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US crossing more borders in terror war?

The alleged incursions into Syria, and previously into Pakistan, could be risky.

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WASHINGTON - In the name of protecting its forces in Afghanistan and now Iraq, the United States appears to have begun to step up a bold gamble: conducting raids in countries it believes are not doing enough to fight extremist militants.

But taking such actions in Pakistan and now Syria may involve high diplomatic risks and offer limited military gain, say experts outside the military. "It could be morally justifiable, legally justifiable, and strategically a mistake," says Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

For the past few months, there have been reports of US airstrikes inside Pakistan as violence increased in neighboring Afghanistan. Over the weekend, the US reportedly conducted a strike inside Syria's shared border with Iraq.

Syrian officials say the US sent four US helicopters across the Syrian-Iraqi border on Sunday to carry out a raid against suspected militants. Damascus claimed that the attack, reportedly carried out by US Special Forces units, resulted in the killing of eight civilians near the border town of Abu Kamal.

Syrian officials described the incident as a violation of international law and a "terrible crime."

The Associated Press quoted an unnamed American military official who confirmed the operation, saying, "We are taking matters into our own hands."

As is typical in these cases, no US official would comment on the record on the alleged attack, including US Special Operations Command and Marine officials in Anbar Province in Iraq. Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman, refused to comment on the incident Monday.

Damascus and London called off a joint press conference scheduled for Monday in an apparent response to the alleged incident, the Times of London reported.

The US has reportedly begun cross-border attacks in Pakistan in recent months in pursuit of militants seeking haven in the border tribal areas. The New York Times reported last month that President Bush signed an accord in July allowing US Special Operations forces to conduct ground assaults inside Pakistan's borders. No American officials confirm the existence of such an accord.

It is not clear if the same accord, if it exists, would apply to Syria. But Sunday's alleged incident raises broader questions about the efficacy of the US's apparent new strategy on violating a country's sovereignty to hunt down terrorists.

Every incursion across a sovereign border carries risk, says Tony Cordesman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington. An incident can and often does stir national resentment toward the US. But if the US is to go after insurgents, it cannot allow them a haven just across a border.

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"If you do, you are basically saying that you have an open border forever," says Mr. Cordesman.

The trade-offs of these kinds of incursions must be assessed in terms of the value of the target and the "message" sent as a result of the raid, he says. Like Pakistan, Syria may be beginning to recognize the danger of extremist elements inside its own borders. "How willing it is to crack down and how openly it will do it is uncertain," Cordesman says of Syria. A comparison of the US approach in Pakistan with whatever it may be doing in Syria can only go so far, says Brian Fishman, director of research for the Combating Terrorism Center at the US Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. The US has not allied with Syria in the war on terrorism in the way it has with Pakistan, and Syria's political calculus about going after extremists within its borders is likely not to be viewed in the same way. That said, Fishman agrees that the increased security situation in Iraq may be forcing Syria to look at the dangers extremists pose differently.

Mr. O'Hanlon of Brookings says he will reserve judgment on whether this particular alleged raid is a good idea. But he asks, "Why now?"

Whatever the benefits for the US may be, says O'Hanlon, the raid comes more than five years after the US has been operating in Iraq and at a time when the inflow of foreign fighters into Iraq is down significantly from what it was even a year ago.

"We did not take this kind of action [then]," he says. "I would just wonder why, what has changed?"

Maj. Gen. John Kelly, the top Marine commander in western Iraq, told reporters Thursday that the Syrian border remains a problem. Syria, he said, has not done enough to prevent militants from entering Iraq from there.

Syria is "problematic," he says, "because it doesn't seem that there's much being done on the other side of the border to assist this country in terms of maintaining the border and the integrity of ... Iraqi sovereignty."

The Syrian border is one of the longest in Iraq and has little in the way of a physical infrastructure to prevent the cross-border activity that has contributed to some of the violence in Iraq, General Kelly said.

"We believe certainly ... [and] the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi intelligence forces feel that Al Qaeda operatives and others operate, live pretty openly on the Syrian side," he said.

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