

US and Israel maintain menacing silence over air raid on Syria

Peter Symonds
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More than a month after Israeli warplanes attacked a target in northern Syria, there are few firm facts and a great deal of conjecture about this unprovoked act of aggression. No official statements have been made by the Israeli government or the US administration. Syria has protested the attack but provided scant information. Earlier this month, Syrian President Bashar Assad said only that an unused building “related to the military” had been bombed on September 6.

The *New York Times* on Monday added to the speculation by claiming that the site was “a partly constructed nuclear reactor apparently modelled on one North Korea has used to create a stockpile of nuclear weapons fuel”. Based on information from “unnamed American and foreign officials”, the article provided limited detail, stating that it was still unclear how much progress had been made on the reactor, what was to have been the reactor’s purpose, or what North Korea’s role had been.

The article followed previous leaks in the US press claiming that Israel had struck a nuclear facility. In particular, former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton stridently condemned what he claimed was North Korean-Syrian nuclear collaboration. This demonstrated, he declared, that Syria should be inscribed in the Bush administration’s “axis of evil” and that negotiations with North Korea over its nuclear programs should be ended.

All these allegations, which have been denied by Syria and North Korea, have to be treated with considerable caution. The capacity of Israel and the US to spread misinformation and fabricate lies and half-truths as the pretext for war is well-established. The latest accusations against Syria recall US and British claims prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq that Saddam Hussein had plans to import uranium from the African country of Niger. As it turned out, the documents used to “prove” the case were forgeries.

What is significant is that the *New York Times* establishes that the Bush administration was well aware of the Israeli plans for an air strike. According to the newspaper’s sources, the partly constructed Syrian reactor had been detected earlier in the year by satellite photographs after being brought to American attention by Israel. “There wasn’t a lot of debate about the evidence,” a US official told the newspaper. “There was a lot of debate about how to respond to it.”

The story also confirmed that Bolton was acting as the public mouthpiece for Vice President Dick Cheney and the Bush administration’s hard-line militarist faction. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Robert Gates “were particularly concerned about the ramifications of a pre-emptive strike in the absence of an urgent threat.” Cheney and supporters not only backed the Israeli attack but insisted that the US had to take a far tougher stance against both Syria and North Korea.

Behind closed doors, the *New York Times* explained, “Vice President Dick Cheney and other hawkish members of the administration have made the case that the same intelligence that prompted Israel to attack should lead the United States to reconsider delicate negotiations with North Korea over ending its nuclear program, as well as America’s diplomatic strategy towards Syria, which has been invited to join Middle East peace talks in Annapolis, Md., next month.”

The Bush administration undoubtedly gave tacit approval for the Israeli attack, but its subsequent actions indicate that it did not regard the Syrian target as a serious threat. The US took part in six-party talks with North Korea earlier this month, and reached an agreement with Pyongyang over the disabling of its nuclear facilities. At the same time, Rice reaffirmed an invitation to Syria to attend the Middle East talks in Annapolis—an offer that Damascus is unlikely to take up at this stage.

The most striking aspect of the *New York* is the most obvious: all factions of the Bush administration, along with the newspaper itself, accept Israel's naked aggression against Syria as legitimate. In 1981, when Israeli jets attacked and destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak, even the right-wing Reagan administration, in response to international outrage, felt compelled to issue a formal protest. Today, however, there is not a murmur of opposition from the White House, the Democrat congressional majority, or the media over Israel's latest act of war.

Even if Syria had been constructing a small nuclear reactor, its actions would not have been in breach of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Signatories are required to demonstrate that their programs are for peaceful purposes and to notify the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when new facilities are due to be completed and come on line. The IAEA stated on Monday that it had no evidence of any undeclared atomic plant in Syria.

The real purpose of the raid and the subsequent tight-lipped official silence was to send a menacing message throughout the region that the Israeli state can and will strike without warning against any target as it sees fit. In the wake of its humiliating military setback last year in southern Lebanon, Israel has been determined to reassert its military superiority. While refusing to speak about the nature of the Syrian target, a senior Israeli official told the *New York Times* the strike was intended to "reestablish the credibility of our deterrent power".

Moreover, as several analysts have pointed out, the chief target of the Israeli threat was not so much Syria, but Iran, which has a far more sophisticated nuclear program. Since the beginning of the year, the Israeli government has been warning that it will not tolerate the completion of Iran's nuclear facilities. Like the US, Israel has dismissed Iranian claims that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes. The *New York Times* reported in June that Shaul Mofaz, Israel's transportation and former defence minister, told US Secretary of State Rice that any sanctions regime had to end Iran's uranium enrichment program by the end of the year. If not, he warned, Israel "would have to reassess where we are".

What little information is available about the September 6 raid suggests that the Israeli air force deployed its most advanced jets, which are capable of striking Iran and returning. The Turkish military recovered at least one jettisoned long-range fuel tank inside its territory. An article last month in the *Sunday Observer* suggested that

the operation was a ~~trial~~ ~~run~~ for an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. By probing Syria's defences, the Israeli air force may have gained important data about Iran's capabilities. Both Syria and Iran bought and installed Russian air defence systems this year.

More significantly, Israel was able to test the political waters. Its September 6 attack provoked no criticism from the European powers or in the Middle East. Since the start of the year, the Bush administration has been seeking to consolidate a coalition of so-called moderate Middle Eastern countries against Iran—including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states. By directly attacking Syria, Israel, with US support, may have been seeking to weaken Syria's current alliance with Iran.

What was actually destroyed on September 6 in northern Syria remains the subject of debate. Efraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, told the *Los Angeles Times* this week that the site was an unlikely venue for a project of such significance. "The location of such a site I don't think would be the best place. It's too close to Turkey and Iraq. I have my doubts," he said.

A Middle Eastern security analyst in Washington told the *New York Times* last week that Turkish officials had travelled to Damascus to present the Syrian government with a dossier on what was believed to be Syria's nuclear program. The analyst said Syrian officials had vigorously denied the intelligence and said the Israelis hit a storage depot for strategic missiles.

US analyst David Albright told Reuters on Monday: "A very real question is whether Syria is technically and financially able to build such a reactor. It would be hard to justify an air strike on a facility so early on in construction and, if supplied by North Korea, unlikely ever to be finished. Israel may have wanted to send a signal to Iran. The US wants to scare Iran [off nuclear work] and this air strike might have been a way to do it, and explain some of Israel's secrecy."

Much more significant than the identity of the Syrian target is the menacing threat of a broader war that could engulf the region.



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