

# US intelligence on Syrian reactor: justifying last year's crime to prepare for new ones

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More than seven months after Israeli warplanes destroyed a building in Syria's eastern desert, the Bush administration has released intelligence purporting to prove that Damascus was building a nuclear reactor at the site, with the assistance of North Korea, as part of plans to build an atomic bomb.

The CIA intelligence briefing last Thursday raised more questions than it answered, and fuelled considerable speculation about its timing and purpose. In all the commentary, however, the most obvious point is deliberately obscured. The US is belatedly justifying an unprovoked and illegal act of aggression by Israel, undoubtedly sanctioned at the time by Washington, that had the potential to spark a new war in the Middle East.

A White House statement hypocritically warned that Syria's covert construction of the reactor was "a dangerous and potentially destabilising development for the region and the world", carried out in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is an open secret, however, that Israel, with Washington's tacit approval, has covertly manufactured a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons, refused to sign the NPT and blocked International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its facilities.

IAEA director general Mohamad ElBaradei has previously criticised Israel for bombing Syria, rather than providing information to the IAEA. Last Friday he issued a statement, which "deplored the fact that this [CIA] information was not provided to the agency in a timely manner" in line with the international body's responsibilities under the NPT. ElBaradei declared that he regarded "the unilateral use of force by Israel as undermining the due process of verification that is at the heart of the non-proliferation regime".

Syria has again denied that the building destroyed by the Israeli air strike last September housed a nuclear reactor and that Syria has any intention of building nuclear weapons. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told that media that the air strike "hit a military site under construction, not a nuclear site as Israel and America claimed... Does it make sense that we would build a nuclear facility in the desert and not protect it with anti-aircraft defences? A nuclear site exposed to [spy] satellites, in the heart of Syria and in open space?"

While it is possible that Syria was constructing a nuclear reactor, none of the evidence made public by the CIA provides definitive proof. Nor does it show that the facility was "nearing operational capacity". Even more tenuous are the claims of North Korean

involvement and the existence of a Syrian nuclear weapons program. The presentation includes satellite images of the site before and after the attack, along with photographs of the building's exterior, of the internal construction and of North Korean and Syrian nuclear chiefs standing side by side. The accompanying commentary claims that the building and internal construction match the design of North Korea's nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

Given the Bush administration's lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction that were used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, none of this "evidence" can be taken at face value. In an editorial on Saturday entitled "The curious Syrian nuclear affair", the British-based *Financial Times* pointedly commented: "It would appear to justify retroactively the Israeli air strike on the site in Syria's eastern desert last September. But given the US and Israel's recent record in these matters, it could also be just another dog and pony show."

Jon Wolfstal, from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), pointed out that the photo of North Korean and Syrian nuclear scientists was not conclusive proof of collaboration. The reactor shown in the photographs was an old British design that was available on the Internet, he explained. It should also be noted that none of the photos, which almost certainly were supplied by Israeli intelligence, were dated.

As the CIA acknowledged in passing, construction dates back to at least 2001. The *New York Times* reported last October that a photograph released by the private company GeoEye showed that construction on the building was well underway in September 2003. Jeffrey Lewis, an analyst with the New America Foundation, told the newspaper that "it was surprising from the photos how little progress had been made at the site between 2003 and 2007". Obvious questions arise. If a reactor was under construction, when exactly did Israel and the US first know about it? And did Syria call a halt, in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq?

US claims that Syria has a nuclear weapons program rest on the following dubious argument: North Korea and Syria are collaborating, Pyongyang used plutonium from its reactor to test a crude nuclear device in 2006, and therefore Damascus must be doing the same. But as several commentators have pointed out, there is no indication from the satellite photos that Syria was constructing a processing plant needed to extract plutonium from spent reactor rods. Moreover, it is not clear where Damascus was to get the fuel for a nuclear reactor. And finally, there were no

signs of high levels of security that would be expected around such an installation.

In a lengthy article in February entitled “What did Israel bomb in Syria?” veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh commented: “In three months of reporting for this article, I was repeatedly told by current and former [US] intelligence, diplomatic and congressional officials that they were not aware of any solid evidence of ongoing nuclear weapons programs in Syria.” High-level Syrian officials confirmed that North Korea had contracted to construct the building, as it had done on other projects, but denied that it was a nuclear reactor.

The obvious question is: why has the Bush administration chosen to release its intelligence now, seven months after the Israeli strike? The two immediate targets are North Korea and Syria. However, amid the increasingly belligerent US propaganda campaign against Iran, last week’s dossier on Syria is also a menacing threat against Tehran, which, in defiance of US demands, is continuing to build a uranium enrichment plant as well as a nuclear research reactor.

In the case of North Korea, the latest revelations cut directly across a deal struck to dismantle Pyongyang’s nuclear facilities in return for a normalisation of relations and economic aid. The agreement was reached in late 2006 at six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan. While going along with the arrangement, Bush administration hardliners such as Vice President Dick Cheney continued to regard the deal as an unacceptable concession to North Korea.

The talks have reached a turning point. North Korea has shut down its nuclear reactor and associated plutonium reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. But Pyongyang is insisting that Washington show good faith by removing the country from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and easing economic sanctions before North Korea makes a full declaration of nuclear facilities and starts to dismantle them. Pyongyang’s alleged “proliferation” to Syria is a convenient means for cutting across negotiations.

In a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 15 entitled “Bush’s North Korea Capitulation”, former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, derided a plan to allow Pyongyang to “acknowledge” US concerns about proliferation, declaring it looked “like something out of Bill Clinton’s or Jimmy Carter’s playbook”. A right-wing push is also underway in Congress to demand a full accounting of North Korea’s activities before its removal from the terrorist list.

The CIA allegations are also a threat to Syria, which is now linked to the remaining two members of Bush’s “axis of evil”—Iran and North Korea. By backing last September’s attack, the Bush administration is effectively giving Israel a green light for similar raids. The US and Israel routinely condemn Syrian influence in neighbouring Lebanon and demand an end to its support for Hezbollah.

While not directly implicated in American claims about a Syrian nuclear reactor, Iran is undoubtedly at the top of the list of US targets. For months, the Bush administration has been escalating its rhetoric over Tehran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs and support for anti-occupation militia inside Iraq. During his tour of the Middle East last month, Vice President Cheney referred to Iran

as the “darkening cloud” over the region, underscoring the Bush administration’s oft-repeated threat to maintain “all options on the table”.

Iran was at the top of the agenda when Cheney spoke with leading Israeli officials. Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu bluntly told the media: “I spoke to him [Cheney] about the need to remove the Iranian threat before [Tehran] arms itself with a nuclear bomb.” When later asked by an American reporter if Israeli leaders had asked for approval for an Israeli attack on Iran, Cheney dismissed the suggestion as “hypothetical” but did not deny it outright. Since Cheney’s trip, Israel has conducted its largest-ever civil defence drill, during which National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer threatened “the destruction of the Iranian nation” in response to any attack by Tehran.

US accusations of Iranian “meddling” in Iraq have become more strident. Saturday’s *New York Times* noted that “the administration has, in fact, discussed whether to attack training camps, safe houses and weapons storehouses inside Iran that intelligence reports say are used by the [Iranian] Quds Force to train fighters, according to two senior administration officials.” While such strikes are off the agenda “for now”, the newspaper reported that General David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, had ordered the preparation of a public dossier to expose Iran’s covert activities inside Iraq.

In comments last Friday, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, underscored the threat. He stated that the Pentagon was planning for “potential military courses of action” against Iran, which he branded as an “increasingly lethal and malign influence” in Iraq. While describing a conflict with Iran as “extremely stressing”, Mullen explained that it was not impossible for the US military. “It would be a mistake to think that we are out of combat capability,” he said.

The agenda behind the CIA briefing is provoking alarm in European ruling circles. The *Financial Times* concluded its weekend editorial on an ominous note. After referring to the assassination of a top Hezbollah commander in February, the newspaper declared: “The air strike and the hit could also be interpreted as warnings to Iran to cease its regional meddling and nuclear ambitions—and maybe scare Damascus off its alliance with Tehran. One video show in Washington does not shine a light through the regional murk. But it should remind us there is too much dry tinder out there for anyone to be careless with matches.”

Far from pulling back from threats against Tehran, however, the CIA’s “video show” justifying last September’s air strike is another warning from the US and Israel. If a Syrian site can be struck without warning then Iran’s nuclear and military facilities can suffer the same fate.



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