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Saudis give nod to Israeli raid on Iran

Uzi Mahnaimi in Tel Aviv and Sarah Baxter

The head of Mossad, Israel's overseas intelligence service, has assured Benjamin Netanyahu, its prime minister, that Saudi Arabia would turn a blind eye to Israeli jets flying over the kingdom during any future raid on Iran's nuclear sites.

Earlier this year Meir Dagan, Mossad's director since 2002, held secret talks with Saudi officials to discuss the possibility.

The Israeli press has already carried unconfirmed reports that high-ranking officials, including Ehud Olmert, the former prime minister, held meetings with Saudi colleagues. The reports were denied by Saudi officials.

"The Saudis have tacitly agreed to the Israeli air force flying through their airspace on a mission which is supposed to be in the common interests of both Israel and Saudi Arabia," a diplomatic source said last week.

Although the countries have no formal diplomatic relations, an Israeli defence source confirmed that Mossad maintained "working relations" with the Saudis.

John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the United Nations who recently visited the Gulf, said it was "entirely logical" for the Israelis to use Saudi airspace.

Bolton, who has talked to several Arab leaders, added: "None of them would say anything about it publicly but they would certainly acquiesce in an overflight if the Israelis didn't trumpet it as a big success."

Arab states would condemn a raid when they spoke at the UN but would be privately relieved to see the threat of an Iranian bomb removed, he said.

Referring to the Israeli attack on an alleged Syrian nuclear facility in 2007, Bolton added: "To this day, the Israelis haven't admitted the specifics but there's one less nuclear facility in Syria . . ."

Recent developments have underscored concerns among moderate Sunni Arab states about the stability of the repressive Shi'ite regime in Tehran and have increased fears that it may emerge as a belligerent nuclear power.

"The Saudis are very concerned about an Iranian nuclear bomb, even more than the Israelis," said a former head of research in Israeli intelligence.

The Israeli air force has been training for a possible attack on Iran's nuclear site at Natanz in the centre of the country and other locations for four years.

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