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### **A warning shot for Iran, via Syria**

By Gareth Porter

WASHINGTON - Until late October, the accepted explanation about the September 6 Israeli air strike in Syria, constructed from a series of press leaks from US officials, was that it was prompted by dramatic satellite intelligence that Syria was building a nuclear facility with help from North Korea.

But new satellite evidence has discredited that narrative, suggesting a more plausible explanation for the strike: that it was a calculated effort by Israel and the United States to convince Iran

The narrative promoted by neo-conservatives in the George W Bush administration began to unravel in late October with the release by a private company of a series of satellite images showing that the same square, multi-storey building that was hit by Israeli planes on September 6 had been present on the site four years earlier. Although the building appears to be somewhat more developed in the August 2007 image, it showed that the only major change at the site since September 2003 was what appears to be a pumping station on the Euphrates and a smaller secondary structure.

Media reports based on leaks from administration officials had suggested that the presence of a water pump indicated that the building must have been a nuclear reactor. But Jeffrey Lewis, a specialist on nuclear technology at the New America Foundation, pointed out in an interview with Inter Press Service (IPS) that the existence of a water pump cannot be taken as evidence of the purpose of the building, since other kinds of industrial buildings would also need to pump water.

The campaign of press leaks portraying the strike as related to an alleged nuclear weapons program assisted by North Korea began almost immediately after the Israeli strike. On September 11, a Bush administration official told the New York Times that Israel had obtained intelligence from "reconnaissance flights" over Syria showing "possible nuclear installations that Israeli officials believed might have been supplied with material from North Korea".

The Bush administration officials leaking this account to the press, obviously aligned with Vice President Dick Cheney, were hoping to shoot down the administration's announced policy, pushed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, of going ahead with an agreement to provide food and fuel aid to North Korea in exchange for the dismantling of its nuclear program.

They had lost an earlier battle over that policy and were now seeking to use the Israeli strike story as a new argument against it.

The officials did not want the intelligence community involved in assessing the alleged new evidence, suggesting that they knew it would not withstand expert scrutiny. Glenn Kessler reported in the Washington Post on September 13 that the "dramatic satellite imagery" provided by Israel had been restricted to "a few senior officials" and not disseminated to the intelligence community, on orders from National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley.

The intelligence community had opposed a previous neo-conservative effort in 2002-2003 to claim evidence of a Syrian nuclear program at the same site. A senior US intelligence official confirmed to the New York Times on October 30 that US intelligence analysts had been aware of the Syrian site in question "from the beginning" - meaning from before 2003 - but had not been convinced that it was an indication of an active nuclear program.

In 2002, John Bolton, then under secretary of state for arms control and international security, wanted to go public with an accusation that Syria was seeking a nuclear weapons program, but the intelligence community rejected the claim. A State Department intelligence analyst had called Bolton's assertion that Syria was interested in nuclear weapons technology "a stretch" and other elements of the community also challenged it, according to a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report.

The attack on the site was an obvious demonstration of Israeli military dominance over Syria, generally considered a vital ally of Iran by Israeli and US officials. It was also in line with the general approach of using force against Syria that Cheney and his allies in the administration had urged on Israel before and during the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in summer 2006.

During the war, Deputy National Security Adviser Elliot Abrams told a senior Israeli official that the Bush administration would not object if Israel "chose to extend the war beyond to its other northern neighbor", leaving no doubt he meant for Israel to attack Syria, IPS reported last December.

David Wurmser's wife Meyrev Wurmser, director of the neo-conservative Hudson Institute's Center for Middle East Policy, told Israel's Ynet News in December 2006 that, "many parts of the American administration believed that Israel should

have fought against the real enemy, which is Syria and not Hezbollah". She said such an attack on Syria would have been "such a harsh blow for Iran that it would have weakened it and changed the strategic map in the Middle East".

Both Israeli and US officials dropped hints soon after the Israeli air raid that it was aimed at sending a message to Iran. Ten days after the raid, Israeli's military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin declared to a parliamentary committee, "Israel's deterrence has been rehabilitated since the Lebanon war, and it affects the entire regional system, including Iran and Syria ..."

Although he did not refer explicitly to the strike in Syria, the fact that the Syrian raid was the only event that could possibly have been regarded as restoring Israel's strategic credibility left little doubt as to the meaning of the reference.

That same day, Reuters quoted an unnamed US Defense Department official as saying that the significance of the strike "was not whether Israel hit its targets, but rather that it displayed a willingness to take military action".

On September 18, former United Nations ambassador John Bolton was quoted by JTA, a Jewish news service, as saying, "We're talking about a clear message to Iran. Israel has the right to self-defense - and that includes offensive operations against WMD [weapons of mass destruction] facilities that pose a threat to Israel. The United States would justify such attacks."

On October 7, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, who enjoys access to top administration officials, quoted an unnamed official as providing the official explanation for the Israeli attack as targeting "nuclear materials supplied to Syria by North Korea".

But then, without quoting the official directly, Ignatius reported the official's description of the raid's implicit message: "[T]he message to Iran is clear: America and Israel can identify nuclear targets and penetrate air defenses to destroy them."

The official's suggestion that the strike was a joint US-Israeli message about a joint policy toward striking Iran's nuclear sites was the clearest indication that the primary objective of the strike was to intimidate Iran at a time when both Israel and the Cheney faction of the Bush administration were finding it increasingly difficult to do so.

**Gareth Porter** is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in US national security policy. His latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in June 2005.