

Israel attacks Russian plan for Syria's chemical weapons

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16 September 2013

Publicly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had sought for days to present Israel's response to the delayed assault on Syria as restrained and supportive. He did not want to appear as though Israel is pushing for war, and banned his ministers from expressing their opinions on the subject.

President Shimon Peres defended President Barack Obama's decision to seek congressional approval for a military attack on Syria, saying he was "confident the US will respond against Syria... I think it's permitted to carefully consider a decision beforehand rather than after, and I trust him on anything connected to Israel."

Netanyahu had said little on the Syrian situation, beyond stating that Israel is not involved but would respond severely if attacked. Unusually, he did not give the traditional Jewish New Year interviews so as not to have to answer any questions about Syria or the possibility of a US attack. He cancelled a planned trip to Rome last week to meet Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta and US Secretary of State John Kerry, who had planned to be there at the same time, in order to manage the political line in Israel. Instead, Kerry flew to Israel yesterday to discuss the Syrian crisis with Netanyahu.

Israel's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Benny Gantz, claimed that Obama's announcement to seek Congressional approval had taken Israel by surprise despite reports that Netanyahu was warned in advance—but uttered not a word of disappointment or criticism.

This show of unity fell apart when the Obama administration opted to engage in the Russian government's proposal for Syria's chemical disarmament, hoping that the process would create a new pretext for war.

Obama's decision was made necessary by

overwhelming popular opposition to war. But Netanyahu and his right-wing allies have been unable to contain their anger and derision. Unidentified Israeli officials were widely quoted mocking the decision as undermining the image of American resolve. They said that if Obama was hesitating in confronting Syria, he would be even more hesitant in striking at Iran, a far more complicated move. This would, they argued, leave Israel to act alone.

Netanyahu took a swipe at Obama, saying that Israel could not trust anyone on security issues. Speaking to naval officers at a graduation ceremony in Haifa, he said, "The main rule that guides me in my actions as prime minister and on which I am very particular, is: If I am not for myself, who will be? If we are not for ourselves, who will be? We are for ourselves."

He hypocritically called for Syria to be stripped of its chemical weapons and for those who had used chemical weapons against innocent civilians to be punished, passing over Israel's own use of chemical weapons against Lebanon and the Palestinians.

Any perceived hesitancy to respond to the chemical weapons attack on a Damascus neighbourhood, which Netanyahu attributed without a shred of evidence to the Assad regime, would be exploited by Tehran, the Israeli prime minister asserted. "The message that is received in Syria will be received loudly in Iran," he added.

Speaking on Sunday, Kerry reassured Israel that "the threat of force remains". "Make no mistake, we have taken no options off the table."

Such comments are indicative of the gangster-like mentality of Israel's political establishment. They underscore the point that for Israel, the civil war for regime change in Syria, fomented and sponsored by Washington's allies in the region, has nothing to do with any perceived threat from Syria. Indeed, Syria has

not fired a shot against Israel since the 1973 war.

Rather Syria is but the means to remove Hezbollah as a political and military force in Lebanon, further undermine Palestinian Islamic forces that are supported by Iran, and isolate and promote regime change in Iran.

The chemical attack on August 21 was a provocation staged by Washington's proxies, the armed Islamist militias led by Al Qaeda, to this end.

Israel knows this perfectly well. Indeed, DEBKAF, a military intelligence web site with close links to Israel's security services, has acknowledged that Al Nusra possesses chemical weapons. Citing Turkish sources, it reported last June, "Turkish police round up Al Qaeda-linked Syrian Al Nusra terrorists in raids in Istanbul and southern cities near the Syrian border: Turkey police Friday arrested 12 members of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Al Nusra Front. Found in their possession were four and a half pounds of sarin nerve gas, hand guns, grenades, bullets and documents for what the Turkish daily *Zaman* reported was a bomb attack on the Turkish town of Adana."

Israel has for months claimed that the Assad regime is using chemical weapons to provide Washington with a *casus belli*. It has also threatened that any attempt by Syria to use chemical weapons against Israel will meet with a devastating attack aimed at ending Assad's rule once and for all.

On Wednesday, officials reiterated that were Damascus to send chemical weapons or any other weapons that could strengthen Hezbollah against Israel, Israel would intervene to stop the transfer. As if on cue, a Syrian rebel leader has come forward to allege that the Assad regime has transferred chemical weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Saudi Arabia newspaper *al-Watan* reported that Kamal al-Labwani, a member of the CIA-backed Syrian National Coalition, claimed that a defector from one of the Syrian government's chemical weapons research centres had provided evidence that showed the regime had transferred roughly one metric ton of VX nerve gas to Hezbollah.

According to a CNN report on Thursday, Free Syrian Army leader Salim Idriss said that the Syrian government had begun moving its chemical weapons stockpiles to Lebanon and Iraq.

This transparent attempt to undermine the Russian plan for Syria's chemical weapons to be destroyed under UN supervision was dismissed by Baghdad,

which rejected Idris's claim outright. Israeli officials told CNN they had no indication that Assad had moved chemical weapons to Lebanon or Iraq.

At the same time, the *Wall Street Journal* mounted a separate effort to torpedo the proposals to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons and put them beyond use. It cited "American and Middle Eastern officials" as saying that the military unit running Syria's chemical weapons programme had begun dispersing its stockpile of chemical and biological weapons to as many as 50 sites around the country.

"It also raises questions about implementation of a Russian proposal that calls for the regime to surrender control of its stockpile," the paper concluded.

The lack of any credible proof cannot be allowed to stand in the way of Washington's war plans. At the very least, such reports pave the way for Israel to mount attacks on Syria and Lebanon that would spark a far wider conflagration.

Israel has already carried out several operations in Syria and Lebanon this year. In July, Israel targeted the Syrian naval base of Safira, near the large Mediterranean port of Latakia, which had recently received a shipment of Russian-built Yakhont anti-shiping cruise missiles.

Israel has ramped up its war preparations. Iron Dome anti-missile batteries have been moved to central and northern Israel, defence batteries activated, and 1,000 army reservists were called up. So many Israelis queued up to get gas masks—the last issue was for the 1991 Gulf War—that supplies ran out. Officials admitted that they only had enough to supply 60 percent of the population, a clear indication that the Israeli government and military intelligence viewed the probability of Syria using chemical weapons against Israel as extremely low.



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