

Israelis hit Syrian nuclear bomb plant™

Contributed by Uzi Mahnaimi in Tel Aviv and Michael Sheridan in Seoul
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ISRAEL'S top-secret air raid on Syria in September destroyed a bomb factory assembling warheads fuelled by North Korean plutonium, a leading Israeli nuclear expert has told The Sunday Times.

Professor Uzi Even of Tel Aviv University was one of the founders of the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, the source of the Jewish state's undeclared nuclear arsenal.

"I suspect that it was a plant for processing plutonium, namely, a factory for assembling the bomb," he said. "I think the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] transferred to Syria weapons-grade plutonium in raw form, that is nuggets of easily transported metal in protective cans. I think the shaping and casting of the plutonium was supposed to be in Syria."

All governments concerned - even the regime in Damascus - have tried to maintain complete secrecy about the raid.

They apparently fear that forcing a confrontation on the issue could spark a war between Israel and Syria, end the Middle East peace talks and wreck America's extremely complex negotiations to disarm North Korea of its nuclear weapons.

The political stakes could hardly be higher. Plutonium is the element which fuelled the American atomic bomb that destroyed the Japanese city of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

Critics in the United States say proof that North Korea supplied such nuclear weapons material to Syria, a state technically at war with Israel, would shatter congressional confidence in the Bush administration's diplomatic policy.

From beneath the veil of military censorship, western commentators have formed a consensus that the target was a nuclear reactor under construction.

But Even said that purely from scientific observation, he had reached a different conclusion - that it was a nuclear bomb factory, posing a more immediate danger to Israel. He said that satellite photos of the site, taken before the Israeli strike on September 6, showed no sign of the cooling towers and chimneys characteristic of nuclear reactors.

Syria's haste after the attack to bury the site under tons of soil suggested that hundreds of square yards were contaminated and there were fears of radiation, the professor added.

Since then the Syrians have sealed up the location, levelled the site and diverted curious journalists to a place that had not been attacked by Israel.

The professor's theory fits with authoritative technical evidence about North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. The North Koreans are able to produce weapons-grade plutonium, which is electro-refined, alloyed and cast into shapes ready to be machined to fit into a warhead, according to a team of distinguished American nuclear weapons scientists who visited the country's laboratories.

One of those scientists, Siegfried Hecker, was allowed to hold a sample and was told that it was "good bomb grade plutonium", because it had a very low content of plutonium-240, the isotope which reduces the overall quality of the material.

Assembly of a Nagasaki-type bomb involves mating a plutonium core with a uranium wrap and inserting a small quantity of polonium and beryllium to initiate the chain reaction.

"Plutonium is highly dangerous material," explained the Israeli professor. "It is easily oxidised in air unless protective measures are taken. The oxide is easily dispersed as dust in air when machining plutonium to create the 'pit' [a hollow sphere in many nuclear weapons] and thus can be inhaled, causing a fatality in minute quantities.

"Plutonium pellets are handled and machined exclusively in a large array of 'glove boxes', to protect the technicians and their environment. That is why you need a relatively large containment building and cannot assemble a nuclear weapon in your garage - unless you are suicidal of course."

The debris from a destructive raid on a weapons-building facility could therefore contain toxic radioactive waste. But the main danger for Syria would be the telltale exposure of the elements to surveillance and detection by America. This would explain the cover-up at the site.

North Korea, for its part, has more than enough plutonium to sell some of its stock to Syria.

The same team of visiting US scientists estimated that by late 2006 the nation had made 40-50kg (88-100lb) of the material. Between six and eight kilograms are needed for a weapon.

For the US and its allies the Syrian connection raises the deeply worrying possibility that North Korea has succeeded in building what the US scientists called "a sophisticated design with smaller dimensions and mass so as to fit onto a . . . medium-range missile";

That puzzle was complicated when North Korea announced that it had tested its first nuclear bomb on October 9 last year. The yield of the blast was small - less than a 20th of the Nagasaki bomb - suggesting to some scientists that the device was sophisticated and small while others believed the North Koreans had simply not made a very good bomb.

Professor Even believes the North Koreans have not yet perfected small warheads. "The mechanical dimensioning at this stage is extremely demanding (less than 0.01mm). So is the casting of the explosives around the plutonium core and the initiation of the implosion," he said.

The question is under urgent study by nations who might one day be targets of a North Korean device sold to Syria or Iran. Iran is known to have financed missile and weapons deals between North Korea and Syria, causing concern to Israel and the US. One day after the Israeli attack, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, sent his nephew with a personal letter to Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leader.

The professor's theory of a clear and present danger that Damascus would get the bomb may be the only credible explanation why Israel carried out a military strike against Syria and risked an all-out conflict.

Indeed on September 6 Israel was ready for war with Syria. Israeli sources said its military chiefs assumed Syria would launch a retaliatory attack, but no reprisal came.

Meanwhile, President Bush has authorised his chief negotiator, Christopher Hill, to go on talking to North Korea in the search for a peaceful solution. Hill will visit Pyongyang this week to pursue negotiations after international technicians got to work on disabling the reactor at Yongbyon, the source of North Korea's plutonium.

The North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il is supposed to make a full declaration of his nuclear programmes by December 31. The US says that must include information on his weapons deals with Syria and Iran.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article2983719.ece

Imad Moustapha answers questions concerning Israel's airstrikes on alleged Syrian nuclear facilities in September 2007.
----- Syrian Ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha

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