

Missing in Action

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Articles & Testimony

It's hard to believe, but nearly three weeks into a major crisis involving Syrian sponsorship of terrorism in Iraq, the United States is feigning neutrality. That's a big mistake. Given that almost 130,000 U.S. troops remain in harm's way trying to bolster Iraq's stability, and given America's longstanding concern with Syria's role in fomenting violence in Iraq, the United States has a huge stake in supporting the Iraqi government's efforts to pressure Syria out of the terrorism game.

First, some background. On August 19, two massive truck bombs exploded outside Iraq's ministries of foreign affairs and finance. Up to 100 people were killed and several hundred more injured. Within days, Iraqi TV aired the confession of an alleged accomplice to the finance-ministry attack, who claimed that the bombings had been directed by two members of Saddam Hussein's outlawed Baath party living under Syrian protection. Iraq demanded that Syria extradite the men. Syria refused. Iraq recalled its ambassador to Damascus. Syria responded in kind.

Refusing to back down, Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki publicly accused Syria of serving as a terrorist safe haven and of harboring a long list of wanted insurgents. Maliki noted that 90 percent of foreign jihadists crossing into Iraq passed through Syria. For good measure, Iraqi TV broadcast a second confession, this one by a Saudi extremist who spoke in some detail of being trained by Syrian intelligence. In a subsequent briefing for foreign ambassadors, Maliki shared evidence of a meeting held outside Damascus in late July between Iraqi Baathists and Sunni extremists in the presence of Syrian security officers. By the end of last week, Maliki had dispatched thousands of police reinforcements to the border with Syria to guard against further infiltrations. He also lodged a formal request with the United Nations for an international investigation of the August 19 bombings and other terrorist attacks, with a special emphasis on the destructive role played by neighboring states.

Remarkably, as tensions escalated between Baghdad and Damascus, the United States had almost nothing to say. The one exception came on August 26, when the State Department spokesman was asked about the deteriorating situation. Reading from prepared guidance, he replied:

We understand that there has been sort of mutual recall of the ambassadors. We consider that an internal matter. We're -- we believe that, as a general principle, that diplomatic dialogue is the best means to address the concerns of both parties. We are working with the Iraqis to determine who perpetrated these horrible acts of violence. But as I said, this is -- it's an internal matter for both -- for the Iraqi government and the Syrian government. . . . We hope this doesn't hinder dialogue between the two countries.

An internal matter? Let's review a few essential facts. Iraq is a struggling democracy and putative ally of the United States, whose existence was forged in the crucible of an American-led war of liberation. Syria is a brutal anti-American dictatorship that, along with its closest ally, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a charter member of the State Department's "state sponsors of terrorism" list. Since 2003 -- despite multiple attempts by the U.S. and Iraq to resolve the problem through "diplomatic dialogue" -- the Syrian-Iranian axis has worked tirelessly to defeat the American project in Iraq and force a humiliating U.S. withdrawal.

Hundreds of unreconciled Baathists are harbored in Syria. Thousands of foreign jihadists have been welcomed at Damascus International Airport. After receiving money, training, and arms, they have been transported to the Iraqi border to engage in jihad -- resulting in the deaths of hundreds of American soldiers and thousands of Iraqis. Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) -- headed by President Bashar al-Asad's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat (sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury for his links to Iraqi terrorism) -- has been up to its eyeballs in this activity, its agents actively facilitating the work of al-Qaeda in Iraq's most lethal foreign-fighter networks.

True, as the U.S. military has reported, the flow of jihadists from Syria has slowed significantly in the last year. But this has far more to do with the success of the surge, the overall improvement in Iraq's security environment, and al-Qaeda's diversion of recruits to the more promising Afghan theater than it does with any Syrian measures. It's also true that Syria has in recent years conducted a harsh crackdown on Islamic extremists -- but only those who refuse to play by SMI's rules and stubbornly insist on targeting the Syrian regime in addition to that of Iraq. The objective of the Syrian crackdown has by no means been the elimination of deadly foreign-fighter networks per se, but rather their monopolization under the control of Syrian intelligence. The fact is that while there may be far fewer al-Qaeda-linked networks operating, those that remain continue to conduct lethal operations against Iraq with the knowledge, blessing, and assistance of the Syrian authorities -- just as the Maliki government has alleged.

Knowing all this, and bearing in mind all the United States has at stake in Iraq's success, how can the Obama administration adopt the posture of a disinterested bystander in this conflict? For the first time since 2003, an Iraqi government is prepared to stand up to one of its terrorist-sponsoring neighbors and to take the lead in rallying the international community to its side. And the U.S. remains on the sidelines? What message does that send about U.S. resolve to stand by allies who are under terrorist attack? If Iraq, whose independence has been purchased with immense sacrifice of U.S. blood and treasure, can't count on American solidarity, what lessons will be drawn by others who look to Washington for support and reassurance against aggressive tyrants?

Even if the United States can't confirm Maliki's claims about Syria's responsibility for the August 19 bombings, it could still easily craft a statement that makes clear whose side it stands on in light of Syria's violent legacy in Iraq. Something along the lines of: "While we are working closely with Iraq to determine exactly who perpetrated these specific attacks, the United States has longstanding concerns about Syria's role as a major transit point for foreign fighters and a haven for armed insurgents. We fully support Iraq's call for the international community to take vigorous steps to enforce U.N. resolutions that require Iraq's neighbors to prevent the transit of terrorists to and from Iraq, and of arms and finances that would support terrorists. Syria must be made to choose: It can become part of the solution in Iraq, or it can remain a major part of the problem. It cannot be both." A reassuring phone call from President Obama to Maliki expressing outrage and support would also be helpful, as would a commitment by Secretary of State Clinton to make the issue of Syrian and Iranian support for violent activities in Iraq a talking point in all her meetings at the upcoming U.N. General Assembly in late September.

It's hard, of course, not to wonder whether the administration's removal from the Iraq-Syria crisis is not heavily influenced by its ongoing efforts to engage the Assad regime. Before undertaking his own mission to mediate the crisis, Turkey's foreign minister spoke of an August 30 phone conversation with Secretary Clinton in which the need to insulate U.S.-Syrian relations seemed an important priority. The minister said that "there are extremely positive developments which have recently been emerging in relations between Syria and the U.S. -- developments which we also encourage. We attach great importance to this depression between Syria and Iraq not influencing bilateral relations between Syria and the U.S."

There certainly has been a significant effort by the administration to reach out to the Assad regime, though to what effect remains unclear. Six high-level delegations have visited Damascus in the past several months, pleading for greater Syrian cooperation on a host of Middle East problems. Two of the delegations have consisted of senior

military officers from U.S. Central Command seeking Syrian help in shutting down the foreign-fighter pipelines -- the second of which traveled just a week ahead of the August 19 Baghdad massacre. The administration has announced that, in response to Syrian demands, it will return a U.S. ambassador to Damascus and ease restrictions on the issuance of export licenses for Syria.

Though U.S. officials privately acknowledge that there has been little meaningful change in Syria's policies on Lebanon, Palestine, or Iraq, President Obama seems personally committed to wooing Assad. Rumors have circulated of a recent Obama letter underscoring his desire for improved U.S.-Syrian relations. Uppermost in the president's mind is said to be the goal of re-convening direct peace talks between Israel and Syria after an almost decade-long hiatus. It's easy to imagine, therefore, that the administration's hesitancy to enter the Iraq-Syria fray is being driven, at least in part, by its determination not to offend Assad and put at risk the chances for this kind of perceived diplomatic breakthrough.

That would be unfortunate. The United States never does particularly well, especially in the vortex of Middle East power politics, when it disregards the interests of its friends in an effort to appeal to its adversaries. The latter usually perceive such gestures as signs of weakness and indecision, and proceed to intensify their bad behavior. The former, meanwhile, spooked by such demonstrations of U.S. faithlessness, often end up cutting bad deals with America's enemies in an effort to save their own skins.

When it comes to anti-American dictatorships in general, and Syria in particular, history suggests that leverage and pressure, not reassurance and unconditional concessions, are the most reliable ways to ensure that diplomatic engagement advances U.S. goals. It's a lesson the Obama administration would do well to heed.

John Hannah, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, served as Vice President Dick Cheney's national security advisor from 2005-2009. ❖

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