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Syrian airstrikes on ISIS mark new Strategy in civil war

By Mousab Alhamadee and Jonathan S. Landay

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After taking a hands-off approach toward the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria for several months, the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad has reversed course and launched air attacks against the Sunni Muslim extremist group inside both Syria and Iraq.

The policy shift complicates an already tangled situation for the Obama administration by effectively aligning Assad, whose ouster Washington is demanding, with the United States in the fight against ISIS, which was once part of al Qaida.

The attacks by Syrian jet aircraft are occurring as Iraq's air space appears to be growing crowded. The Pentagon this week confirmed that U.S. aircraft and unmanned drones are flying dozens of daily sorties over Iraq, collecting intelligence to share with the government of beleaguered Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki. Moreover, news reports said that Iran, which backs both Maliki and Assad, also is flying drone missions over Iraq.

Who is coordinating the Syrian air attacks on ISIS targets inside Iraq is unclear. The state-run Syrian news agency denied that Syrian aircraft had bombed inside Iraq. But local Sunni tribes denounced the attacks, and White House spokesman Joshua Earnest said the administration has "no reason to dispute" the reports of Syrian airstrikes in Iraq.

“The solution to the threat confronting Iraq is not the intervention of the Assad regime,” Earnest said. “In fact, it’s the Assad regime and the terrible violence they perpetrated against their own people that allowed (ISIS) to thrive in the first place.”

The U.S. supported Syrian exile opposition also denounced the air strikes, calling them part of a plot by Assad and Maliki to ignite a sectarian war “to preserve Iranian interests.”

“We expected this since the outset, as Assad is rewarding al Maliki for sending him sectarian militias to fight alongside his forces to suppress the popular uprising,” Nora al Ameer, a vice president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, was quoted as saying in the group’s Daily Newsletter.

The United States so far has declined to launch air strikes against ISIS, though Maliki has requested them.

The effectiveness of the Syrian strikes remains uncertain.

Opposition activists in Raqqa, the northern Syrian provincial capital that ISIS made its headquarters after capturing the city in April 2013, said that fierce regime bombing on Wednesday missed the extremists’ main bases and killed 30 civilians. Meanwhile, Syrian air attacks on Tuesday appeared to have done little to loosen ISIS control of the Iraqi border crossing of Qaim.

But Assad’s new focus on ISIS _ which analysts say likely came at Iran’s behest _ carries potentially important political advantages for the Syrian leader, including putting his Iraqi counterpart, Maliki, in his debt. As a result, Maliki may have to more closely coordinate the fight against ISIS with Syria.

Assad “is giving a hand to his ally, Maliki,” said Abu al Walid, an opposition activist contacted by telephone in Raqqa province.

Furthermore, Assad could point to the airstrikes to press his argument that he’s indispensable in the fight against radical Islam and demand that the United States and its European allies reconsider their demand for his departure from power as part of a settlement to Syria’s civil war.

Joining the drive against ISIS “could change his (Assad’s) relationship with the international community,” said Jessica D. Lewis, the research director of the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington research organization.

Other experts said that Assad’s switch may be nothing more than a reaction to the mounting danger the group poses in Syria now that ISIS has sent to Syria armored vehicles, artillery and other war materiel that it captured from the Shiite-dominated Iraqi army.

“Any recent strikes targeting ISIL along the Iraq-Syrian border would likely reflect Syrian concern over ISIL’s growing strength, but wouldn’t necessarily signal a paradigm shift on the part of the Syrian regime,” said a U.S. official, who requested anonymity because he wasn’t

authorized to speak publicly. ISIL is the shorthand the U.S. government uses to refer to ISIS, which is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Until ISIS began its drive earlier this month through northern and western Iraq following the capture of Mosul, the country's second largest city, Assad's forces generally had refrained from directly attacking the group's main strongholds in eastern Syria, concentrating instead on recapturing highways and urban centers in western and southern Syria that had been held by other rebel groups.

The largely hands-off policy toward ISIS prompted the U.S.-backed opposition to charge that Assad secretly was aligned with ISIS, which some opposition figure even suggested Assad had helped create to justify his assertion that the revolt against his family's 40-year rule was led by terrorists.

U.S. officials and other experts never have subscribed to that scenario. Instead, they contend that Assad ignored ISIS because its existence helped to substantiate his contention that Syria was being attacked by Islamic radicals and because its rivalry with other rebel groups weakened the entire rebel movement.

The first hint that the Assad government had reconsidered that approach came June 11, one day after ISIS seized control of Mosul, when anti-Assad activists reported that Syrian aircraft had bombed an ISIS column headed to Iraq near the Syrian city of Deir el Zour. Three days later, Syrian aircraft hit ISIS headquarters in Raqqa city hall. The Syrian Air Force then staged 11 airstrikes on ISIS positions after the insurgents seized al Mohasan, a town in Deir el Zour province that controls a road to the Iraqi border. Regime aircraft also hit ISIS bases in neighboring Hasaka province, which also borders Iraq.

On Tuesday, Syrian aircraft crossed the border and hit ISIS fighters who'd captured the Qaim border crossing and the nearby town of Ratba.

Opposition activists contacted in Raqqa described Wednesday's airstrikes as the most destructive to date. But they weren't accurate, resulting in the deaths of civilians, they said.

Zakaria Zakaria, a Syrian journalist from Hasaka province who now is based in Urfa, Turkey, said that the regime attacks could still be stronger.

"The regime could have been more serious in bombing ISIS," said Zakaria. "The regime can, if it wanted, cause real damage to ISIS, which hasn't happened until now."

ISIS, which U.S. intelligence agencies estimate has 3,000 fighters in Iraq and 7,000 in Syria, is fighting to establish an Islamist "caliphate" spanning the Iraq-Syria border that was demarcated by France and Britain following World War I.