

Israel reported to have bombed Syrian chemical weapons facility

Syrian military appears to confirm media reports of attack on research centre near Mediterranean coast in night-time raid.

Israeli jets have reportedly bombed a Syrian government facility in north-west of the country believed to be associated with Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons programme.

The strikes were initially reported by Hebrew and Arab media sources on Thursday morning. A Syrian military statement appears to confirm the reports.

The airstrike on the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre was reported to have taken place overnight. Western intelligence reports have linked the centre near the town of Masyaf to Syria's chemical weapons programme.

A statement from the Syrian military said the attack had occurred early on Thursday and hit a facility close to the Mediterranean coast. It said Israeli warplanes fired several missiles after entering neighbouring Lebanon's air space.

"Israeli warplanes at 2.42am fired a number of missiles from Lebanese air space, targeting one of our military positions near Masyaf, which led to material damage and the deaths of two members of the site," the army said in a statement.

It warned of the "dangerous repercussions of such hostile acts on the security and stability of the region".

Syrian opposition sources said four Israeli warplanes were involved in the strike. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, along with others, identified the target as the al-Talai facility, a site that had been subject to US sanctions for its role in the Syrian non-conventional weapons agency.

The strikes follow a series of statements by Israel in recent weeks accusing Iran of seeking to establish itself in Syria and Lebanon and of building a weapons factory, as the six-year Syrian civil war has continued to swing in favour of Assad.

Israel rarely confirms its strikes inside Syria but it has launched numerous strikes

during the country's civil war, usually against arms convoys and weapons storage sites associated with Hezbollah, a key Assad ally.

An Israeli army spokeswoman declined to discuss reports of a strike in Syria, but Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, tweeted that the reported attack was not routine and targeted a Syrian military scientific centre.

"The facility at Masyaf also produces chemical weapons and explosive barrels that have killed thousands of Syrian civilians," he said.

Amir Eshel, a former Israeli air force chief, suggested in August that Israel had conducted dozens of airstrikes on weapons convoys destined for the Hezbollah over the past five years.

Washington claims the al-Talai centre developed the sarin gas weapon allegedly used in a chemical attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun in April, which left about 80 people dead.

UN war crimes investigators announced on Wednesday they had an "extensive body of information" that indicated Syrian warplanes were behind the attack.

In a conference call with journalists, the former Israeli national security adviser Yaakov Amidror said the fact that the target was a Syrian military facility took Israeli intervention to a new level.

"I know the organisation and facility," he said. "For many years it has been one of the Syrian centres for research and development for weapons systems including chemical weapons ... and weapons that have been transferred to Hezbollah."

The only logical explanation for the attack was that the facility was producing weapons systems for Hezbollah, he said.

Even before the outbreak of the war in Syria, the al-Talai centre was on Israel's radar. The director of the Israeli national security council's counter-terrorism bureau called for the destruction of the centre in 2010, alleging it had provided weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Israel is conducting its biggest military exercise in 19 years on its northern border, involving tens of thousands of troops. It has been widely described as a dress rehearsal for a future war with Hezbollah, including civilian evacuation

drills.

The strike, if confirmed, follows increasingly bellicose statements from senior Israeli government officials, including the country's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, about the advances Assad has made in the civil war, backed by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.

Netanyahu accused Iran last week of building sites to produce precision-guided missiles in Syria and Lebanon, but the commentator Amos Harel suggested in Haaretz that the Israeli action may have been a message aimed as much at Washington and Moscow as Tehran and Hezbollah after Israeli disquiet over a Russian-backed partial ceasefire in Syria.

"The United States, whose interest in Syria has been on the decline, acceded to the Russian initiative. Washington and Moscow also failed to heed Israeli protests that the agreement to reduce friction in southern Syria failed to require Iran and allied militias to steer clear of the Golan Heights," he wrote.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/07/israel-airstrike-syria-chemical-weapons-facility>

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