

Israeli air raid in Syria heightens Middle East tensions

Chris Talbot
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The incursion by Israeli jet fighters into Syrian air space on September 6 is the most serious provocation the Olmert regime has carried out since the 34-day attack on Lebanon last summer. The planes flew deep into Syria and were reportedly engaged by Syrian air defences at Tall al-Abyad, near the Turkish border.

There are differing explanations about what exactly happened and considerable secrecy surrounds the event. What is clear is that the Israeli action is supported by the Bush administration in the United States.

The incident must be seen as part of the escalation of US military aggression in the Middle East. It coincides with the news that the US is building a military base near the Iran-Iraq border and the decision to deploy more British troops on that same border (see “British troops in Iraq deployed to Iranian border”).

A strike at Iran’s ally, Syria, under these conditions of heightened tension has the most ominous implications. Whatever the precise nature of the operation, it indicates that US plans for a wider Middle Eastern conflagration, whether launched directly by the US or by its Israeli allies, are well-advanced.

Some experts have suggested that the Israeli operation was an attempt to gather intelligence on a new air defence system that Russia has supplied to the Syrians. Others speculated that it may have been a mission intended to test a northern route for bombing missions against Iran. Others have claimed that it was an attempt to stop Syria from supplying arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

However, media speculation in the West—Syria has given almost no details of the Israeli raid and the Olmert government has imposed a blanket security blackout on the Israeli media—has increasingly settled on the claim that the Israeli jets bombed a facility housing North Korean-supplied nuclear materials.

Both Syria and North Korea have denied any nuclear exchanges.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have run reports claiming that North Korea has given Syria nuclear weapons technology. Andrew Semmel, acting deputy assistant secretary of state for nuclear non-proliferation policy, was quoted in the *Washington Post* as claiming that there are North Koreans in Syria. “There are indicators that they do have something going on there,” he said.

An anonymous US expert claimed that the Israeli raid targeted an agricultural research facility in northern Syria near the Turkish border at which the Syrians are allegedly attempting to extract uranium from phosphates. The attack was linked, the expert claimed, to the arrival of North Korean ship on September 3 in the Syrian port of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast.

Other experts in the field of Middle East politics and nuclear weapons technology are highly sceptical of these allegations. But former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton has been only too eager to spread the story. Bolton, a public opponent of US nuclear talks with North Korea and unofficial spokesman for the faction within the Bush administration, led by Vice President Dick Cheney, that is pushing for war with Iran, has claimed that Syria and Iran have become “safe havens” for Korean nuclear technology.

The claim that Korea has exported nuclear technology to Syria bears all the hallmarks of the WMD fabrication that preceded the invasion of Iraq. The idea that a ship could bring nuclear material all the way from North Korea to the Mediterranean through waters bristling with US and other NATO warships is unlikely.

The three media outlets that first promoted the claim of a Syrian-North Korean nuclear connection are all

identified with those sections of the American ruling elite pressing for military action against Iran. The *Wall Street Journal* published an article a week before the Israeli raid, citing claims by Bolton that Pyongyang was selling nuclear technology to Damascus. Fox News Channel then reported US suspicions that North Korea was secretly transferring technology and equipment for enriching uranium to Syria. The *Washington Post* subsequently quoted international experts who claimed that Israel had targeted a delivery from North Korea that had arrived three days before the air strike.

The *New York Times* reported September 16 that supporters of Vice President Cheney “have argued, privately, that the United States should encourage Israel to consider a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities.”

The article continued: “An Israeli airstrike in Syria last week kicked up speculation in the Iranian press that Israel, in alliance with the United States, was really trying to send a message to Iran that it could strike Iranian nuclear facilities if it chose to do so.

“If I were the Iranians, what I’d be freaked out about is that the other Arab states didn’t protest’ the airstrike, said George Perkovich, vice president for global security and economic development studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. ‘The Arab world nonreaction is a signal to Iran that Arabs aren’t happy with Iran’s power and influence, so if the Israelis want to go and intimidate and violate the airspace of another Arab state that’s an ally of Iran, the other Arab states aren’t going to do anything.’”

The Israeli operation is a significant shift in its approach. Only recently, Israel and Syria were insisting that neither had aggressive intentions towards the other and were engaged in discussions on the Golan Heights.

Syria’s response to the Israeli action was strangely muted. It made a public protest at the UN, but it did not call on the Security Council to condemn the violation of its air space. Syria’s cautious response suggests that the Assad regime is unwilling to inflame the situation and wants an accommodation with Israel and the US.

A retired Israeli diplomat quoted in Al-Jazeera who has been negotiating with Syrian officials expressed his concern over the Israeli operation. Alon Liel said, “I see here an Israeli message that is very aggressive and I’m worried.”

Whether or not Syria is to be targeted as well as Iran,

the Israeli action was meant to send a clear message that it is vulnerable and should not attempt to help Iran in the event of a US attack.



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