

## Opinion

## Another Blunder

By Ehsan Bakhshandeh

There are some speculations about the suspected nuclear links between North Korea and Syria. US president George Bush on Tuesday defended the disclosure of intelligence over the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor.

The White House claimed last week that Syria is building a secret nuclear reactor.

Syria, however, said on Monday that US accusations that it had been building a nuclear reactor until its destruction in an Israeli air raid last September were "as bogus as" American claims that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction in 2003.

It seems the Bush administration wants to revive the "untrue scenario" of Iraq's WMDs five years ago this time in Syria.

Seven months after Israeli planes violated Syria's airspace and raided the alleged nuclear site, American officials have now provided the US Congress with a report, claiming that the site was a nuclear facility for producing plutonium. The White House report also said that the evidence found by the Central Bureau of Investigation is identical to the CIA report about WMDs in Iraq five years ago.

In 2003 and only months before the US-led invasion of Iraq, the US State Department released documents claiming that Saddam was developing WMDs. The then secretary of state Colin Powell even presented some photos to prove his claim on Iraq's WMDs. However, later it was revealed that the documents and photos were all forged and fabricated. This might be the same case about Syria.

But this time not only the government in Damascus but also others across the world even in the United States reacted to Washington's claim.

In an interview published in the Qatari-daily "Al-Watan" on Sunday, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad ridiculed the US accusations.

Syria's ambassador to the US Imad Moustapha also reacted by saying "It was a Syrian military warehouse. It was a military location but it has nothing to do whatsoever with nuclear technology."

The Syrian daily "Al-Baath" has compared the photographs of the bombed site shown to US congressmen to the images Washington presented to the UN Security Council as alleged evidence of Iraq's non-conventional arsenal in the run-up to the US-led invasion. "When you look at these pictures... a single image comes to mind -- that of former US secretary of state Colin Powell accusing Iraq of hiding weapons of mass destruction and presenting as proof a dossier of photographs," "Al-Baath" wrote.

Former US ambassador to UN John Bolton has also questioned one of the key pieces of US evidence that a North Korean shown in photographs from the Syrian facility was a nuclear scientist. The intelligence officials said the man was recognized from the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear activities.

"I would have been surprised had North Korea permitted any of its nuclear scientists anywhere near the six-party talks," Bolton said, adding "That would be running the risk they might have said something true!"

Bolton's skepticism echoed doubts raised shortly after the briefing Friday, when a South Korean newspaper "Munwha Ilbo" cited a government official in Seoul who identified the individual in question as Jung Tae-yang--a North Korean Foreign Ministry official.

Scott Ritter, who served from 1991 to 1998 as a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq, has also cast doubt at the US evidence.

"We have interior photographs and exterior shots and nothing that links the two. If you're bringing this evidence to a court of law, you would have trouble having anybody say this is definitive evidence that links the allegations to this specific site in question," he said, adding that there is also no evidence on the destruction of the alleged facility.

Instead of informing the International Atomic Energy Agency of a possible development of a nuclear site in Syria, the US withheld the intelligence and supported the Israeli bombardment. Perhaps Bush wants his successor to also experience his utter failures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Israeli Charges Dismissed

The UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon has dismissed Israeli allegations that it has been ignoring Hezbollah activity near the border.

Israeli officials on Sunday accused UNIFIL of intentionally concealing information about Hezbollah activities south of the Litani River in Lebanon to avoid conflict with the group, Press TV reported.

The Israeli sources claimed there have been reports that UNIFIL soldiers identified armed Hezbollah operatives, but did nothing and did not submit full reports on the incidents to the UN Security Council.

UNIFIL spokeswoman, Yasmina Bouziane, released a statement late Monday saying, "These reports inaccurately represent the way in which UNIFIL operates and repeat the factual inaccuracies in disregard of our public statement that gave a full account of the incident."

The UN Resolution 1701 put an end to the 33-day war between the Zionist regime and Hezbollah in 2006.

## Maliki Vows to Disarm Militants

Iraq will disarm militants by force if they do not lay down their weapons, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki said on Wednesday adding his government wants to build a single national army.

Al-Maliki told reporters at a news conference inside Baghdad's fortified Green Zone on Wednesday "We can't build a state along with militias."

He set four conditions -- begin militia disarm, stop interfering in state affairs, stop running their own courts and hand over wanted fugitives -- or face a military assault, alalam.ir reported.

He said "To refuse these conditions means the continuation of the government's efforts to disarm them by force."

"There is no alternative to these conditions. The alternative is the continuation of force and clashes until we reach the end, to get rid of the weapons and the gangs who are carrying weapons."

Maliki launched a crackdown against fighters loyal to anti-America cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr last month in the southern city of Basra.

After initial setbacks, the Basra offensive appears to have been a success in driving militants from the streets there.



## News Diary

FRIDAY, MAY 2

■ **LUCERNE, Switzerland** - Rose D'Or Festival (to May 6). The Rose d'Or or Golden Rose is a highly prestigious television award which is focused on entertainment-based programming, excluding dramas and documentaries.



■ **WASHINGTON** - The US Internal Revenue Service will begin sending the first of more than 130 million economic stimulus payments on May 2 and expects to complete the first round of payments by early July. The payments are part of a \$152 billion economic stimulus package signed into law last month by President George W. Bush to try to stave off recession amid a deepening housing and credit market crisis.

## Egypt's Gaza Proposal Moving Ahead



File picture shows a national conference of leaders of the Palestinian factions in Gaza against the US-hosted peace conference in Annapolis, November 26, 2007.

Palestinian factions meeting in Cairo for talks with Egyptian security officials have agreed to an Egyptian proposal for a truce with Israel starting in the Gaza Strip, state news agency MENA said on Wednesday.

"All the Palestinian factions have agreed to the Egyptian proposal on a truce with Israel," MENA said, citing an unnamed high-level Egyptian official.

The official said the Egyptian proposal included a "comprehensive, reciprocal and simultaneous truce, implemented in a graduated framework starting in the Gaza Strip and then subsequently moving to the West Bank," MENA added.

"This proposal is a phase of a broader plan that aims at providing an appropriate atmosphere before lifting the blockade and ending the state of Palestinian division," it said.

## All-Out Peace

Egypt invited 12 Palestinian groups for talks to form a consensus on a proposal for a six-month ceasefire, floated by the Palestinian resistance group Hamas last week.

Although it wants Palestinians to stop firing missiles across the border, Israel has dismissed the offer as a Hamas ploy to gain time to prepare for more fighting.

"We are in favor of the truce, on the condition that it be balanced, reciprocal, equal and comprehensive, to include Gaza and the West Bank as well," Talal Nagy of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command told reporters on Wednesday.

"We support the truce on that basis that it be reciprocal, simultaneous and start in Gaza and extend to include the West Bank as soon as possible, but this does not mean we will end the resistance to the Israeli occupation," added Ghazi Hussein of the small group Saiga.

## Absence of Hamas, Fatah

Leading Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah did not attend the talks. Hamas had proposed a six-month truce between Israel and Palestinians in

Gaza, with an option to extend it to Palestinians in the West Bank.

Hamas on Monday briefed the Palestinian factions on its final response to the peace efforts, saying it will accept a truce deal that includes lifting the siege and halting of Israeli strikes for six months.

## Reciprocate

The Palestinian resistance movement of Jihad said on Tuesday it had approved a truce with Israel starting in the Gaza Strip, but reserved the right to respond to Israeli attacks in the West Bank.

A truce between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza would take some pressure off Egypt, a key regional mediator.

Egypt does not want to be viewed as aiding the blockade of Gaza or to have Palestinians storm the Egyptian border with the coastal strip, as Hamas did earlier this year, allowing hundreds of thousands of Gazans to cross into Sinai.

## Israel Closes Hamas Charity

Israeli army said it has forced the closure in a West Bank city of offices of a charity affiliated with Hamas. The army spokesman said that troops early Wednesday shut down financial offices of the charity, AP reported.

Israel believes the charity group works to recruit operatives and raise money for militant activities.

## Remove Key Checkpoints

A joint study by several Israeli ex-generals and Palestinian officials said Israel could remove 10 major West Bank checkpoints quickly.

The report released Wednesday said these checkpoints no longer fulfill a crucial security need, yet their removal could significantly improve Palestinian trade.

The study follows warnings by the World Bank that the Palestinian economy is not likely to grow this year. The bank says that's largely because of continued Israeli movement restrictions and despite massive foreign aid.