

Targeting Syria

By Khody Akhavi | September 26, 2007

Nearly three weeks have passed since Israeli warplanes conducted a mysterious raid against an as yet unidentified target in northeast Syria. Details of the incident have been slow to come, as officials from both countries have remained tight-lipped.

In the absence of a clear picture of what happened in the early hours of September 6, speculation in the U.S. mainstream media has grown as to what exactly the Israelis targeted, and why Damascus—assuming it was the target of an unprovoked attack—has been so muted in its response.

Was Israel's attack aimed at testing Syria's radar defenses? Did the air strike seek to disrupt arms shipments to Lebanon's Hezbollah? Was it a dress rehearsal for a possible future strike on Iranian nuclear facilities?

Feeding the speculation, a familiar clutch of George W. Bush administration hawks appear to be suggesting that Israel's apparent air strike may have targeted a joint North Korea-Syria nuclear venture.

Writing in the opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal* more than a week before the incident, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton asserted: "We know that both Iran and Syria have long cooperated with North Korea on ballistic missile programs, and the prospect of cooperation on nuclear matters is not far-fetched."

"Whether and to what extent Iran, Syria, or others might be 'safe heavens' for North Korea's nuclear weapons development, or may have already benefited from it, must be made clear," he wrote. Bolton resigned his position at the United Nations in late 2006 and currently serves as a senior fellow at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute.

Comments made by a State Department official on September 14 fanned the flames further and bolstered the neoconservative argument. Andrew Semmel, acting deputy assistant secretary of state for nuclear nonproliferation policy, told the Associated Press that the United States believes that Syria may have a number of "secret

suppliers" to obtain nuclear equipment as part of a covert program.

The Bush administration has maintained a hardline policy stance on Syria. It has not had high-level diplomatic relations with the country since the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. The United States has alleged that Syria played a role in the assassination.

Neoconservatives appear to be reigniting a political narrative that fits neatly with the infamous cast of the "axis of evil." While not explicitly mentioned, Syria has often been designated as a junior partner of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea's "reign of terror" because of its support for Islamist opposition groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas in Gaza.

"They want to torpedo the North Korea deal, they have clung doggedly to making sure that there is no cooperation in Syria, and they're the same people who got us into this mess in the Middle East in the first place," said Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator and senior fellow at the Washington-based New America Foundation.

The focus on North Korea comes as the United States prepares to implement a deal to end that country's nuclear weapons program, a diplomatic approach that has drawn the ire of policy hawks like Bolton.

"Bolton represents the crowd that is very distressed that the United States has declared defeat in North Korea by trusting the North Koreans. They would like to scuttle that agreement," wrote Syria expert Josh Landis, on his widely read blog, www.syriacomment.org.

"While doing it, anything they can drag in to boost the notion of weapons transfers between Korea and Syria

and Iran will be icing on the cake. Israeli planes were trying to get the goods,” he wrote.

Some U.S. analysts have been very dubious of an actual Syrian nuclear threat, describing the speculation surrounding the incident as a manufactured stunt aimed at advancing a neoconservative agenda.

“This story is nonsense. The *Washington Post* story should have been headlined ‘White House Officials Try to Push North Korea-Syria Connection.’ This is a political story, not a threat story,” said Joseph Cirincione, director for nuclear policy at the Washington-based Center for American Progress, according to an interview with *Foreign Policy*.

“Once again, this appears to be the work of a small group of officials leaking cherry-picked, unvetted ‘intelligence’ to key reporters in order to promote a pre-existing political agenda. If this sounds like the run-up to the war in Iraq, it should. This time it appears aimed at derailing the U.S.-North Korean agreement that administration hardliners think is appeasement. Some Israelis want to thwart any dialogue between the United States and Syria,” he said.

Cirincione previously served as director for nonproliferation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Israeli media—bound by an army censor that restricts coverage of the incident—has relied largely on foreign press reports to reconstruct the incident.

“The Israeli press have gone out of their way to say to the Israeli public, ‘we know [the story], we’re gonna selectively quote from the overseas rumors, and you can

fill in the gaps,’” Levy told the Inter Press Service. “[The press] was dismissive about the reports about arming Hezbollah, and gave greater weight to those connecting Syria and North Korea.”

Syria lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations Tuesday over the “flagrant violation” of its airspace last week by the Israeli warplanes, which Damascus claims dropped munitions on its territory. Israel and Syria have technically been at war since 1967, when Israel occupied the Golan during the Six-Day War.

The air strike follows a summer that saw heightened tension between the two countries, a period that provides the necessary context for the eventual Israeli action.

“Something will come to light and will make it clear to everyone—the Israelis were sitting on intelligence,” said Levy.

Experts are still unsure of what that intelligence entails, and whether is it “nuclear,” “non-conventional,” “chemical,” or nothing of the sort. Regardless, in most of the narratives, the North Korea connection remains a salient point.

But whatever happened in the early hours of September 6 does not appear to have soured Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s efforts to restart negotiations with his adversary. Olmert announced last Monday that Israel was prepared to hold negotiations with Damascus, without preconditions and without ultimatums, according to the *Jerusalem Post*.

Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.

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