

Iraq's Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Syrian-Iraqi Border Since 2003

By James Denselow

THE PRECISE FRAMEWORK of Iraq's territorial integrity is currently facing both old and new challenges. In the northern Kurdistan Regional Governorate (KRG), problems of sovereign control are characterized by regular and often deadly incursions by the Turkish military in pursuit of PKK fighters. Iraq's borders with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are characterized by new and developing high-tech border security solutions.¹ The Iranian border dispute over the delineation of the Shatt al-Arab waterways resulted in British naval personnel being held captive in May 2007. The main focus of this article, however, is the Syrian-Iraqi border—the source of the majority of foreign fighter transit and therefore one of the driving factors shaping present U.S.-Syrian relations.²

The Syrian Connection

The triangle of Syrian-Iraqi-U.S. relations has proved an ever-changing narrative. It demonstrates Washington's ideological-strategic conundrum in dealing with Syria with respect to its Iraq policy. U.S. policy in Iraq has shifted away from reliance solely on hard power to becoming increasingly varied and pragmatic. Yet the desired nature of such engagement is somewhat disputed, currently consisting as it does of low-level regional conferences and Washington's "green light" to the establishment of improved and more public bilateral ties between the respective states.

Therefore, where does the narrative concerning the Syrian-Iraqi border troubles begin? Arguably, the most obvious trigger was the much debated Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) "Order 2," which disbanded the Iraqi security forces, including the 35,000-strong Iraqi border guard that

had been responsible for six international borders. Dr. Mustafa Alani, formerly of the Royal United Services Institute, described this action as having turned Iraq's 2,270 miles of international boundaries into an "open house."³ The opening of the borders also included the dissolution of trade barriers.⁴ The consequences of this, compounded by vagueness over the role and responsibilities of the replacement border force, have affected all of Iraq's borders and its relationships with its neighbors.

The collapse of the Iraqi state in 2003 saw the rapid emergence of a (largely Sunni) insurgency. The insurgency proved a multi-factional entity consisting of a variety of groups: former regime loyalists, disenfranchised Sunni Arab

“Syria has constructed 557 border posts, each spaced between 0.6 and 1.5 miles apart, as imposed by the topographical nature of the terrain.”

nationalists and the participation of al-Qa`ida-inspired foreign jihadists. The insurgent movement that emerged post-war constituted a largely indigenous force, with foreign elements playing regular—and deadly—cameo appearances as “force multipliers”: those carrying out comparatively rare but highly destructive suicide attacks.

How does Syria fit into this? In February 2006, John Negroponte, as director of U.S. National Intelligence, delivered the annual threat assessment to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. His appraisal of the Syrian role was illuminating. He described it as that of a “pivotal—but generally unhelpful—player in a troubled region.” The statement echoed that of historian Philip Hitti, who, in 1951, painted Syria as “perhaps the largest small country on the map, microscopic in size but cosmic in influence.”⁵ Moreover,

visiting London in September 2006, Syrian Information Minister Dr. Mohsen Bilal responded to a question as to why the United States should engage Syria by confirming that Syria did indeed have influence “beyond its borders.”⁶ Other commentators, however, have contrasted a Syrian inability to steer the region with a capability to “thwart the ambitions of others.”⁷

Synthesizing these views in order to define a policy approach to Syria suggests the importance of balancing Syria's potential constructive role with its pivotal role as a spoiler. The legacy of the policies of the Bush administration's first-term, however, was the transformation of border securitization, theoretically a functional issue, into a political dispute with the Syrian regime, with little input from either the nascent Iraqi government or its fledgling border guard.

Fences in the Sand

The Syrian-Iraqi border is 376 miles in length and, despite poor relations between Baghdad and Damascus in the past, has historically been more of a line on a map rather than any physical reality. In terms of population and socio-economics, it is worth emphasizing the general poverty of the borderland area, as well as recognizing the tripartite division in terms of physical and social dynamics:⁸

1. From the Jordanian tri-point to the Euphrates River, the border runs through full desert. It is a sparsely populated and challenging environment, home to small Bedouin settlements, nomadic farming and little else.

2. North of the Euphrates is a more built-up area with villages on and along the border line. Villages such as al-Baguz are examples of settlements whose houses virtually cross the international border line itself. Unsurprisingly, perhaps,

6 Mohsen Bilal, press conference, London, September 2006.

7 See “Syria and Iran: An Enduring Alliance – 1979 to Present,” speech by Dr. Jubin Goodarzi, Chatham House Event, October 2, 2006. Goodarzi is a Middle East analyst and author of *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

8 This information was obtained through participant observation. Living in the region, the author visited all sections of the border at various times between 2005 and 2007.

1 Harry de Quetteville, “Saudis Build 550-mile Fence to Shut Out Iraq,” *Daily Telegraph*, September 30, 2006.

2 The paper is based on research carried out in Syria during the past four years that examined the evolution of the geopolitics of this borderland as well as political relations between Damascus, Baghdad and Washington.

3 Personal interview, Dr. Mustafa Alani, March 2006.

4 “Let's All Go to the Yard Sale: Iraq's Economic Liberalization,” *Economist*, September 27, 2003.

5 Philip Hitti, *History of Syria, including Lebanon and Palestine* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 4.

this section of the border witnesses the highest incidence of illegal trade and border crossings.

3. The northeast corner of Syria, called the Jazira, is characterized both by a history of more organized border control measures on either side as well as by the worst incidence of national poverty. The greater security both at and behind the border itself is linked to internal Syrian concerns with the indigenous Kurdish population and its connections with other Kurdish groups across the borders with Turkey and Iraq.

Syrian Border Control Measures

Border security starts with a good, solid strategy along the border itself, reinforced by policing and intelligence-gathering behind it. Syria claims to have made significant progress in tightening security along its frontier since 2005. There are also some glaring negative characteristics of Syria's border security arrangements, which allow the issue of foreign fighters crossing from Syria into Iraq to remain. Syrian adjustments to their border have changed its functionality from a line in the sand to a semi-effective filter to the illicit transfer of people and/or materials.

Syria has constructed 557 border posts, each spaced between 0.6 and 1.5 miles apart, as imposed by the topographical nature of the terrain.⁹ Each post is manned by between five and eight soldiers equipped with personal weapons and one fixed heavy weapon.¹⁰ The main weakness of such a personnel-heavy approach is that the Syrians have neither the training nor the equipment to conduct patrols at night, when the largest percentage of illicit transit occurs.

The overall size of the Syrian border security force has hovered around 10,000, mostly troops that were redeployed to the east following the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon. To put this reinforcement in context, it should be noted that prior to the war, the guard on the Iraq border stood at only 700 men. Furthermore, both British and U.S. officials in Syria have admitted that the Syrians have deployed over time and that a "satisfactory" system of border coverage is in place.¹¹

9 Personal interview, Syrian defense official, Damascus, June 2007.

10 Ibid.

11 Personal interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, Au-

The Syrians also constructed a sand berm (earth fence) at a height of between 6-12 feet along large parts of the border in 2005. The rudimentary and temporal nature of the structure, however, has meant that large parts have suffered natural weathering, thereby reducing its effectiveness as a barrier. The berm is easy to traverse by foot and there have been frequent reports of 4x4s also gaining access.¹²

Two of the three official crossing points have been steadily improved, although security concerns at al-Qaim mean continued closure. Al-Yaroubiyeh, in the northeast of the country, and al-Tanf, close to the Jordanian tri-point, have seen steadily increasing flows of both people and goods in both directions. In particular, the need for building materials and other goods in the relatively stable KRG-controlled north has seen a boom in traffic at al-Yaroubiyeh. This is characterized by regular queues of more than 18 miles of lorries backed-up on the Syrian side.¹³ In addition, there is a rail service that travels across this border with two trains a day, mainly carrying freight cargo.

The Syrian Ministry of Interior has also introduced a new integrated computer system for all border entry points.¹⁴ This helps to compensate for the fact that Arab nationals are not required to have visas to enter Syria. In October 2005, however, the Ministry of Interior issued a circular informing immigration and security officers that non-permanent resident males between the ages of 18 and 30 could be denied entry under a number of conditions, including traveling alone, student or recent graduate status, residence in a country other than their own, or suspicious travel abroad.¹⁵

By 2006, according to security officials,¹⁶ Syrian efforts to control the border have resulted in the detention of more than 1,300 "extremists" of different nationalities who were handed over to

gust 2006.

12 Personal interviews, Syrian residents of Jazira area, Damascus, September 2006.

13 Personal observation, June 2007

14 J. Denselow, "From Stone Age to Space Age," *Syria Today*, May 2006.

15 Personal interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, May 2006.

16 Personal interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, August 2006.

their country of origin through embassies and security channels. Seventy non-Syrian nationals remained in Syrian detention and more than 4,000 Syrians attempting to travel to Iraq illegally had been interrogated.

The secretive nature of the Syrian regime means that there has been little follow-up confirming these statistics. The work that has been done to look at the numbers and backgrounds of would-be fighters has pointed to Saudi Arabia as the largest country of origin.¹⁷

Future Developments

Since 2003, the Syrian-Iraqi border has developed into a security filter that has reduced the number of would-be fighters gaining access into Iraq. In February 2008, General David Petraeus revealed that the number of foreign fighters traveling into Iraq to join al-Qa`ida had dropped by 50%. To see further improvements to the level of border security, there would have to be a warming in U.S.-Syrian relations—or at least in EU-Syrian relations—to address both the technological and the political shortcomings in securing the line.

James Denselow is a writer on Middle East geopolitical and security issues and a board member of the Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU). Mr. Denselow earlier completed the masters program in International Boundary Studies at Kings in 2004. Previously, he graduated in Geography from the University of Exeter. He worked as a researcher at Chatham House between 2003 and 2005. Mr. Denselow has visited and worked extensively in the Middle East. He writes regularly for The Guardian and has written articles for The World Today, The Daily Telegraph and The Yorkshire Post. He has appeared on numerous occasions to discuss Middle Eastern issues on the international television and radio media, including BBC World Service, Newsnight, Sky News, ITN and CNN. He is currently working on a book on The Geopolitics of Iraq with Richard Schofield to be published by Hurst in 2008.

17 Ian Black, "Saudis Make Up 41% of Foreign Fighters in Iraq," *Guardian*, November 23, 2007.

Colonel Joe Celeski discusses the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Special Air Warfare and the Secret Air War in Laos: Air Commandos 1966 - 1975: Truck routes were one lane with several bypasses and turnarounds (for northbound traffic), ranging from eight to twelve feet wide, and with improved surfaces to give them an all-weather capability. These operations took place all along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia and Laos and sometimes in the demilitarized zone. Cambodian defectors were used in a second operation code-named Pike Hill. Since these teams were supposed to be local enemy troops they moved along the roads and trails instead of the jungle. As a result, you will also find them identified occasionally as Road Runners. Since early March, the Vietnamese began to advance into the Valley. The problem was the extremely low throughput capacity of the roads to their rear, for units of two divisions and one separate infantry regiment, this capacity was critically lacking, the rear units worked at the physical limit, and still the pace of attack was very low. It is after these battles that the CIA will move on to a different strategy for working on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Now, operations on it will go without regard to the course of the civil war in Laos, in the form of raids and raids - which, due to the very nature of such operations, a priori could not lead to the interruption of the "Trail". Raids and raids will be a serious problem for the Vietnamese, but they will never become critical. Ho Chi Minh Trail Xe BangFie Ford, Road 23 used during the war to move supplies Southwards towards the war front. Sam Missile container abandoned in a village on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Resting Hut made from Bombie casings Ban Katah Ho Chi Minh Trail. Ho Chi Minh Trail-Fuel bunker in a cave, Built near the Ban Raving Pass. Ho Chi Minh trail, painting by Veteran Larry Chambers. Since we were sitting ducks where we were, I decided to try a running take off and attempt to reach translational lift by running (sliding along on our skids) down the hillside. I was surrounded by armored vehicles, so I looked for an opening between two vehicles that was large enough to fit, but ended up clipping off both of their FM whip antennas. Ho Chi Minh trail. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. The infamous and ingenious Ho Chi Minh Trail - Cameron Paterson. Vietnam War Documentary: Inside the Viet Cong - Tactics, Weapons, Tunnels, Uniform. Transcription. Since the road network within the trail system was generally dirt, the bulk of supply transportation (and the military efforts that they supported) were conducted during the dry season. Eventually, the bulk of the trail was either asphalted or hard packed, thus allowing large quantities of supplies to be moved even during the rainy season.[citation needed]. Week in Review|Iraq's Ho Chi Minh Trail. Advertisement. Continue reading the main story. The capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003 dealt the insurrection no such mortal blow, and American commanders know Mr. Zarqawi's capture or death might not either. "It's not about one guy," a senior officer said Friday. "It's more about the network of cells he has across the country. From Husayba on the Syrian frontier through Qaim and the sand-blown towns of Rawa, Haditha, Asad and Hit, onward through Ramadi and Falluja to Baghdad, the corridor has become the Ho Chi Minh trail of this war.

He picked it up and has had it ever since. Now, Fraser wants to return it to the soldier's family. Host Wes Cowan sets out to find out exactly whose diary this was and return it to its rightful owners. At the end of World War II, Vietnam declared itself an independent republic under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. France, however, set up another "independent" government in South Vietnam. Civil war broke out between the two governments and continued, in various forms, until the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. Why do you think more recent wars, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have not prompted protest and debate the way the Vietnam War did?

Going Further. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to write one-minute speeches for a Vietnam War rally. Colonel Joe Celeski discusses the Ho Chi Minh Trail in *Special Air Warfare and the Secret Air War in Laos: Air Commandos 1966 - 1975*: Truck routes were one lane with several bypasses and turnarounds (for northbound traffic), ranging from eight to twelve feet wide, and with improved surfaces to give them an all-weather capability. These operations took place all along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia and Laos and sometimes in the demilitarized zone. Cambodian defectors were used in a second operation code-named Pike Hill. Since these teams were supposed to be local enemy troops they moved along the roads and trails instead of the jungle. As a result, you will also find them identified occasionally as Road Runners. Ho Chi Minh trail. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. In the early days of the Ho Chi Minh trail, bicycles were often used to transport arms and equipment from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. Materiel sent from the north was stored in caches in the border regions that were soon retitled Base Areas, which, in turn, became sanctuaries for NLF and PAVN forces seeking respite and resupply after conducting operations within South Vietnam.[11]. Base areas. There were five large Base Areas (BAs) in the panhandle of Laos (see map). The Ho Chi Minh Trail was not so much a single route but a network. In general it started with the transportation arteries in North Vietnam, swung west into Laos, south parallel to the South Vietnamese border, and at various points crossed back to the east and into South Vietnam. Some of the trails also went directly across the DMZ and into South Vietnam. The Laotian part of the system continued further south into Cambodia and intersected with a network there which was known as the Sihanouk Trail. The routes consisted mostly of small trails for personnel movement and roads for vehicles.