

US FINALLY ADMITS AIR STRIKES IN IRAQ



It turns out that the mighty Cessna can indeed fire Hellfire missiles!

As events unfolded rapidly yesterday afternoon into the evening, we had several different stories about what took place in Iraq in response to President Obama authorizing air strikes against Islamic State, or IS. Air drops of humanitarian aid are undisputed. These were for a group of Iraqi civilians who became stranded after fleeing IS, fearing execution because they belonged to various non-Muslim religions. That air strikes took place during the night Thursday night in northern Iraq also is not disputed, but we had multiple reports on who was responsible. The New York Times initially said the strikes were carried out by US aircraft, but eventually relented and the current version of their story (with caveats to be seen below) quotes the Pentagon as saying the strikes were carried out by Iraq. At the height of the confusion, there was even a trial balloon floated that perhaps the strikes were carried out by Turkey, but that story didn't appear to catch on anywhere else.

The Pentagon's claim that strikes were carried out by Iraq seemed to me to be very unlikely to stand up, even at the height of the confusion last night, prompting me to tweet:

One torture video destroyed became 92.

Authorization for targeted airstrikes will become we bombed on Aug 7 (US time). Camel nose—>Tent

— Jim White (@JimWhiteGNV) August 8, 2014

I found Robert Caruso's description of options for support in Iraq to be especially interesting, especially this bit that he put forward just before we heard about the strikes:

Clandestine action will be key to success. Aircraft carriers decide what is on their deck and what is not. If you decide to covertly support Kurdish forces, naval aircraft can complete the circuit and return to deck. No landing in Turkey or Jordan in plain view of anyone with eyesight. No cell phone pictures from the flightline, which is exactly how the RQ-170 Sentinel was exposed. Whatever you say was in Iraq's airspace was there, and whatever you deny was in their airspace wasn't there because you decide what was there.

That seemed to ring especially true to me. After all, the "official" line from the Pentagon in the version of the New York Times story I am working from now says that Iraq carried out the strikes, but there seems to be little support for that story. Here is the Times parroting the Pentagon:

The official said the cooperation had included airstrikes by Iraqi forces against militant targets in the north.

The Times paid slight homage to their earlier report that the strike was carried out by the US:

Kurdish and Iraqi officials said that airstrikes were carried out Thursday night on two towns in northern Iraq

seized by ISIS – Gwer and Mahmoud, near Erbil. Earlier on Thursday, The New York Times quoted Kurdish and Iraqi officials as saying that the strikes were carried out by American planes.

The problem for the way the Times has the report this morning is that Iraq's air force is nearly non-existent. This report is only one month old (the slightly garbled text is in the original):

Iraq's air force has been very slow in getting to its feet. A handful of Seeker light observation aircraft with their distinctive bubble-shaped fronts, a few Comp Air light propeller aircraft, a couple of old, refurbished C-130E transports, and a slowly growing fleet of helicopters. A few Hawker Beechcraft King Air 350s have been ordered for transport and surveillance duties, and an RFP for armed counterinsurgency aircraft has only given Iraq a set of unarmed T-6B trainers. Even subsequent orders for F-16C/D fighters and L-159 advanced trainer and attack jets leave the Iraqi air force a long way from being able to secure Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While it continues to grow, the IqAF's primary duties remain troop/medical transport, light supply duties, and surveillance of roads and infrastructure.

Ah, but the centerpiece? To deliver Hellfire missiles, Iraq relies on....Cessnas:

The "Bird Dog" concept certainly fits the IqAF's profile and support capabilities, and Cessna 172s were initially slated to serve as a trainer aircraft. Unsurprisingly, statements from people on the front lines quickly revealed that larger Cessna 208B Caravan aircraft were picking up key

surveillance roles, and that a push was on to arm the planes with the same kinds of Hellfire missiles carried by more expensive attack helicopters and Predator drones.

The process has continued in close lockstep with the growth of the Iraqi Air Force's own professionalism and capabilities, and the Iraqis are now fielding armed "Bird Dog" aircraft as one of their primary domestic options for close air support.

So for us to believe the story from Thursday night, the strikes were carried out by Iraqi Cessnas firing Hellfire missiles. Any jet sounds ascribed to the attack would have to be the US jets that accompanied the aircraft that dropped the humanitarian supplies.

You probably noticed the absence of any jets in that list of Iraqi air assets. But there are perhaps a few jets. They are Russian jets and were provided by...Iran:

The latest delivery of Russian-made Su-25 Frogfoot aircraft to the Iraqi Air Force originated from Iran, according to a research analyst.

Joseph Dempsey, from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), provided open-sourced evidence that the close-air support and ground attack aircraft are using the same serial numbers used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which operate the aircraft.

We learned from the Washington Post last month that Iraqi jet pilots are being trained in the US. That report said the first two pilots would not be certified until "mid-August", so there are at most now two Iraqi pilots who are jet-certified. But they were trained on US F-16's and Iraq only has Russian jets right now. That

is partly because the base where the US intends to deliver F-16's is no longer secure:

A delivery date for the F-16s is uncertain, in part because Balad Air Base, which would have housed the jets, is no longer secure. On June 12, militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), now known as Islamic State, neared the base 40 miles north of Baghdad and forced U.S. contractors working on security there to leave the area.

It should come as no great surprise, then, that a fresh report from the Washington Post this morning admits to US aircraft carrying out strikes:

U.S. military aircraft carried out airstrikes on Islamist militants besieging Kurdish forces in northern Iraq, the Pentagon announced Friday.

The airstrikes targeted artillery being used by militants of the Islamic State extremist group against Kurdish forces defending Irbil, the Kurdish regional capital, the Pentagon said. It said the artillery was used "near U.S. personnel."

McClatchy has more detail from the Pentagon, with the US admitting only to strikes today:

The U.S. military has carried out airstrikes on artillery used by Islamic State militants near the Kurdish capitol of Irbil, the Pentagon said on Friday.

Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby said in a statement Friday morning that two F/A-18 aircraft dropped 500-pound laser-guided bombs on a mobile artillery piece near Irbil. The artillery had been used against Kurdish forces defending Irbil, near U.S. personnel, he said.

Kirby said the targeted strikes took place at 6:45 a.m. eastern time.

We will probably never know for sure, but I'm betting last night's strikes were carried out by the US, as well, but somehow the decision was made to keep them secret since they took place before Obama announced his authorization (but most likely after the authorization was granted).