

WHY NOT SEND 30,000 TROOPS TO SOMALIA?

Spencer focused on a really important part of the Afghanistan debate today—the struggle the Administration is having to claim that al Qaeda and its affiliates in Af-Pak pose a direct threat to the US.

“Syndicate of terror” was how Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton described the relationship between al-Qaeda and the various insurgent and terrorist networks across the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a position eagerly endorsed by her colleagues Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen. Anticipating the argument that the syndicate does not substantially threaten the United States at home, Clinton said that “at the head of the table,” like a “Mafia family,” sat al-Qaeda. And that means, she continued during her testimony today before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that al-Qaeda retains a capability to export terrorism to “Yemen, Somalia or, indeed, Denver” that is “unmatched” – a reference to the recently arrested Najibullah Zazi. Zazi’s case, which has yet to go to trial, shows a plot that traces “back to al-Qaeda-originated training camps and [a] training program” in Pakistan.

This is going to be one of the most controversial and disputed elements of the Obama administration’s strategy: the scope of the threat and the directness of the links between al-Qaeda in the Pakistani tribal areas; its strategic depth through the “syndicate” on each side of the Afghanistan and Pakistan border; and that syndicate’s capabilities to export destruction.

[snip]

I am told by senior administration officials that the autumn Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy was informed by 30 intelligence products, many of which were directly produced for the review, and several of which focused on the question of al-Qaeda's global reach from the Pakistani tribal areas. I'm also told that the military is increasingly looking at the nexus between al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, the Haqqani network in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and a rising extremist ally, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. But the link between that nexus and its present capability to reach the United States at *home*, to put it as neutrally as I can, has not been publicly demonstrated, and requires much further and deeper exposition – and, frankly, *proof* – than the administration has provided.

Now, Spencer is focusing on whether Najibullah Zazi will end up having been directly tied to Afghanistan or Pakistan. That's the case Hillary was making. But it's not clear the case is as strong as she suggested.

But I think there's another way to make the same point—the argument Russ Feingold has been making. Rather than focusing on whether Afghanistan is the headquarters of al Qaeda, Feingold focuses on all the other places where al Qaeda is active where we're not sending 30,000 troops (Feingold admits that Pakistan is important to al Qaeda right now, which raises the question of whether we're sending these 30,000 for Afghanistan or Pakistan).

BLITZER: OK.

Let's talk a little bit about why you oppose what the president is doing. What's wrong with his logic?

FEINGOLD: Well, it just doesn't add up

for me.

The president says, we're doing this. We're adding 30,000, 35,000 troops to finish the job. And I ask the question, "What job?" because the president has been so eloquent in pointing out our issue is fighting al Qaeda.

The argument falls apart when you realize that al Qaeda does not have its headquarters in Afghanistan anymore. It is headquartered in Pakistan. It is active in Somalia, and Yemen, North Africa, affiliates of it in Southeast Asia.

Why does it make sense to have a huge ground presence in Afghanistan to deal with a small al Qaeda contingent, when we don't do that in so many other countries where we're actually having some success without invading the country and attacking those that are part of al Qaeda? It doesn't make sense.

BLITZER: Well, here's how the president responds to that. I will play this clip from his speech last night.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: I guess the main point he's trying to make is, if — if the U.S. were to lose, let's say, in Afghanistan, just walk away, all those al Qaeda operatives who have crossed the border into Pakistan would simply go back to a pre-9/11 situation that the Taliban would control and give them that safe haven in Afghanistan.

FEINGOLD: That's an incredibly unlikely

scenario, in my view, that al Qaeda would find that to be the ideal place to return to. The notion that the Taliban would automatically welcome them with open arms is questionable, in light of the fact that in the first place they came into Afghanistan with the Taliban's blessing because they had a lot of money to pass around.

Now they are hiding in caves in Pakistan. And I'm wondering why the president thinks he shouldn't have ground forces and troops in countries all over the world that are not only potential, but current safe havens for al Qaeda. Why aren't we doing that approach of a huge land presence in those places, as in Northern Africa, in Yemen and Somalia? It doesn't make sense. Why this one place, where it's not the place that al Qaeda actually is headquartered in?

Feingold raises an important point—not just because al Qaeda is active in all these other places. But also because it presents the question of where the greatest push to American extremism has come from. Hillary, after all, was focusing on Zazi, who did train in Pakistan before coming home and attempting to make TATP explosives. But just last week, DOJ unsealed indictments against a bunch more Somalis from the Twin Cities, bringing the total number indicted there to 14.

Terrorism charges have been unsealed today in the District of Minnesota against eight defendants. According to the charging documents, the offenses include providing financial support to those who traveled to Somalia to fight on behalf of al-Shabaab, a designated foreign terrorist organization; attending terrorist training camps operated by al-Shabaab; and fighting on behalf of al-Shabaab.

Thus far, 14 defendants have been charged in the District of Minnesota through indictments or criminal complaints that have been unsealed and brought in connection with an ongoing investigation into the recruitment of persons from U.S. communities to train with or fight on behalf of extremist groups in Somalia. Four of these defendants have previously pleaded guilty and await sentencing.

The charges were announced today by David Kris, Assistant Attorney General for National Security; B. Todd Jones, U.S. Attorney for the District of Minneapolis; and Ralph S. Boelter, Special Agent in Charge of the Minneapolis field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"The recruitment of young people from Minneapolis and other U.S. communities to fight for extremists in Somalia has been the focus of intense investigation for many months," Assistant Attorney General Kris said. "While the charges unsealed today underscore our progress to date, this investigation is ongoing. Those who sign up to fight or recruit for al-Shabaab's terror network should be aware that they may well end up as defendants in the United States or casualties of the Somali conflict."

And it's not just in the Twin Cities, but the al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia appears to be growing in strength, as well.

A suicide bombing at a Somali student graduation ceremony which killed three government ministers and at least 16 other civilians on Thursday bore Al Qaeda's hallmark and further endangered the future of the country's wobbling administration, analysts says.

I'm not really suggesting we send 30,000 troops to Somalia. Rather, I think Feingold makes a very good point. We're not about to send 30,000 Americans to Pakistan to fight al Qaeda. We're not about to send 30,000 American to Somalia to fight al-Shabaab, either. But that seems instructive. We're fighting—out of necessity or political sensitivity—in more threatening havens for terrorism via entirely different means.

So why are we choosing Aghanistan, of all places, to send the troops?