Israel's air raid on Syria: another threat to Iran

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Further details have leaked out about Israel's unprovoked air raid on Syria on September 6, underscoring its primary purpose as a menacing warning not only to Syria, but also Iran. Amid an escalating campaign orchestrated from the Bush administration over Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs, the operation was a graphic demonstration of Israel's capacity to carry out its previous threats to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities.

Briefing the Israeli parliament's foreign affairs and defence committee on Sunday, military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin boasted that Israel had recovered its "deterrent capability" following its disastrous war in southern Lebanon last year. Outlining the scope of Israel's capacity, he declared: "The new situation affects the entire region, including Iran and Syria." Yadlin then elaborated on the alleged threat posed by Iran and its nuclear programs, concluding that current UN sanctions "are not having much of an effect".

Yadlin gave no details of the September 6 air raid and cautioned committee chairman Tsahi Hanegbi against discussing reports of the strike. Israeli authorities have slapped a total blackout on the operation, making it illegal for the media to discuss details provided by Israeli sources. As a result, the only reports in the Israeli press are based on accounts published in the international media.

Hanegbi absurdly excused the blanket censorship, declaring that it was needed to ease tensions. "The more we bite our tongue, the better it will go," he told Israeli radio. The more obvious and ominous reason is that the Israeli government wants to keep everyone, particularly Iran and Syria, guessing as to its next move. A comment in *Haaretz,* entitled "Silence works for Israel", noted with satisfaction that the lack of comment also allowed other governments, including in the Middle East, to say nothing and ignore Syria's protests—in effect, backing the raid.

Several accounts of the raid based on Israeli sources appeared in the British and US press last weekend. While the details must be treated with caution, the articles indicate that a major operation was involved. The warplanes penetrated deep into Syrian territory close to its border with Turkey, near the town of Tall al-Abyad. Turkish authorities retrieved two jettisoned fuel tanks inside their territory, provoking a mild rebuke to Israel from Ankara. Turkey, which has longstanding military ties with Israel, has in the past allowed the Israeli air force to exercise over its territory.

In an article entitled, "Was Israeli raid a dry run for attack on Iran?", the *Sunday Observer* explained: "Far from being a minor incursion, the Israeli overflight of Syrian airspace through its ally Turkey, was a far more major affair involving as many as eight aircraft, including Israel's most ultra-modern F-15s and F-16s equipped with Maverick missiles and 500lb bombs. Flying among the Israeli fighters at great height, the *Observer* can reveal, was an ELINT—an electronic intelligence gathering aircraft."

The information, from an Israeli participant in "Operation Orchard", points to a sizeable and sophisticated operation, involving Israel's war planes equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks with the range required to reach Iran. In January, Israeli military sources leaked details to the *Sunday Times* of the preparation of two air force squadrons for an attack on Iran that would include the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Commenting on the September 6 operation, a retired Turkish general told the *Turkish Weekly*, "Syria is very close to Israel and you likely don't need auxiliary tanks for a flight to a neighbouring country... Using this long

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flight equipped with tanks, Israel tested its ability to fly to Iran."

Israeli authorities maintained a complete silence on the operation, but rather far-fetched stories began to appear in the US media of a Syria-North Korean nuclear connection. The Bush administration had undoubtedly been informed of and supported the Israeli operation. An unnamed US expert told the *Washington Post* that the Israelis had attacked an agricultural research facility in northern Syria that was involved in a nuclear project. Other media reports claimed that North Korea was exporting nuclear technology to Syria. Last weekend's *Sunday Times* in Britain published claims that Israeli fighters, guided by an elite commando team on the ground, had struck and destroyed a target that was in some way connected to a Syrian nuclear weapons program.

As if to confirm that the story had been concocted for political purposes, its most vocal publicist has been former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton. Since resigning from office, Bolton has functioned as a de facto public mouthpiece for Vice President Dick Cheney and his White House faction, who have been pressing for military action against Iran. As far as these warmongers are concerned, the Syrian-North Korean nuclear connection is perfect: firstly, it undermines the US-North Korean nuclear deal struck this year, to which they are opposed; secondly, it puts pressure on Syria to break from its ally Iran; and thirdly, it feeds into the hysteria they are whipping up over Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs.

However, as with the WMD lies told by Bolton, Cheney and others to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, scant evidence has been offered. Various experts have pointed to the extremely limited character of Syria's existing nuclear programs. The *Sunday Observer* article commented: "There has also been deep scepticism about the claims from other officials and former officials familiar with both Syria and North Korea. They have pointed out that an almost bankrupt Syria has neither the economic nor the industrial base to support the kind of nuclear program described, adding that Syria has long rejected going down the nuclear route."

Syria and North Korea have both emphatically denied any joint nuclear project. An editorial in Syria's state-owned *al-Thawra* nervously warned of the implications: "This is nothing new, accusing Syria of things that it has nothing to do with. But what is new is the scope of the new lie and the way it is being peddled. The latest accusation could be a prelude to more attacks on Syria." Syria's own low-key response to the Israeli operation raid could well be a signal that it has understood the threat from Israel and the US.

As well as to Syria, the September 6 air raid operation was designed to send a warning to Tehran: that Israeli is ready, willing and able to strike Iranian nuclear facilities at any time. That was certainly the conclusion that the *Sunday Observer* reached, commenting: "Whatever the truth of the allegations against Syria—and Israel has a long history of employing complex deceptions in its operations—the message being delivered from Tel Aviv is clear: if Syria's ally Iran, comes close to acquiring a nuclear weapon, and the world fails to prevent it, either through diplomatic or military means, then Israel will stop it on its own.

"So Operation Orchard can be seen as a dry run, a raid using the same heavily modified long-range aircraft, procured specifically from the US with Iran's nuclear sites in mind. It reminds both Iran and Syria of the supremacy of its aircraft and appears to be designed to deter Syria from getting involved in the event of a raid on Iran—a reminder, if it were required, that if Israel's ground forces were humiliated in the second Lebanese war, its airforce remains potent, powerful and unchallenged."

The raid took place as the Bush administration was escalating its threats against Iran, demanding tougher UN sanctions over Tehran's failure to shut down its nuclear facilities, and building up forces along the Iraq-Iran border to counter Iran's alleged "meddling" in Iraq. Washington's silent approval of Israel's military provocation is one more warning that the White House is quite willing and able to launch a military adventure of its own against Iran.

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