

What Do the Sudan/Afghanistan Strikes Harbinger?

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Brief Analysis

The U.S. cruise missile attacks on the Sudanese chemical weapons precursor plant and the Afghanistan terrorist camps raises questions about the future direction of U.S. policy on several fronts: the emphasis on state linkages to terrorism, the means used to counter proliferation, the role of law enforcement and military force in counterterrorism and the willingness to use swift unilateral force to counter rogues.

How Important are State Linkages? President Clinton described the Afghan bases hit as being "operated by groups affiliated with Osama bin Laden, a network not sponsored by any state, but as dangerous as any we face." Is in fact Bin-Laden a new face of terrorism, unconnected to states? Terrorism with few direct links to states may not actually be such a new phenomenon; groups like the Irish Republican Army have long carried on terrorist campaigns with little if any state sponsorship. But Bin-Laden's group may be more dependent on governments than it likes to acknowledge. Only the approval of the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan allows Bin-Laden to openly operate camps there. And Bin-Laden can maintain facilities in Sudan only because that government is friendly to him. The

Sudanese government assuredly knew about the Bin-Laden-financed pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum and may have been involved with the plant; the Sudanese opposition has been telling the world about it for some time. Indeed, the de facto leader of Sudan, Hassan Turabi, says that Sudan will never forbid Bin-Laden to return, much as they hope he would stay elsewhere. It was this sort of relationship President Clinton may have had in mind when he warned yesterday as well, "countries that persistently host terrorists have no right to be safe havens."

Furthermore, Bin-Laden could be cooperating with other states. He has shown that he can work with those he despises -- he cooperated with the CIA-supported Afghan resistance for ten years -- and he is known to have met in recent years with Iraqi officials and possibly Iranian. State sponsors might find a self-promoter like Bin-Laden handy in order to provide them deniability.

A New Counterproliferation Policy? The United States struck a facility owned by Bin-Laden in an industrial outskirt of Khartoum, allegedly involved in the production of precursor chemicals for the deadly nerve agent VX. This aspect of the operation raises a number of questions concerning American counter-proliferation policy, and the future plans of the Bin-Laden organization. First, has the United States ever previously engaged in preemptive counterproliferation? The U.S. is suspected by some of having conducted a covert action against the Libyan chemical weapons plant at Rabta in 1990, which may have delayed the Libyan chemical weapons program and led to the relocation of the plant to Tarhuna. And during the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. struck at Iraqi chemical, biological, nuclear, and missile related facilities as part of the broader air campaign. This, however, is the first time that an anti-U.S. terrorist group is known to have been investigating chemical agents, has been struck by the U.S. (though there are also reports that the precursor production facility was a joint effort involving both the Bin-Laden organization and the Sudanese government). Second, is the U.S. likely to engage in preemptive counterproliferation elsewhere? This remains to be seen, though it is clear that this policy is different from the policy the U.S. has implemented vis-a-vis Iraq. Finally: if the Bin-Laden organization was producing precursors in Khartoum, where was the actual VX agent production facility (if one has already been established), and have the Bin-Laden organization and the Sudanese already produced VX? If so, is it still possible that non-conventional terrorist attacks by the Bin-Laden organization could occur?

What Role for Law Enforcement and Military Force? In explaining the rationale for launching between 75 and 100 cruise missiles at targets associated with the Bin Laden terrorist group, President Bill Clinton said, "There have been and will be times when law enforcement and diplomatic tools are simply not enough." That was quite a different tone than that used by Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon's June comment about the response to the terrorist bombing of the Khobar Towers, "This is the FBI's job. We don't ask the FBI to fly F-16's over Iraq and they don't ask us to take over their investigations." In response to the Nairobi and Dar as Salaam embassy bombings, the United States was prepared to act on the basis of intelligence information, without waiting for the conclusion of the law enforcement investigation and without revealing the evidence on which U.S. actions were based. Also, in this case, the United States acted before it was clear if the U.S. could get its hands on those responsible for the terrorist action, unlike the response to the Pan Am 103 bombing, where the United States waited years while the judicial wrangling continued. Another difference is that in the most recent case, the United States used military action against the sponsors, whereas for Pan Am 103, the United States concentrated on seeking criminal indictments for the bomb-throwers and foreswore military action against their Libyan sponsors. It is interesting to ask whether the response to the Nairobi embassy bombing will be judged more or less successful than that to the Pan Am 103 bombing.

Swift Unilateral Force Against Rogues? Yesterday's action raises numerous questions about future U.S. policy toward other rogue states in the region, and particularly toward Iraq. Unnamed administration officials claimed the attacks signal the start of a sustained war against terrorism, rather than a one-shot retaliation. Does this projected departure in U.S. policy mean further attacks only on Bin Laden-associated infrastructure, only in retaliation for attacks on U.S.

citizens and installations, only on terrorist bases in political-pariah states like Afghanistan, Sudan, and Libya -- or does it mean carrying the war to a wider venue that would include Syria, Iran, and Iraq?

> Viewed through the lens of Iraq policy, yesterday's strikes contain several distinguishing elements. The first and most obvious of these is the willingness to respond swiftly and to take unilateral action. Twice in the past year the U.S. response to Iraqi violations of the sanctions regime has been bogged down and ultimately neutralized by the Administration's perceived need first to repair a fractured international coalition. Second, the attack on a WMD-related site to which the U.S. and international inspectors otherwise have no access contrasts starkly with Washington's reticence regarding Iraq. There are clear differences in U.S. obligations in responding to attacks on U.S. targets and in responding to Iraqi violations of an international regime. Nevertheless, insofar as the attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan are judged successful, they raise the question of whether a similar approach toward Iraq would be appropriate.

A Word on Timing: The timing of this action is interesting, coming as it does in the midst of a dramatic developments in the long-playing Monica Lewinsky affair. Irrespective of whether domestic policy considerations played a factor in the latest counterterrorism initiative, that initiative should be examined on its own merits: was it the right thing to do? Overwhelmingly, the answer is yes. The issue now is how best to follow up.

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