

Leader

Are we any closer to knowing what happened on 6 September?

The more things change, the more they remain the same (*"plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"* – Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr). Who would have thought within the term of office of the US President who brought us photos of the mobile bio labs in Iraq that we would be asked to believe the photos of the Al Kibar "nuclear reactor" were "real", and part of a Syrian nuclear weapons programme?

The similarities between the two circumstances are staggering. We have "evidence" of a "state sponsored programme for weapons of mass destruction" – evidence in the form of uncorroborated photos. Experts are undecided whether this is prima facie evidence of the development of a Syrian nuclear weapon, yet the US government tells us this is the case. But this is where the two cases then diverge; in Iraq the "mobile bio lab" and "Curveball" brought destruction to Saddam and a legacy of suffering for Iraqi civilians and Coalition servicemen and women. The Syrian photos were post-destruction – not of the state but of the facility – and Israel seems content to leave it at that. The first stories of a North Korean link to the Al Kibar attack came out within the first month after the attack, and were attributed in the press to "sources from the US administration". Yet most observers saw this as wishful thinking, a great opportunity to lay the blame on another state in the "Axis of Evil". Then, lo and behold, more photos were released by the CIA that "show" the reactor, but also – more pertinently – the Head of the Pyongyang nuclear plant and the Syrian Head of the Atomic Energy Commission.

If nothing else, this is fertile ground for conjecture. Other analysts, such as ISIS, had suggested Al Kibar might be a nuclear reactor before the US announcement (early reports had it the Israelis had targeted an arms cache) and subsequent Syrian claims that the Israeli planes had targeted "wasteland" were clearly a lie (one that has since been replaced by a variety of others, such as empty military facility). Syria's parsimony with the truth has complicated the whole story. For example, there appears to be some confusion over air defence. The official statements out of Syria in September talked about the battle between their air defence units and Israeli aircraft – with the Israeli planes dumping their munitions and flying off. Yet the Syrian ambassador to the US, Imad Moustapha, suggested recently (25 April) that it couldn't be a sensitive facility as there were no air defence units to guard it... Clearly something was there, otherwise the IAEA inspectors would have been allowed in (and the IAEA

certainly seems to be one of the victims of this *fait accompli* – either ineffective or a catspaw), and in this confusion the given story is generally accepted as the right one.

Yet Syria has not been the target of any real opprobrium. Israel seems quietly happy with the result (intelligence coup, "reactor" destroyed, powerful northern neighbour blackened internationally) and has not followed up with any further rhetoric, and the US has missed them out and gone to the "source". North Korea has clearly had a bit of a diplomatic dressing down; the US State Department's rhetoric has not been strident, but it has been clear. For example, Sean McCormack, State Department Spokesman said, "Everybody understands the history of agreements with North Korea, and that is why we are taking the approach that we are. And that is, that good faith actions on the part of North Korea will be met in turn by good faith." Sept. 14 2007 (note the date – eight days after the strike).

As to whether this was the start of a nuclear weapons programme, that would still seem to be a matter for debate. David Albright and Paul Brannan of the Institute of Science and International Security have made themselves the piñata of the US far right with their suggestions that the reactor alone might not be evidence of a nuclear weapon programme – that the Syrians lacked the ability to fuel the reactor and are short of a plutonium separation plant and weaponisation facilities (all pointing to the fact that the reactor might not have been as close to operation as was claimed). The other side of the coin is pretty much summed up by the phrase "that we know".

Behind all this is the story of whoever took the photos. If we assume that they are real, then some of them are going to have compromised the photographer in a major way. The fact that the photos were made public would suggest the individual – and hopefully family, friends and anyone who has ever met them – will have been spirited out of the country, as his cover will be well and truly compromised.

So what, at the end of the day, have we learned? The IAEA can still be flouted by countries that don't have inspections and hide facilities. North Korea will still play the part of proliferator if some form of agreement is not reached. Syria has an active nuclear programme – only usage seems to be in any real doubt. Israel has maintained its position as the world's leading destroyer of nuclear facilities and... sometimes... possessing "weapons of mass destruction" does not mean that you have to go to war with that country.



Israeli airforce recruiting poster – "He's hit his target, will you?" ©IAF