

The General's Gambit

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On Jan. 8, 2008, Gen. David Petraeus's face was beamed onto a screen in the White House for a videoconference with President George W. Bush. The Iraq surge was beginning to wind down, and the general had an unusual proposal for the commander in chief.

"I've received three messages from Bashar al-Assad via Iraqi ministers stating that he'd like to meet," Petraeus told the president, according to a classified script for the presentation. "Stan McChrystal and I still want to go to Damascus to talk AQI only with Bashar al-Assad and solicit his help in stemming the flow of foreign fighters and taking on known AQ personalities who work in Syria."

AQI was al Qaeda in Iraq, the global terrorist group's Iraqi franchise, and Petraeus thought that if he and McChrystal, then the three-star commander of the secret special-operations forces in the region, confronted Assad, they just might convince him to curb the flow of Arab fighters traveling through Syria to join al Qaeda's campaign of suicide bombings in Iraq. The volunteers were Sunni extremists, after all, and their presence might eventually pose a threat to Assad, who ruled Syria with an iron hand with the help of a small elite drawn from the minority Alawite sect.

The point was underscored by U.S. intelligence assessments, which noted that the route the would-be jihadists took to the war was also their way out. Foreign fighters "who gained operational experience while fighting in Iraq return to their source countries through Syria," one such report observed. "These experienced fighters returning from jihad pose a threat to the Syrian regime. Although Syria currently is mainly a transit point for AQI, Syria will be an AQI target in the future. AQI ultimately intends to conduct attacks in Syria."

Compounding the problem, terrorist networks inside Syria were also overseeing the stream of fighters to Iraq with the knowledge and, U.S. military officers believed, support of Syrian intelligence, which hoped to direct the energies of the jihadists to Syria's neighbor to the east and bog down the Americans.

Petraeus and McChrystal were among the generals Bush trusted the most, but the president deflected the request. "Stay patient," he replied, according to notes of the meeting, and then changed the subject to troop levels. Petraeus never made the trip. Today, al Qaeda in Iraq has trained its sights on Assad, just as the intelligence reports predicted, becoming a small but deadly part of the resistance in an escalating civil war that has killed more than 20,000 people over the past year and a half. Perhaps the only thing that U.S. officials and Assad might agree on at this point is that al Qaeda should not have a foothold in the new Syria.

Abu Ghadiya

Although there were several networks that provided weapons, cash, and forged passports to al Qaeda's recruits in Syria, by far the largest was run by a figure who went by the nom de guerre Abu Ghadiya. Abu Ghadiya was born into a family of smugglers, and his real name was Badran Turki al-Mazidih. According to the profile drawn by the U.S. intelligence community, he was in his late 20s, with long black hair, a scar on his inner left calf, and a silver ring inset with a black stone that he wore on his left hand.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Abu Ghadiya was put in charge of funneling explosives and volunteers to al Qaeda in Iraq through Syria. Most of the al Qaeda recruits who made their way to Iraq did so on commercial flights that landed at Damascus International Airport. In 2007, foreign fighters were entering Iraq at an alarming rate, sometimes more than 100 per month, the vast majority through Syria.

“Once in Syria they seek accommodations in hotels typically located near large markets or mosques frequented by foreigners, allowing [them] to blend into the general population,” one classified military report noted. “Within a few days facilitators contact the recruits and escort them to safehouses where they await onward movement into Iraq. The safehouses often are clustered in neighborhoods in Damascus and Aleppo, but also are in border towns such as Abu Kamal and Qamishli.” Al Qaeda fighters who had been wounded in Iraq, it added, sometimes “received treatment at al-Nur Hospital in Damascus.”

According to U.S. intelligence, Abu Ghadiya split his time between southeastern Damascus, the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, and Abu Kamal, a Euphrates River town near the border with Iraq's Anbar province. Only occasionally would he venture inside Iraq — all of which posed a challenge for McChrystal's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) based at Balad Air Base north of Baghdad.

McChrystal believed that neutralizing Abu Ghadiya was a high priority, but his commandos could not cross the border into Syria without a presidential finding and the administrative cover of the CIA. They could only pick away at the foreign-fighter network once it crossed into Iraq. McChrystal's campaign against Abu Ghadiya's subordinates, called Operation Daytona, occasionally met with major successes. In 2007, for instance, McChrystal's troops killed Abu Muthenna, who served under Abu Ghadiya as al Qaeda in Iraq's “border emir,” an action that prompted Abu Ghadiya's own brother-in-law to step into the post as a replacement.

During the raid, at a site code-named “Objective Massey,” near Sinjar, an Iraqi town near the Syrian border, JSOC commandos discovered a 5-terabyte trove of documents that sharpened the military's understanding of who exactly was coming across the border. The personnel records, some of which were later publicly released, revealed that over the previous year, 90 percent of the fighters entering Iraq had done so through Syria. They also confirmed that Syria's military intelligence arm, led by Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, was well aware of Abu Ghadiya's network. Some foreign-fighter “facilitators” who had been caught by Syrian intelligence had been released and “continue facilitation

activities,” a military briefing on the Objective Massey documents reported. “Intelligence reports suggest [Syrian] authorities quite likely infiltrated multiple networks, most notably the Abu Ghadiyah network, to monitor threats to Syrian interests,” another document added a few months later.

Some U.S. officials were fed up with Syria’s tolerance of Abu Ghadiya’s presence and were pressing for action. At one point, Elliott Abrams, then the senior National Security Council (NSC) aide for Middle East policy, even suggested that the United States consider some form of covert or military action to temporarily halt flights into Damascus International Airport and send a signal that the foreign-fighter flow had to be stopped. “I thought there were many possible ways to do it,” Abrams recalled in an interview. “At one end of the spectrum was some military action, but I thought there were other ways too, from taking out the radar to taking down the computers through something covert. I thought we would only need to do it once, even briefly, to deliver the message to Assad that we would not tolerate him using the airport to ferry every jihadi in the world into Iraq.” But Gen. John Abizaid, then head of Central Command, opposed the idea, and it was dropped.

Petraeus’s pitch

After Petraeus was named as the top Iraq commander in 2007, he and Ambassador Ryan Crocker commissioned a wide-ranging internal review of military, economic, and diplomatic efforts by a “Joint Strategic Assessment Team.” The team was led by Army Col. H.R. McMaster and veteran diplomat David Pearce, and it included Robert Ford, the future ambassador to Syria.

The U.S. ambassadorial post in Damascus had been vacant since the Bush administration pulled out Ambassador Margaret Scobey in 2005 to protest what it was convinced was Syria’s involvement in the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Now, the review suggested a several-step diplomatic plan for how to reduce the foreign-fighter flow and engage Syria. “Failure to engage/leverage Syria deprives us of opportunity to create a wedge between Syria and Iran,” a briefing on the report noted. “Lack of contact also removes an instrument of influence in the effort to change Syria’s national interest calculations regarding support for former regime elements/insurgents.”

According to the plan, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would start the ball rolling by meeting with the Syrian foreign minister at a conference in Egypt in May. Other meetings between U.S. and Syrian diplomats in Europe might follow, with military briefers in attendance to provide evidence on the foreign-fighter problem. If the Syrians began to put the squeeze on al Qaeda fighters, Rice would declare at the opening of the U.N. General Assembly meeting in September that the United States would be sending back its ambassador. As an incentive, the United States would try to “leverage” Syrian interest in revenue it might derive if a crude oil pipeline from Kirkuk in Iraq to the Syrian port of Baniyas were restored. Rice met with her Syrian counterpart in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. But the deal the assessment team hoped for on foreign fighters never materialized. Then, in late 2007, Assad passed a request for a meeting with Petraeus through an Iraqi minister, the first of several he would make. Petraeus was not naive about Assad; he

wanted to take the Syrian leader up on the offer, fly to Damascus, and confront him with the fact that the United States knew about the foreign-fighter networks and his regime's support for them.

According to an official familiar with Petraeus's thinking at the time, the general planned to ask Assad whether allowing "poisonous snakes" to nest in his backyard might not backfire. Driving the point home, one intelligence report noted that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, al Qaeda's figurehead Iraqi leader, had "singled out Syria as an 'apostate regime'" and had criticized Hamas, the militant Palestinian group, for working with "the butcher and traitor, Hafez al-Assad," Bashar al-Assad's father.

McChrystal, whom Petraeus wanted to take along, supported the plan. Although Assad appeared to be calculating that supporting the likes of Abu Ghadiya was in his short-term interest, he might reevaluate the situation as JSOC and the rest of the U.S. military continued to rack up success after success against al Qaeda in Iraq. McChrystal was also inclined to the pragmatic view that trying to talk sense to an adversary was more productive than shunning him and that it was worth a try because nobody else in the U.S. government seemed willing to take on the mission. (Petraeus and McChrystal declined to comment for this article.)

In October, Petraeus began raising the prospect of traveling to Syria. In late October, he pitched the idea to Adm. William Fallon, then head of Central Command, which oversees U.S. forces in the Middle East, and to the White House's war czar, Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute. "I also told him [Lute] — as I recently told Fox Fallon — that I would like to travel to Damascus to discuss AQI and foreign fighter network issues with appropriate authorities there — and by virtue of my position in Iraq, could refuse discussions of any other topics (such as the Golan Heights, etc.)," he wrote in a classified letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates. "I realize there's a reluctance to engage with Syria until we have the bigger policy issues figured out; however, I fear that such thinking will preclude an opportunity to build on the progress we've been making against AQI."

For the next few months, Petraeus made his case to his superiors every four to six weeks like clockwork. "The further we get our hands around the throats of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the more I feel it is time for a brief visit by me and Stan McChrystal to Syria to ask for their help on stemming the flow of foreign fighters and taking on known AQ personalities who sometimes use Syrian soil," he wrote in a classified report to Gates at the beginning of January 2008, just before he broached the trip to Bush in the Jan. 8 videoconference. As Petraeus saw it, if the United States was going to be "all-in" in securing Iraq, that meant taking on diplomacy with Syria as well.

Stiff-armed

The White House, however, was not anxious for Petraeus to make the trip. Bush and his top aides were trying to isolate the regime. The isolation was not total: The Bush administration invited Syria to the November 2007 Annapolis conference on the Middle East (Syria sent its deputy foreign minister). The Bush administration, however, was determined to avoid anything that looked like "strategic engagement," a former senior

Bush administration official said, until the Assad regime began to change its “bad behavior.”

A high-profile visit from two senior U.S. generals, Bush aides thought, would undermine that policy and had little chance of success. In a classified June 2007 memo to Bush, Stephen Hadley, Bush’s national security advisor, had noted that the United States had intelligence that Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem had told his Iranian counterpart that their goal should be “the defeat of the United States.” Buttrussing this point, Hadley wrote in his memo that the CIA’s assessment was that the Assad regime had convinced itself that the United States needed Syria more than Syria needed the United States.

“We had all the sanctions we could pile on unilaterally, and we had a policy of isolating Assad — and it was working,” Abrams recalled. “For a long while, the EU foreign ministers stopped visiting Damascus. We were getting more European support because it was obvious that he was shipping arms to Hezbollah, continuing to kill Lebanese leaders, and making Syria the key entry point for jihadis going into Iraq. Petraeus kept saying he wanted to visit Damascus and talk to Assad, but it seemed obvious to me that would destroy the whole isolation policy. I delayed it to the extent I could at my level, but he kept pushing, month after month; he genuinely thought his visit would turn things around. Finally his request hit the president’s desk, and the president summarily dismissed the idea.”

After Petraeus was rebuffed in the January 2008 videoconference with Bush, the general joked about the rejection in a morning briefing with his staff. “Some woman kicked him under the table,” he quipped, implying that Rice had encouraged Bush to turn down the suggestion.

“I have offered to go to Damascus, but the last time I said that I was told to go sit under a tree until the thought passed,” Petraeus told his staff six months later. “Maybe it’s time to suggest it again.”

Petraeus was not the only one who was rebuffed. After Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met with Assad over the summer of 2007, Bush discussed the meeting with him in a videoconference. When Maliki suggested that Assad was open to engagement with the United States, the president shut him down. “Actions speak louder than words,” he responded.

Going Kinetic

By early 2008, al Qaeda in Iraq was losing steam, hounded by U.S. surge troops, by McChrystal’s commandos, and by the “Sons of Iraq” who had emerged as part of the tribal Awakening movement. But Abu Ghadiya was getting bolder. In January, intelligence reports noted that the al Qaeda leader was seeking “100 American military uniforms.” The reports suggested that Abu Ghadiya was interested in expanding beyond logistics and smuggling to planning attacks — possibly false-flag attacks like the one that had killed five U.S. soldiers in Karbala in 2007 when Shiite militia fighters used American-style uniforms to great effect. Other intelligence suggested that with Iraq

quieting down, Abu Ghadiya was developing links to al Qaeda's small, underground contingent in Lebanon.

By March, the NSC was deliberating over whether to finally "go kinetic" against Abu Ghadiya inside Syria with a joint JSOC and CIA raid or Predator drone strike. The need for action of some sort was drummed home in early May, when al Qaeda fighters crossed from Syria for a deadly raid on an Iraqi police checkpoint just across the border. "Compelling evidence suggests that Abu Ghadiyah, who runs the largest AQ foreign fighter network in Syria, was behind the murder of the Iraqi police officers," Petraeus wrote to Gates of the attack. "The operation could not have been carried out without the acquiescence of Syrian officials at some level."

The Americans pondered a number of options. One approach was to have Abu Ghadiya designated an international terrorist by the U.N. Security Council, but Muammar al-Qaddafi's U.N. representative blocked those efforts. In mid-July, according to notes of one NSC meeting, Israel offered to kill the al Qaeda leader. The previous September, the Israelis had destroyed a Syrian nuclear site in Deir ez-Zor, the same remote province where U.S. intelligence believed Abu Ghadiya spent part of his time. But the Americans did not accept the suggestion.

The next opportunity came a month later, in August, when a Predator strike was planned in Syria. The strike was set for the night of Aug. 13, but Abu Ghadiya moved and it was canceled. That same week, Interpol added Abu Ghadiya to one of its watch lists, and a JSOC team captured one of his deputies in a raid in Qaim, just inside Iraq across the border from Abu Kamal.

Finally, at the end of October, it happened. In a bold daylight mission on Oct. 26 that bystanders caught snippets of on video, MH-60 Black Hawk helicopters flew a JSOC team across the border to a building near Abu Kamal. The commandos entered the building, killed Abu Ghadiya, and took his body back in the helicopters, just as U.S. commandos would nearly three years later after they killed Osama bin Laden. The mission was structured remarkably similarly to the bin Laden raid — with JSOC commandos working under the CIA.

Because the operation had been run under the CIA rather than under military authority, the Bush administration's response to the raid was sharply different from the fanfare that had surrounded JSOC's capture of Saddam Hussein and killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi — deafening silence.

Three weeks after the Abu Kamal raid, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband met with Assad in Damascus. Miliband pressed Assad about his regime's assistance to al Qaeda in Iraq and asked why his government still referred to Sunni insurgents as the "resistance." Assad complained about the American strike. Why, Miliband asked the Syrian dictator, had his government itself not shut down Abu Ghadiya, especially since the United States had passed along intelligence about his activities?

But Assad refused to acknowledge that Abu Ghadiya had been in Syria, even though the U.S. commandos had taken away the al Qaeda leader's body so that they could prove it. Military action, he said, was a violation of Syrian sovereignty and had not been the way to solve the problem — “even if Abu Ghadiya was there.”

Blowback

As the end of Bush's second term approached, his administration's attempt to isolate Syria was set back by disclosures that Israel had been negotiating with Syria through Turkish mediators, while the Europeans started to engage Assad openly. Petraeus, who had been elevated to head Central Command by that time, thought that the White House had softened its resistance to his proposal for a visit and no longer objected to a trip to Damascus, his associates said. Abrams insists that Bush seemed as opposed as ever. But the question was academic — the trip Petraeus envisioned could not be carried out in the administration's waning days.

Flash-forward four years: As the Syrian crisis has unfolded over the past 18 months, al Qaeda's Iraqi franchise has been active in Syria, according to U.S. and Iraqi officials. Although they represent a small portion of the resistance, al Qaeda's fighters have been among the most battle-hardened, and their presence has undoubtedly complicated the Western response to the crisis. Some of the resistance's most effective tactics, like the use of huge buried bombs to keep government forces out of their areas, closely resemble those of al Qaeda in Iraq.

“[T]here is surely not in modern history a more perfect example of blowback than what is happening now in Syria, where Al Qaeda in Iraq's operatives have turned to bite the hands that once fed them,” Lt. Col. Joel Rayburn, a former Petraeus aide, wrote in a February article published by the Hoover Institution. “Having terrorized the Iraqis for seven years, the Syrian regime now cynically seeks the world's sympathy as terrorism's victims.”

A gnawing question is how a Petraeus visit might have affected the current situation. Some who served in the U.S. command in Baghdad during the Petraeus years believe that if the United States had persuaded Assad to dismantle much of the terrorism network in Syria in 2008, it might have hampered the flow of al Qaeda operatives to Syria over the past year. There would still have been a civil war in Syria, they say, but al Qaeda in Iraq would have had less of a role.

Others believe that al Qaeda would have found a way to take advantage of the chaos in Syria and get into the fight. Still another view is that any crackdown Assad might have mounted against al Qaeda would likely have had only a temporary effect without a broader accommodation between the Bush administration and the Syrian regime that was not to be. As for what Petraeus, now the CIA director, thinks? He's not talking.