly to Mr. Bush.

There's a lesson in these Bush Administration mistakes for the next President, particularly if he is Barack Obama. The Syrians interpreted diplomatic accommodation in the face of their anti-American acts as a sign of weakness to exploit. Mr. Obama has promised he'll engage Syria diplomatically as part of an overall effort to end the conflict in Iraq. If he really wants to end the war faster, he'll pick up on Syria where the Bush Administration has now ended.

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