

Israel, U.S. Shared Data On Suspected Nuclear Site

Contributed by Washington Post
Friday, 21 September 2007

Bush Was Told of North Korean Presence in Syria, Sources Say

By Glenn Kessler and Robin Wright
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, September 21, 2007; A01

Israel's decision to attack Syria on Sept. 6, bombing a suspected nuclear site set up in apparent collaboration with North Korea, came after Israel shared intelligence with President Bush this summer indicating that North Korean nuclear personnel were in Syria, U.S. government sources said.

The Bush administration has not commented on the Israeli raid or the underlying intelligence. Although the administration was deeply troubled by Israel's assertion that North Korea was assisting the nuclear ambitions of a country closely linked with Iran, sources said, the White House opted against an immediate response because of concerns it would undermine long-running negotiations aimed at persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

Ultimately, however, the United States is believed to have provided Israel with some corroboration of the original intelligence before Israel proceeded with the raid, which hit the Syrian facility in the dead of night to minimize possible casualties, the sources said.

The target of Israel's attack was said to be in northern Syria, near the Turkish border. A Middle East expert who interviewed one of the pilots involved said they operated under such strict operational security that the airmen flying air cover for the attack aircraft did not know the details of the mission. The pilots who conducted the attack were briefed only after they were in the air, he said. Syrian authorities said there were no casualties.

U.S. sources would discuss the Israeli intelligence, which included satellite imagery, only on condition of anonymity, and many details about the North Korean-Syrian connection remain unknown. The quality of the Israeli intelligence, the extent of North Korean assistance and the seriousness of the Syrian effort are uncertain, raising the possibility that North Korea was merely unloading items it no longer needed. Syria has actively pursued chemical weapons in the past but not nuclear arms -- leaving some proliferation experts skeptical of the intelligence that prompted Israel's attack.

Syria and North Korea both denied this week that they were cooperating on a nuclear program. Bush refused to comment yesterday on the attack, but he issued a blunt warning to North Korea that "the exportation of information and/or materials" would affect negotiations under which North Korea would give up its nuclear programs in exchanges for energy aid and diplomatic recognition.

"To the extent that they are proliferating, we expect them to stop that proliferation, if they want the six-party talks to be successful," he said at a news conference, referring to negotiations that also include China, Japan, South Korea and Russia.

Unlike its destruction of an Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, Israel made no announcement of the recent raid and imposed strict censorship on reporting by the Israeli media. Syria made only muted protests, and Arab leaders have remained silent. As a result, a daring and apparently successful attack to eliminate a potential nuclear threat has been shrouded in mystery.

"There is no question it was a major raid. It was an extremely important target," said Bruce Riedel, a former intelligence officer at Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy. "It came at a time the Israelis were very concerned about war with Syria and wanted to dampen down the prospects of war. The decision was taken despite their concerns it could produce a war. That decision reflects how important this target was to Israeli military planners."

Israel has long known about Syria's interest in chemical and even biological weapons, but "if Syria decided to go beyond that, Israel would think that was a real red line," Riedel said.

Edward Djerejian, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria and founding director of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, said that when he was in Israel this summer he noticed "a great deal of concern in official Israeli circles about the situation in the north," in particular whether Syria's young ruler, Bashar al-Assad, "had the same sensitivity to red lines that his father had." Bashar succeeded his Hafez al-Assad as president of Syria in 2000.

The Israeli attack came just three days after a North Korean ship docked at the Syrian port of Tartus, carrying a cargo that was officially listed as cement.

The ship's role remains obscure. Israeli sources have suggested it carried nuclear equipment. Others have maintained that it contained only missile parts, and some have said the ship's arrival and the attack are merely coincidental. One source suggested that Israel's attack was prompted by a fear of media leaks on the intelligence.

The Bush administration's wariness when presented with the Israeli intelligence contrasts with its reaction in 2002, when U.S. officials believed they had caught North Korea building a clandestine nuclear program in violation of a nuclear-freeze deal arranged by the Clinton administration.

After the Bush administration's accusation, the Clinton deal collapsed and North Korea restarted a nuclear reactor, stockpiled plutonium and eventually conducted a nuclear test. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice convinced Bush this year to accept a deal with North Korea to shut down the reactor, infuriating conservatives inside and outside the administration.

But for years, Bush has also warned North Korea against engaging in nuclear proliferation, specifically making that a red line that could not be crossed after North Korea tested a nuclear device last year. The Israeli intelligence therefore suggested North Korea was both undermining the agreement and crossing that line.

Conservative critics of the administration's recent diplomacy with North Korea have seized on reports of the Israeli intelligence as evidence that the White House is misguided if it thinks it can ever strike a lasting deal with Pyongyang. "However bad it might be for the six-party talks, U.S. security requires taking this sort of thing seriously," said John R. Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations who was a top arms control official in Bush's first term.

But advocates of engagement have accused critics of trying to sabotage the talks. China on Monday abruptly postponed a round of six-party talks scheduled to begin this week, but U.S. officials now say the talks should start again Thursday.

Some North Korean experts said they are puzzled why, if the reports are true, Pyongyang would jeopardize the hard-won deal with the United States and the other four countries. "It does not make any sense at all in the context of the last nine months," said Charles "Jack" Pritchard, a former U.S. negotiator with North Korea and now president of the Korea Economic Institute.

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