



(b)(3)

UNCLASSIFIED - FOUO

Washingtonpost.com
September 29, 2003

U.S. Forces Watch Syria For Infiltrators

By Hamza Hendawi, Associated Press

HUSAYBAH, Iraq - With only a starry sky and distant twinkling lights to guide them, 12 men started to cross from Syria into Iraq, hoping to slip across the border undetected.

Their chances were slim. U.S. soldiers - using sophisticated night vision equipment in their tanks and in a helicopter hovering out of earshot behind them - saw the dozen would-be infiltrators immediately.

Two volleys from an American M1A2 tank - warning shots - was all it took to send the men scurrying back to the Syrian border town of Abu Kamal. It sits opposite the Iraqi frontier town of Husaybah, some 220 miles northwest of Baghdad.

"If you give me a mission to stop everyone from coming into Iraq, it's probably unrealistic," said Col. David A. Teeple, commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, which monitors the Syrian border. "But if you tell me to stop the flow of weapons, foreign fighters or high-value targets (wanted Iraqis) ... I'll probably do that."

The Bush administration has accused Syria of allowing militants to cross its border into Iraq to kill U.S. servicemen.

Guarding against cross-border infiltrators from Syria, where the regime has been harshly critical of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, has become a high priority in the battle against insurgents who are attacking American forces daily in the Sunni heartland to the west and north of Baghdad as well as in the capital itself.

According to L. Paul Bremer, America's top official in Iraq, the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq is the biggest obstacle to reconstruction efforts. From a total of 248 foreign fighters captured by U.S. forces, he said, almost half came from Syria. The detainees include 19 suspected members of the al-Qaida terror network.

For Teeple and his men, monitoring the 110-mile stretch of border with Syria - where smugglers move everything from livestock to assault rifles - is just part of a difficult and dangerous mission they've been at now for nearly six months.

The soldiers are responsible for all of al-Anbar Province, a vast and mainly desert region where U.S. forces have met stiffest resistance.

"They shoot at us without fail every time we drive through the town (Husaybah) at night," said Capt. Chris Alfeiri, whose unit - "Bandit Troop" - is part of a 3rd Armored Cavalry squadron stationed about 12 miles from Husaybah. "We call it the wild, wild west."

Like elsewhere in al-Anbar, where the 1.5 million people - mainly Sunni Muslims - are known for their fierce pride, strong tribal loyalties and deep piety, Husaybah's 125,000 people view their American occupiers with suspicion and, in many cases, outright resentment.

Some here blame the hard feelings and guerrilla attacks on what they claim to be heavy-handed tactics by the military as well as an ignorance of local customs and religious beliefs.

"When they first came, we gave them something of a welcome. They shook hands with our children and greeted everyone in the streets. Now they point their guns at us when they drive through the town," said Ayman Idham Aftan, a 26-year-old medical student from Husaybah.

"In my heart of hearts I really want to like them. But even if I do, my family and my tribe will go against me," he said.

"My men are culturally sensitive," declared Teeples. "But to an Iraqi, they're probably not culturally sensitive enough."

Speaking to The Associated Press at his office in a former Iraqi air force base 125 miles west of Baghdad, Teeples gave a detailed picture of what he believes to be the mechanism of the insurgency in al-Anbar, an area where he has spent more time than any other American commander.

He said criminals bankrolled by Saddam Hussein's loyalists were carrying out most of the attacks against U.S. forces in the province. Behind them, he said, was a network of financiers.

At the top of Teeples' own most-wanted list is Khamis Sirhan al-Muhammad, a senior member of Saddam's Baath party whom Teeples said was the source of the money.

"He is in this area somewhere," said Teeples, a native of La Crosse, Wis. "He is a man who received large amounts of money from Saddam Hussein and he's what we call a financier of anti-coalition activities."

Muhammad is No. 54 in the list of 55 Iraqis most wanted by the coalition.

Teeples has been in al-Anbar since April, stationed variously in Fallujah, 30 miles west of Baghdad, and Ramadi, 30 miles farther west, before moving to the sprawling al-Assad air force base.

He said foreign fighters still are coming into the country across the Syrian border, albeit in small numbers. On arrival, he said, they link up with local "facilitators" who train them, group them in cells, put them up in safe houses and then give them a mission for which they pay them.

Husaybah was the main entry point for the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Arab volunteers who poured into Iraq in the run-up to the U.S.-led war and who later put up the stiffest resistance to the U.S. thrust into Baghdad in April.

As elsewhere in al-Anbar, Husaybah's residents routinely refer to the insurgents as mujahedeen, or Muslim warriors. A graffiti message scribbled in English for the benefit of the Americans reads: "Slow death."

"See how much these guys love us?" said tank commander Sgt. Michael Adair of Junction City, Kan.