

IRAQ CRISIS PUTS US ON SAME SIDE WITH ASSAD, IRAN QUDS FORCE

As I pointed out two weeks ago, US foreign and military policy is now so muddled that the primary response to any ongoing crisis is to choose a side to arm without thought to the inevitable blowback that will come from trying to pick winners and losers in otherwise internal affairs of far-flung countries. As the meltdown of the US-trained Iraqi military accelerates, we now see a situation whose supreme irony would be hilarious if only so many lives were not senselessly caught in the crossfire. Two developments of that sort stand out today.

First is the news that Syrian aircraft have carried out a strike against ISIS targets inside Iraq. Because Iraq has been pleading with the US to carry out attacks of this sort, it appears that early reports first assumed that US drones had been involved:

Syrian government aircraft bombed Sunni militant targets inside Iraq on Tuesday, further broadening the Middle Eastern crisis a day after Israeli warplanes and rockets struck targets inside Syria.

Iraqi state media initially reported that the attacks near Iraq's western border with Syria were carried out by U.S. drones, a claim that was quickly and forcefully denied by the Pentagon.

Think about that one for a minute. Last fall, the US was agonizing over how to find and arm only those groups fighting the Assad government in Syria that are "moderate" so that we didn't arm the then fledgling ISIS group. But now, inside Iraq, state media is initially unable to distinguish an action taken by Assad from one taken by the US. That is, Assad, whom we are fighting inside Syria, is on our side inside

Iraq.

The second development is a pairing of US interests with one we have been fighting for a much longer time. The New York Times brings us the latest on Iranian assistance to Iraq in its struggle against ISIS. The initial part of the report seems routine:

Iran is flying surveillance drones over Iraq from an airfield in Baghdad and is secretly supplying Iraq with tons of military equipment, supplies and other assistance, American officials said. Tehran has also deployed an intelligence unit there to intercept communications, the officials said.

The secret Iranian programs are part of a broader effort by Tehran to gather intelligence and help Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's government in its struggle against Sunni militants with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

But when the Times drills down to detail on how the assistance is being delivered, we get into more strange times:

Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the head of Iran's paramilitary Quds Force, has visited Iraq at least twice to help Iraqi military advisers plot strategy. And Iran has deployed about a dozen other Quds Force officers to advise Iraqi commanders, and help mobilize more than 2,000 Shiite militiamen from southern Iraq, American officials said.

Wait. Iran's IGRC, and especially its Quds Force, is supposed to be still absolutely opposed to the US and even drops comments trying to disrupt the P5+1 negotiations on Iran's nuclear program now and then. And yet, here they are, sending their head to Iraq to prop up al-Maliki as well as sending "about a dozen other Quds Force officers to advise Iraqi commanders".

Hmm. Advisers. That sounds familiar. Returning to the Washington Post story cited above:

Separately, the Pentagon said that 90 additional U.S. troops arrived in Iraq, part of a group of up to 300 military advisers that President Obama said last week he would deploy there to assess the situation before taking any further U.S. military action.

Imagine that. What many in the military would call one of our most dangerous enemies, the Quds Force, is providing exactly the same function in Iraq as US military members.

Hayes Brown and his colleagues at ThinkProgress prepared an amazing chart a couple of weeks ago describing the dizzying array of groups involved in Syria and their relationships with one another. If we were to try to add Iraq to that chart, I suspect that there simply isn't a way to make a graphic representation that would be able to show how the relationships between a number of these groups suddenly change from being opposed to one another to supporting one another as the border is crossed.

Lost in all of the hand-wringing over the Iraqi military's meltdown and advance of ISIS is a bit of really good news. On Monday, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons announced, to almost no fanfare whatsoever, that the last consignment of Syria's declared chemical weapons material left the country. While there are still issues to be addressed on recent use of chlorine bombs and the status of a few facilities and how Syria rendered them useless, this stands out as a huge achievement for diplomacy over military action. [Yes, the civil war in Syria still rages, but at least the US didn't lob its own missiles into the fray.] And note also that in the same vein, the P5+1 process is accelerating toward the end of the initial six month negotiating period next month over Iran's nuclear program. It would be a terrific victory for diplomacy if a final

agreement is reached next month, depriving the neocons and their friends of a chance to claim that only military action can stop Iran developing a nuclear weapon.

Those two bits of diplomacy, on Syria's chemical weapons and Iran's nuclear technology, provide the alternative to the "Which group do we arm?" approach. "How can we avoid military action while making the world a safer place?" is a question that Washington should put forward every time the war mongers try to arm another group and the success on Syria's chemical weapons (hopefully, along with success on Iran's nuclear technology) can be cited as clear evidence the approach works. As for the approach of arming groups, the cases of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, among many others, stand testament to the inevitable bad outcome.