

Syria Raid: Cheney's Farewell Gift to Bibi and London

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Nov. 1—On Sunday, Oct. 26, four U.S. combat helicopters raided the Syrian village of Sukkariyah, five miles from the Iraqi border, killing nine Syrians and wounding 14 others. While officially refusing to even acknowledge that the raid occurred, the Bush Administration defended the action, by claiming that their target had been a leading al-Qaeda smuggler named Abu-Ghadiya, a man who had been reportedly killed several years ago.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff came closest to admitting on Oct. 30, that the raid had taken place, while at the same time acknowledging it was a violation of international law; he told reporters: "International law must begin to recognize that part of the responsibility of sovereignty is the responsibility to make sure that your own country does not become a platform for attacking other countries. There are areas of the world that are ungoverned or ungovernable but nevertheless technically within the sovereignty of boundaries. Does that mean we simply have to allow terrorists to operate there, in a kind of badland, where they can plan, they can set up laboratories, they can experiment with chemical weapons and with biological weapons?"

Chertoff's flagrant defense of the Cheney doctrine of preventive war is but one feature of the story behind the Sukkariyah raid.

The attack, which U.S. intelligence sources say was carried out behind the back of the U.S. Central Command and the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, was ordered from the White House, and aimed to sabotage a series of international diplomatic initia-

tives—including some undertaken recently by senior U.S. officials.

In fact, all of the evidence points in the direction of Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Council Middle East chief Elliott Abrams, two of the Bush Administration's biggest proponents of regime change in Damascus, who have collectively sabotaged every Syrian peace initiative for the past seven and a half years, and remain committed to the overthrow of the Assad government. Ultimately, President George W. Bush would have had to sign off on the attack; but evidence indicates that Cheney and/or Abrams pushed for the authorization.

Task Force 88

The attack on the Syrian border village was, according to U.S. military sources, carried out by Task Force 88, a joint Anglo-American special operations unit, established shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks (initially, under a different task force designation), with the mandate to hunt down and eliminate al-Qaeda leaders. The unit is comprised of special operations commandos from the U.S. SEAL Team 6, Delta Force, British Special Air Services (SAS), and the CIA's Special Activities Division.

Task Force 88 is reportedly deployed through a separate chain of command, which bypasses the regional command structures, and has a global mandate to operate independently. The unit and its predecessors have been deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout Africa, according to various news accounts.

In the case of the Oct. 26 raid into Syria, there is good reason to believe that the action was taken behind the backs of chief of the U.S. Central Command Gen. David Petraeus and commander in Iraq Gen. Ray Odierno, the generals in charge of the U.S. operations in Iraq.

In fact, according to a recent ABC-News report, Petraeus had sought White House approval to make a trip to Damascus, to meet with President Bashar al-Assad and pursue closer counterterror cooperation with Syria. His request was rejected at the White House just days before the Sukkariyah raid.

Ambassador Moustapha Speaks

The Syrian Ambassador in Washington, Dr. Imad Moustapha, shed further light on the attack on sovereign Syrian territory on Oct. 30, in remarks to the annual meeting of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR). The ambassador revealed that, during the United Nations General Assembly session in New York City in September, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had requested a meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem. The mere fact that Rice sought to meet with her Syrian counterpart represented a dramatic reversal of U.S. policy. It was universally known that Cheney and Abrams had sabotaged any direct Syrian-Israeli peace talks, and had even pressed for Israel to reject a ceasefire during its disastrous July 2006 invasion of Lebanon, in order to continue the “shock and awe” bombing against Hezbollah.

The Rice-Moallem meeting did take place, and was followed a day later by a lengthy working meeting between Moallem and David Welch, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East. Welch was scheduled to travel to Damascus for even higher level meetings—until the whole initiative was scotched, days before the Sukkariyah raid.

A Two-Front War

The attack on the Syrian village came just days after Syria had sent an ambassador to Baghdad for the first time in decades, marking a new and positive direction in Syrian-Iraqi relations. After initial silence, the Iraqi government came out strongly denouncing the U.S. raid, demanding a full investigation, and insisting that the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and Iraq include an airtight guarantee that U.S. forces will never again use Iraqi territory as a staging ground for an attack on a neighboring country. Ne-

gotiations for the SOFA are proceeding with great difficulty, with a deadline of Dec. 31 when the UN mandate for U.S. troop presence in Iraq expires.

The Sukkariyah raid also came in the context of a vicious Anglo-Saudi covert program of arming and financing an al-Qaeda-type terror network, which has targeted Allawites in the Tripoli area of northern Lebanon, and Syrian Allawites across the border. According to senior U.S. intelligence sources, Syrian military intelligence has hard evidence that the Salafi terrorist provocations are being financed by Prince Bandar bin-Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States and Bush family intimate, who was the architect of the “Al-Yamamah” program between Britain and Saudi Arabia. Under Al-Yamamah, the British and Saudi intelligence services have amassed an offshore covert operations fund, that has financed wars and narco-insurgencies for more than 20 years, particularly targeting Africa, the Persian Gulf, the eastern Mediterranean, and South Asia.

Now, according to U.S. intelligence sources, the British-Bandar program is going after Lebanon and Syria.

A Gift for Netanyahu

Ultimately, the Cheney-Abrams caper aimed to back Israeli Likud Party head Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu. The day before the U.S. raid on Syria, Kadima Party leader and current Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni gave up on her efforts to form a new coalition government, and asked President Shimon Peres to set early elections for February 2009. She will be running against Netanyahu and Labor Party head and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

For London, and for the neocon apparatus still ensconced in the corridors of power in Washington, a Netanyahu victory would be the surest guarantor that no peace process in the region would move forward, and Southwest Asia would remain a cockpit for global confrontation, regardless of the new policy coming out of Washington.

In this regard, the relatively small-scale attack on Syrian territory is a signal of a much larger intention by London and its neoconservative assets in Washington and Tel Aviv—to spread chaos at the very moment that their post-Bretton Woods financial system disintegrates. It is this kind of recklessness that triggered two world wars during the previous century, and brought European civilization into a dark age during the 14th Century.