

Why did Israel attack Syria?

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Israel's air strike on northern Syria earlier this month should be understood in the context of events unfolding since its assault last summer on neighbouring Lebanon. Although little more than rumours have been offered about what took place, one strategic forecasting group, Stratfor, still concluded: "Something important happened."

From the leaks so far, it seems that more than half a dozen Israeli warplanes violated Syrian airspace to drop munitions on a site close to the border with Turkey. We also know from the US media that the "something" occurred in close coordination with the White House. But what was the purpose and significance of the attack?

It is worth recalling that, in the wake of Israel's month-long war against Lebanon a year ago, a prominent American neoconservative, Meyrav Wurmser, wife of Vice-President Dick Cheney's recently departed Middle East adviser, explained that the war had dragged on because the White House delayed in imposing a ceasefire. The neocons, she said, wanted to give Israel the time and space to expand the attack to Damascus.

The reasoning was simple: before an attack on Iran could be countenanced, Hizbullah in Lebanon had to be destroyed and Syria at the very least cowed. The plan was to isolate Tehran on these two other hostile fronts before going in for the kill.

But faced with constant rocket fire from Hizbullah last summer, Israel's public and military nerves frayed at the first hurdle. Instead Israel and the US were forced to settle for a Security Council resolution rather than a decisive military victory.

The immediate fallout of the failed attack was an apparent waning of neocon influence. The group's programme of "creative destruction" in the Middle East — the encouragement of regional civil war and the partition of large states that threaten Israel — was at risk of being shunted aside.

Instead the "pragmatists" in the Bush Administration, led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the new Defence Secretary Robert Gates, demanded a change of tack. The standoff reached a head in late 2006 when oilman James Baker and his Iraq Study Group began lobbying for a gradual withdrawal from Iraq — presumably only after a dictator, this one more reliable, had again been installed in Baghdad. It looked as if the neocons' day in the sun had finally passed.

Israel's leadership understood the gravity of the moment. In January 2007 the Herzliya conference, an annual festival of strategy-making, invited no less than 40 Washington

opinion-formers to join the usual throng of Israeli politicians, generals, journalists and academics. For a week the Israeli and American delegates spoke as one: Iran and its presumed proxy, Hizbullah, were bent on the genocidal destruction of Israel. Tehran's development of a nuclear programme — whether for civilian use, as Iran argues, or for military use, as the US and Israel claim — had to be stopped at all costs.

While the White House turned uncharacteristically quiet all spring and summer about what it planned to do next, rumours that Israel was pondering a go-it-alone strike against Iran grew noisier by the day. Ex-Mossad officers warned of an inevitable third world war, Israeli military intelligence advised that Iran was only months away from the point of no return on developing a nuclear warhead, prominent leaks in sympathetic media revealed bombing runs to Gibraltar, and Israel started upping the pressure on several tens of thousands of Jews in Tehran to flee their homes and come to Israel.

While Western analysts opined that an attack on Iran was growing unlikely, Israel's neighbours watched nervously through the first half of the year as the vague impression of a regional war came ever more sharply into focus. In particular Syria, after witnessing the whirlwind of savagery unleashed against Lebanon last summer, feared it was next in line in the US-Israeli campaign to break Tehran's network of regional alliances. It deduced, probably correctly, that neither the US nor Israel would dare attack Iran without first clobbering Hizbullah and Damascus.

For some time Syria had been left in no doubt of the mood in Washington. It failed to end its pariah status in the post-9/11 period, despite helping the CIA with intelligence on al-Qaeda and secretly trying to make peace with Israel over the running sore of the occupied Golan Heights. It was rebuffed at every turn.

So as the clouds of war grew darker in the spring, Syria responded as might be expected. It went to the arms market in Moscow and bought up the displays of anti-aircraft missiles as well as anti-tank weapons of the kind Hizbullah demonstrated last summer were so effective at repelling Israel's planned ground invasion of south Lebanon.

As the renowned Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld reluctantly conceded earlier this year, US policy was forcing Damascus to remain within Iran's uncomfortable embrace: "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad finds himself more dependent on his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, than perhaps he would like."

Israel, never missing an opportunity to wilfully misrepresent the behaviour of an enemy, called the Syrian military build-up proof of Damascus' appetite for war. Apparently fearful that Syria might initiate a war by mistaking the signals from Israel as evidence of aggressive intentions, the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, urged Syria to avoid a "miscalculation". The Israeli public spent the summer braced for a far more dangerous repeat of last summer's war along the northern border.

It was at this point — with tensions simmeringly hot — that Israel launched its strike, sending several fighter planes into Syria on a lightning mission to hit a site near Dayr al-Zawr. As Syria itself broke the news of the attack, Israeli generals were shown on TV toasting in the Jewish new year but refusing to comment.

Details have remained thin on the ground ever since: Israel imposed a news blackout that

has been strictly enforced by the country's military censor. Instead it has been left to the Western media to speculate on what occurred.

One point that none of the pundits and analysts have noted was that, in attacking Syria, Israel committed a blatant act of aggression against its northern neighbour of the kind denounced as the "supreme international crime" by the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal.

Also, no one pointed out the obvious double standard applied to Israel's attack on Syria compared to the far less significant violation of Israeli sovereignty by Hizbullah a year earlier, when the Shia militia captured two Israel soldiers at a border post and killed three more. Hizbullah's act was widely accepted as justification for the bombardment and destruction of much of Lebanon, even if a few sensitive souls agonised over whether Israel's response was "disproportionate". Would these commentators now approve of similar retaliation by Syria?

The question was doubtless considered unimportant because it was clear from Western coverage that no one — including the Israeli leadership — believed Syria was in a position to respond militarily to Israel's attack. Olmert's fear of a Syrian "miscalculation" evaporated the moment Israel did the maths for Damascus.

So what did Israel hope to achieve with its aerial strike?

The stories emerging from the less gagged American media suggest two scenarios. The first is that Israel targeted Iranian supplies passing through Syria on their way to Hizbullah; the second that Israel struck at a fledgling Syrian nuclear plant where materials from North Korea were being offloaded, possibly as part of a joint nuclear effort by Damascus and Tehran.

(Speculation that Israel was testing Syria's anti-aircraft defences in preparation for an attack on Iran ignores the fact that the Israeli air force would almost certainly choose a flightpath through friendlier Jordanian airspace.)

How credible are these two scenarios?

The nuclear claims against Damascus were discounted so quickly by experts of the region that Washington was soon downgrading the accusation to claims that Syria was only hiding the material on North Korea's behalf. But why would Syria, already hounded by Israel and the US, provide such a readymade pretext for still harsher treatment? Why, equally, would North Korea undermine its hard-won disarmament deal with the US? And why, if Syria were covertly engaging in nuclear mischief, did it alert the world to the fact by revealing the Israeli air strike?

The other justification for the attack was at least based in a more credible reality: Damascus, Hizbullah and Iran undoubtedly do share some military resources. But their alliance should be seen as the kind of defensive pact needed by vulnerable actors in a Sunni-dominated region where the US wants unlimited control of Gulf oil and supports only those repressive regimes that cooperate on its terms. All three are keenly aware that it is Israel's job to threaten and punish any regimes that fail to toe the line.

Contrary to the impression being created in the West, genocidal hatred of Israel and Jews,

however often Ahmadinejad's speeches are mistranslated, is not the engine of these countries' alliance.

Nonetheless, the political significance of the justifications for the the Israeli air strike is that both neatly tie together various strands of an argument needed by the neocons and Israel in making their case for an attack on Iran before Bush leaves office in early 2009. Each scenario suggests a Shia "axis of evil", coordinated by Iran, that is actively plotting Israel's destruction. And each story offers the pretext for an attack on Syria as a prelude to a pre-emptive strike against Tehran — launched either by Washington or Tel Aviv — to save Israel.

That these stories appear to have been planted in the American media by neocon masters of spin like John Bolton is warning enough — as is the admission that the only evidence for Syrian malfeasance is Israeli "intelligence", the basis of which cannot be questioned as Israel is not officially admitting the attack.

It should hardly need pointing out that we are again in a hall of mirrors, as we were during the period leading up to America's invasion of Iraq and have been during its subsequent occupation.

Bush's "war on terror" was originally justified with the convenient and manufactured links between Iraq and al-Qaeda, as well as, of course, those WMDs that, it later turned out, had been destroyed more than a decade earlier. But ever since Tehran has invariably been the ultimate target of these improbable confections.

There were the forged documents proving both that Iraq had imported enriched uranium from Niger to manufacture nuclear warheads and that it was sharing its nuclear know-how with Iran. And as Iraq fell apart, neocon ideologues like Michael Ledeen lost no time in spreading rumours that the missing nuclear arsenal could still be accounted for: Iranian agents had simply smuggled it out of Iraq during the chaos of the US invasion.

Since then our media have proved that they have no less of an appetite for such preposterous tales. If Iran's involvement in stirring up its fellow Shia in Iraq against the US occupation is at least possible, the same cannot be said of the regular White House claims that Tehran is behind the Sunni-led insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. A few months ago the news media served up "revelations" that Iran was secretly conspiring with al-Qaeda and Iraq's Sunni militias to oust the US occupiers.

So what purpose does the constant innuendo against Tehran serve?

The latest accusations should be seen as an example of Israel and the neocons "creating their own reality", as one Bush adviser famously observed of the neocon philosophy of power. The more that Hizbullah, Syria and Iran are menaced by Israel, the more they are forced to huddle together and behave in ways to protect themselves — such as arming — that can be portrayed as a "genocidal" threat to Israel and world order.

Van Creveld once observed that Tehran would be "crazy" not to develop nuclear weapons given the clear trajectory of Israeli and US machinations to overthrow the regime. So equally Syria cannot afford to jettison its alliance with Iran or its involvement with Hizbullah. In the current reality, these connections are the only power it has to deter an attack or force the US and Israel to negotiate.

But they are also the evidence needed by Israel and the neocons to convict Syria and Iran in the court of Washington opinion. The attack on Syria is part of a clever hustle, one designed to vanquish or bypass the doubters in the Bush Administration, both by proving Syria's culpability and by provoking it to respond.

Condoleezza Rice, it emerged at the weekend, wants to invite Syria to attend the regional peace conference that has been called by President Bush for November. There can be no doubt that such an act of détente is deeply opposed by both Israel and the neocons. It reverses their strategy of implicating Damascus in the "Shia arc of extremism" and of paving the way to an attack on the real target: Iran.

Syria, meanwhile, is fighting back, as it has been for some time, with the only means available: the diplomatic offensive. For two years Bashar al-Assad has been offering a generous peace deal to Israel on the Golan Heights that Tel Aviv has refused to consider. This week, Syria made a further gesture towards peace with an offer on another piece of territory occupied by Israel, the Shebaa Farms. Under the plan, the Farms — which the United Nations now agrees belongs to Lebanon, but which Israel still claims is Syrian and cannot be returned until there is a deal on the Golan Heights — would be transferred to UN custody until the dispute over its sovereignty can be resolved.

Were either of Damascus' initiatives to be pursued, the region might be looking forward to a period of relative calm and security. Which is reason enough why Israel and the neocons are so bitterly opposed. Instead they must establish a new reality — one in which the forces of "creative destruction" so beloved of the neocons engulf yet more of the region. For the rest of us, a simpler vocabulary suffices. What is being sold is catastrophe.

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