

Israeli Overflights Deep into Syria - The Questions Remain!

Contributed by Administrator
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Israeli over flights in Syrian Airspace on Thursday September 6th have raised the interest of Military Intelligence Analysts worldwide. These flights were not normal intrusion into Syrian Airspace from Israeli territory, on the contrary reports from the region state that they were from North of Lebanon - across the Syrian border from the Mediterranean all the way to Dayr az-Zawr.

Today's Military Intelligence analysts are focusing on three leading points.

1. To Over fly the recently delivered SAM-22 Pantsyr Systems - the goal: to gain intelligence on Radar frequencies, modes of operation, Syrian experience with operations, etc..... and/or to deliver a strong message to the Syrians (and Iranians for that matter) that these newly acquired systems do not project the defenses that they were initially thought to. American Produced fighters can still operate with impunity over the Entire of Syria and Iran.
2. Syria has long been thought to have hidden Saddam's WMD, and now there is strong suspicion that they may be hiding some N. Korean WMD's as well. With the knowledge of former Baathist Military Leaders' insurgent training camps, Saddams WMD's and now N. Koreans - an over flight to gain more real time intelligence is necessitated.
3. Syria still threatens military buildup and calling up of reserves - while extending a hand towards peace. This confusing approach by a weakened Government, i.e. the upcoming international tribunal on the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri - which is thought to include top Syrian officials and which could further isolate Syria, its Government and Personnel so much so that the resultant weakened regime could hardly survive. In the case that the Syrians are brewing a counter to all of this, then to not be caught by a surprise, the Israelis want to know what it is brewing and how.

In either cases - Syria recently said over the weekend - that they reserve the right to respond to Israeli over flights in a manner that they see fit, together with calling up reserves. Here - as we closely follow these events - we leave you with a couple interesting blog articles.

Editor Cedars Revolution News,

1. From Prospects for Peace

Piecing Together What's Just Happened between Israel and Syria

Something must be going down - the entire Israeli political and military leadership has managed to maintain over 24 hours of disciplined media silence.

Here's what we think we know so far: there was an Israeli air presence in Syria during the early hours of Thursday morning that was engaged (unsuccessfully) by Syrian anti-aircraft fire. Approximately twelve hours later, official Syrian sources announced that Syrian airspace had been violated, and that Syria was considering the nature of its response.

Syrian ministers described the incident as an Israeli provocation that was indicative of Israel's disinterest in pursuing a peace option. For good measure, they added that Syria would respond at a time and in a manner of its choosing. Today, the Arab League issued its own condemnation of this "unacceptable maneuver," Egyptian and other Arab sources echoed this sentiment. Even Turkey felt compelled to clarify that Israel had not used its airspace in conducting this mission. The US has not officially commented. And in Israel - zip, on record at least. The media is rife with speculation, and the military censor is working overtime and can anticipate a very restless Sabbath. The Syria story dominates the news in Israel, and there are increasingly heavy hints by journalists and analysts that this was not a routine event.

On Thursday, the very public Israeli official effort to broadcast business as usual seemed to have an intentional air of the unreal about it: the IDF top brass convened its annual Jewish New Year toast at military headquarters, all smiles and calm, in the full gaze of the TV cameras; while Ehud Olmert spoke to a large gathering of the Kadima Party faithful. Olmert's appearance was timed to coincide (as these events often are) with the primetime evening news, but the only headline was what the Prime Minister did not say, namely, anything about Syria. Most of the effort in the intervening period of time has been invested in attempts to de-escalate the sense of uncertainty. The Jewish holidays, and the tourism they bring, are around the corner. The situation with Syria was supposed to be calm after troop exercises were

moved from the Golan to the South just last week, and attention was due to be focused on convening a peace summit in November. Overnight, talk again turned to war speculation, intentional or miscalculated. Ma'ariv's headline today screamed, "On the Verge of an Explosion," with their lead commentator, Ben Caspit, noting that "too many people from within the defense establishment are involved in personal bets about whether there will be a war with Syria. Almost all of them are betting that there will be." Never to miss an opportunity, neocon cheerleader, Dore Gold, had his Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs put out a three-pager on Syria detailing just how evil the evil Syrian evilness is.

The incident itself remains shrouded in mystery, and the media's lips have been sealed. As Israel Channel 2's military correspondent said this evening, when asked by the anchor what information can he could share with us, the answer was "very little." While making sure to tell a story that implied there was lots to know.

So what might actually have happened?

Here are four scenarios.

(1) This was a pretty regular Israeli reconnaissance mission that entered Syrian airspace, and there's nothing dramatically new in that. Under this scenario, it is actually the Syrians who decided to make an issue of this by opening fire and then going public with the story. Most of all, what Syria cannot bear is to be ignored. Given the recent de-escalation with Israel, and the likely exclusion of Syria from November's peace summit, Damascus was sending a signal - "Factor us in." The Syrians may also have wanted to show off their newly acquired military hardware.

(2) That Israel wanted to create a minor and manageable provocation, specifically, to test both Syria's new toys and the overall nature of Syria's response. There has been huge speculation in Israel, throughout the summer, regarding Syrian rearmament and possible military intentions. This might have been a way of dipping one's toe in the water of Syrian potential bellicosity. The Israeli website, DEBKA (part sensationalist, part propagandist, part psych-ops plaything) has suggested today that Israel was checking the threat posed by the new Russian-supplied Pantsyr Missile Systems that both Syria and Iran have taken possession of:

Western intelligence circles maintain that it is vital for the US and Israel to establish the location and gauge the effectiveness of Pantsyr-S1E air defenses in Syrian and Iranian hands, as well as discovering how many each received... Western intelligence circles stress that information on Russian missile consignments to Syria or Iran is vital to any US calculation of whether to attack Iran over its nuclear program... Syria took delivery in mid-August of 10 batteries... the Pantsyr-S1E had failed in its mission to bring down trespassing aircraft.

This would neatly dovetail the renewed push in the American media this week for confrontation with Iran - that included a Washington Post editorial discrediting IAEA chief elBaradei, a new ADL stop Iran campaign and general neocon push. I am not suggesting that the American Enterprise Institute has a hotline to the Israeli Air Force Chief.

But Neither scenario (1) nor (2) really help explain the pattern of commentary that is coming out of Israel at least. Ofer Shelah, one of Israel's smartest analysts, writing in Ma'ariv had this to say,

What we have here is something far deeper and something that touches on the fundamental position of both sides... It is clear that both sides see it in this light... neither Barak nor Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would approve an operation that could be intercepted by the Syrians, unless it was for a goal that they deemed to be very important... It is a story that stretches back a long way, over many consultations, decisions that are made and then reexamined all the time. All of the decision-making and intelligence services have been party to it.

Yediot Ahranot military and intelligence analyst, Alex Fishman, talked of the unlikelihood of an operation that would be

high risk just for the sake of some tactical step, to improve our situation tomorrow morning. This kind of action is only justified for an important goal, i.e., one that will be beneficial even in many more years.

Of course this might all be hype and Israeli media hysteria and military cover-up, but, if this incident is of a different order of magnitude, how about scenario's (3) and (4).

(3) This was an irregular and highly unusual Israeli reconnaissance mission that had a degree of urgency, and was based on new intelligence. Given Syria's missile air-defense capabilities Israeli planes don't just wonder into Syrian airspace on a whim, this is not Lebanon. There is often speculation that Syria is not only arming itself with advanced Russian weaponry, but that it is also pursuing a non-conventional weapons program. Today, Josh Landis has a fascinating post on his well-respected Syria Comment blog entitled "Is Israel Looking for Korean Weapons in Syria?". Landis reminds us that less than a week ago, John Bolton was writing in the Wall Street Journal against the current diplomatic efforts with North Korea, and raised the claim that Syria may be providing "safe havens for North Korea's nuclear weapons development, or may have already participated with or benefited from it."

Other sources suggest that the US has new intelligence linking Syria with North Korea and that this information is known

to Israel. Such intelligence might also explain the degree of Israeli hysteria throughout the summer regarding the likelihood of a military clash with Syria, precisely because action against Syria was being planned. Again, I am not suggesting that John Bolton is on Instant Messenger with IAF flight command.

(4) There is an additional scenario, this one more in line with the tone of the Israeli commentary, and even more far-reaching. It is hinted at by several key Israeli commentators, all remember operating under the watchful eye of the IDF military censor. Alex Fishman, again, in Yediot, "Why did they fly there? It is unlikely that someone suddenly decided that he felt like photographing northern Syria... at night." Amos Harel in Haaretz is even more explicit: "Damascus is not saying what the IDF plane allegedly attacked." Other TV commentators have hinted at Israeli satisfaction with the results of the mission. The suggestion seems to be that an actual military operation has been conducted in Syrian territory, perhaps against a possible or suspected or claimed non-conventional weapons production facility.

According to scenarios (3) and (4), Syria would be downplaying the story in order to cover for its own embarrassment regarding a suspected weapons program, and perhaps also at having taken a military hit without being able to effectively respond. This might also explain the Syrian comment that it would respond at a time and in a manner of its choosing. According to Ehud Ya'ari on Israel Channel 2, Israel also passed messages to the Syrians that there could be no small wars, or grabs Hezbollah-style, and that any, even partial, Syrian attack would be repelled with the IDF's full force.

Maybe none of these scenarios is correct, and many questions certainly remain unanswered. A key one would be, "Why now?" Perhaps there was a perception that, given where the political cycle is in Lebanon, Hezbollah's room for maneuver is now at its most limited, that Hamas is already pinned down in Gaza and does not want to encourage an Israeli invasion, and that the intensity of the international diplomatic spotlight on the region would help prevent an escalation towards war. Israel has carried out missions over Syria before without events spiraling towards conflict. In 2003 Israel bombed a PFLP GC base in Syria, and in 2006 IAF warplanes buzzed the holiday residence of President Bashar Assad, sending a unequivocal message that he should reign in Hezbollah.

The Israeli military might simply be spinning in order to cover up for an unplanned incident that many in Israel would believe is reckless and irresponsible in the current climate. In fact, those who write as if they are in the know suggest that the proof of any intelligence better be damn good. Fishman, in Yediot Ahranot, says that "we can only hope that we can rely on the people who decided on it (the mission)." He goes as far as to suspect that the Israeli leadership might try to conceal "uncalculated risks and adventurism." In Ma'ariv, Ben Caspit pointedly comments that "we have changed roles with the Syrians. Israel is the side looking for trouble and Syria is holding itself back."

And Amos Harel's warning in Haaretz:

It is to be hoped that the story will end without war. But it is important to remember that Israeli intelligence does not always understand the behavior of the Syrian leader. Assad is not an Israeli and does not think like one. His reactions could be very different than what Israel expects or sees as reasonable.

And there are two other ways of explaining all this - one rather possible, and the other a bit of mischief on my part: the first is that it was all simply a mistake, and both sides are now, perhaps in a co-ordinated fashion, trying to calm things while saving face. An Israeli pilot took a wrong turn over the Med, and, whoops an incident needs to be covered up and explained in terms of the highest national interests. Back-channels, diplomats who used to know each other, third parties, friendly businessman get busy working the phones, you agree to say 'x', we'll say 'y' and this can all be forgotten.

Or was this an exercise whereby both Israeli's and Syrians were creating a mini-crisis so that the US would find itself engaged on the Israel-Syria track and stop blocking it? Provoke Washington into changing course. Of course, I think this is an unreal scenario, but it highlights a very real problem. The leadership in both Damascus and Jerusalem seems to believe there is a value in engaging on this track, but the US is stubbornly opposed, or at least determined to stay out, and this has become a crucial obstacle. If the US is not at this particular table, there is no table. And that approach only increases the likelihood of a planned or mistaken escalation, it makes movement on the Lebanese and the Iraqi front more difficult, and also will likely undermine the supposed peace effort that the US is now itself promoting.

TCF has just released two reports on US-Israel-Syria relations, by a leading American expert (David Lesch) and Israel's foremost authority on the subject (Moshe Ma'oz) - both advocate serious diplomatic re-engagement, and those in-depth reports can be downloaded here. Posted by Daniel Levy on September 7, 2007

http://www.prospectsforpeace.com/2007/09/piecing_together_whats_just_ha.html

2. From Syrian Blogger based in the US - Joshua Landis

Is Israel Looking for Korean Weapons in Syria?
Friday, September 7th, 2007

Why would Israel risk war by flying deep into Syria?

I am going to speculate, based on the following evidence.

Israeli planes were on a "'reconnaissance mission when they got caught by Syrian defenses and were forced to drop their bombs and extra fuel tanks,' said a Western diplomat in Syria's capital Damascus. He declined to be named. Military analysts said Israel has conducted reconnaissance flights over Syria to probe its defenses. Witnesses said several planes crossed deep into Syrian territory and flew over the oil centre of Deir al Zor on the Euphrates river."

John Bolton wrote this in the WSJ on Aug. 31 under the title, "Axis of Evil: Pyongyang's Upper Hand." Here are the last paragraphs, which speculate that Syria is providing "safe havens for North Korea's nuclear weapons development."

President Bush has stressed that we must also deal with Pyongyang's biological, chemical and ballistic missile programs. We must address these programs, especially the missiles, soon. Failure to make explicit the important connection between weapons and delivery systems will certainly come back to haunt us, and we are on the verge of allowing this point to slip away entirely.

Finally, we need to learn the details of North Korean nuclear cooperation with other countries. 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 havens" for North Korea's nuclear weapons development, or may have already participated with or benefited from it, must be made clear.

For our own safety's sake, and that of allies like Japan and South Korea, there can be no compromises on these points.

My hunch is that Israel is taking a closer look at industrial sites outside of Deir al-Zur to see if they can see if anything looks Korea-like and what is going on with missile and weapons development.

This is speculation, but Western intelligence agencies have been suspicious for some time that Korean technology is working its way to Syria. September 2006, Interpol had Cypriot authorities search a ship coming from Korea to Latakia only to find ballistic missile components and not weapons. Here is the report.

Cyprus finds air defense systems on Syria-bound ship: (article may have been removed, please see below) Washington Post. Interpol told Cypriot authorities the ship, the Gregorio I, which had been loaded in China and North Korea and was destined for Latakia, was carrying ballistic missile components. Cyprus searched the ship only to discover that it contained air defense systems and not weapons. They are trying to figure out what to do with it now. This is the first indication of the power of UN resolution 1701.

In 2004, there were some weird reports that Syrian officials had visited North Korean weapons facilities, where they had been involved in a train crash. See: Syrians With Secret CBW Material On Korean Train That Exploded? This report came as Bolton was trying to make the case that Syria had reactivated its nuclear program. See my post on this, here. The intelligence community in the US was divided over Bolton's claims.

Bolton is not making all this stuff up. Right wingers in the agencies are feeding him with this stuff because they know he is rash enough to go out on a limb to make noise about it and push the issue. He has been pushing the issue for years. My hunch is that some new bit of intelligence has come in to reanimate Bolton and the debate over Syria's weapons capabilities. The Israelis went on their 'reconnaissance mission' to see if they could get to the bottom of it. The neocons do not want the "Axis of Evil" concept to go cold. Bolton represents the crowd that is very distressed that the US has declared defeat in North Korea by trusting the North Koreans. They would like to scuttle that agreement. While doing it, anything they can drag into 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.

Addendum: (next day) Kaan from Turkey writes:

Dear Dr. Landis, After the news about that Israel airplanes accused of air raid on Syria, a new news has flashed in Turkish news channels. This time, according to the local people of the Gindiralik ares of the Koroglu Mt, Hatay (Antioch), the midnight of September 5, a Syrian airplane dropped its fuel tank on the Turkish side of the Turco-Syrian border. [http://www.gazeteport.com.tr/GUNCEL/NEWS1/GP_067112]. The web site that published this news put a dropped fuel tank's picture shows the tank in the rural area. A military expert of air forces may identify which air force uses this kind of fuel tank. What can be said that a certain incident happened on the Turco-Syrian air space border on the September 5. There are a google earth picture as far as I've tried to locate the area mentioned in the news and a picture of the airplane fuel tank. Regards, Kaan Kutlu ATAC, Hacettepe University. Also, this from a commentator. "In the first reaction from an Israeli official to Wednesday night's alleged IAF foray over Syria, Science, Culture and Sports Minister Ghaleb Majadle said Friday that IAF planes enter Syrian airspace on a daily basis, adding that he did not believe the latest alleged incident would spark off a war." LINK I have hear that Syria regularly overflies Syrian airspace from

other Israeli sources as well. rummyal writes: Hello Joshua, Your theory doesn't check out because (a) the flights took place (as reported) in the middle of the night and there isn't much to see or photograph at that time. (b) The US doesn't need Israel to do this work for it since it has very advanced satellites. Israel, too, has them. The Daily Star has a condemning editorial:

"Israel's policy of provocation only increases the threat of war," By The Daily Star, Friday, September 07, 2007

The precise details of what happened over northeastern Syria in the early hours of Thursday morning may never be known, but the incident served up yet another warning about the inherent perils created by Israel's policy of provocation. The Jewish state routinely violates Lebanon's airspace, and while its intrusions into Syria's are less numerous and less ostentatious, they are also more dangerous. All of this is the result of the impunity with which Israel violates the norms of international law, and this impunity is the product of double standards imposed at the United Nations by the United States and some of its allies. The daily effect of this lopsidedness is to increase tensions, especially in those countries that share borders with Israel.

<http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=370>

1. John Bolton: Syria is providing "safe havens for North Korea's nuclear weapons development."

http://www.cedarsrevolution.net/jtphp/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=519&Itemid=2

2. IsraeliAF Overflies Syria to Test Newly Delivered Russian Pantsyr SAMs?

http://www.cedarsrevolution.net/jtphp/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=500&Itemid=2

3. Mystery Shrouds Israeli Jetfighters' Mission in Syria

http://www.cedarsrevolution.net/jtphp/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=498&Itemid=2

4. Dayr az-Zawr

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir_ez-Zor

5. SA-22 Greyhound Pantsyr Surface to Air Missile Systems - recently acquired by Syrian (10 Systems Aug. 15, 2007) & Iran

http://www.cedarsrevolution.net/jtphp/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=394&Itemid=2

Cyprus finds air defense systems on Syria-bound ship

By Michele Kambas

Reuters, WSJ

Monday, September 11, 2006; 10:21 AM

NICOSIA (Reuters) - A ship bound for Syria from North Korea and detained in Cyprus on an Interpol alert for suspected arms smuggling was carrying air defense systems, Cypriot authorities said on Monday.

The shipment was billed as weather-observation equipment on the freight manifest of the Panamanian-flagged Grigorio 1 and officials said the Syrian government had asked Cyprus to release the seized consignment.

"To my knowledge their name doesn't appear anywhere on the manifest as the consignee, but they have got involved," a senior shipping industry source in Nicosia told Reuters.

He said the vessel had been tracked over a long period of time.

The ship was carrying 18 truck-mounted mobile radar systems and three command vehicles. "The radars on the 18 trucks appear to be part of an air defense system," a police spokeswoman said. Pipes also found on board were irrigation pipes, she added.

Senior government officials said the Foreign Ministry would decide what to do with the cargo in consultation with legal authorities.

Customs became involved because of the apparent discrepancy on the ship manifest, which spoke of meteorological equipment.

The Commerce Ministry was also called to decide on whether an export permit was required for the cargo in the event of it being released to Syria.

"We will implement the law, nothing more and nothing less. And the political position will be expressed by the foreign minister," said Justice Minister Sophocles Sophocleous.

There are no restrictions on arms supplies to Syria. Neighboring Cyprus, which has friendly relations with Damascus, intercepted the vessel on an Interpol tip.

Interpol, contacted by Reuters, declined to elaborate on the nature of its alert to the Cypriot authorities on Monday, referring queries to Nicosia instead.

Both Nato's Allied Joint Force Command and U.S. Naval Forces Europe, which work together on maritime security issues out of Naples, said that neither had been involved in the operation or the tracking of the ship.

"This kind of thing could well have come under programs like Operation Active Endeavour, but on this occasion it didn't," a spokesman for Nato in Naples said.

It was not clear if Cyprus planned to confiscate the equipment.

"That is not an issue for police. We have concluded our task and it is now an issue for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Commerce Ministry," said Iacovos Papacostas, the deputy chief of police.

The Gregorio 1, which experts say has changed name and flag five times over the past five years, was detained by Cyprus on September 5.

It had initially set off from North Korea. It then left on the final leg of its journey from Port Said in Egypt to Latakia in Syria when it entered Cypriot territorial waters to refuel.

Syria's borders with Lebanon are believed to be a key conduit in the past for weapons supplies to Lebanon's Hizbollah guerrillas.

BBC Response: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5338518.stm>