

# NYTimes: Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say

Contributed by By DAVID E. SANGER and MARK MAZZETTI, NYTimes  
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WASHINGTON, Oct. 13 — Israel's air attack on Syria last month was directed against a site that Israeli and American intelligence analysts judged was a partly constructed nuclear reactor, apparently modeled on one North Korea has used to create its stockpile of nuclear weapons fuel, according to American and foreign officials with access to the intelligence reports.

The description of the target addresses one of the central mysteries surrounding the Sept. 6 attack, and suggests that Israel carried out the raid to demonstrate its determination to snuff out even a nascent nuclear project in a neighboring state. The Bush administration was divided at the time about the wisdom of Israel's strike, American officials said, and some senior policy makers still regard the attack as premature.

The attack on the reactor project has echoes of an Israeli raid more than a quarter century ago, in 1981, when Israel destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq shortly before it was to have begun operating. That attack was officially condemned by the Reagan administration, though Israelis consider it among their military's finest moments. In the weeks before the Iraq war, Bush administration officials said they believed that the attack set back Iraq's nuclear ambitions by many years.

By contrast, the facility that the Israelis struck in Syria appears to have been much further from completion, the American and foreign officials said. They said it would have been years before the Syrians could have used the reactor to produce the spent nuclear fuel that could, through a series of additional steps, be reprocessed into bomb-grade plutonium.

Many details remain unclear, most notably how much progress the Syrians had made in construction before the Israelis struck, the role of any assistance provided by North Korea, and whether the Syrians could make a plausible case that the reactor was intended to produce electricity. In Washington and Israel, information about the raid has been wrapped in extraordinary secrecy and restricted to just a handful of officials, while the Israeli press has been prohibited from publishing information about the attack.

The New York Times reported this week that a debate had begun within the Bush administration about whether the information secretly cited by Israel to justify its attack should be interpreted by the United States as reason to toughen its approach to Syria and North Korea. In later interviews, officials made clear that the disagreements within the administration began this summer, as a debate about whether an Israeli attack on the incomplete reactor was warranted then.

The officials did not say that the administration had ultimately opposed the Israeli strike, but that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates were particularly concerned about the ramifications of a preemptive strike in the absence of an urgent threat.

"There wasn't a lot of debate about the evidence," said one American official familiar with the intense discussions over the summer between Washington and the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel. "There was a lot of debate about how to respond to it."

Even though it has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Syria would not have been obligated to declare the existence of a reactor during the early phases of construction. It would have also had the legal right to complete construction of the reactor, as long as its purpose was to generate electricity.

In his only public comment on the raid, Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, acknowledged this month that Israeli jets dropped bombs on a building that he said was "related to the military" but which he insisted was "not used."

A senior Israeli official, while declining to speak about the specific nature of the target, said the strike was intended to "re-establish the credibility of our deterrent power," signaling that Israel meant to send a message to the Syrians that even the potential for a nuclear weapons program would not be permitted. But several American officials said the strike may also have been intended by Israel as a signal to Iran and its nuclear aspirations. Neither Iran nor any Arab government except for Syria has criticized the Israeli raid, suggesting that Israel is not the only country that would be disturbed by a nuclear Syria. North Korea did issue a protest.

The target of the Israeli raid and the American debate about the Syrian project were described by government officials and nongovernment experts interviewed in recent weeks in the United States and the Middle East. All insisted on anonymity because of rules that prohibit discussing classified information. The officials who described the target of the attack included some on each side of the debate about whether a partly constructed Syrian nuclear reactor should be seen as an urgent concern, as well as some who described themselves as neutral on the question.

The White House press secretary, Dana Perino, said Saturday that the administration would have no comment on the intelligence issues surrounding the Israeli strike. Israel has also refused to comment.

Nuclear reactors can be used for both peaceful and non-peaceful purposes. A reactor's spent fuel can be reprocessed to extract plutonium, one of two paths to building a nuclear weapon. The other path — enriching uranium in centrifuges — is the method that Iran is accused of pursuing with an intent to build a weapon of its own.

Syria is known to have only one nuclear reactor, a small one built for research purposes. But in the past decade, Syria has several times sought unsuccessfully to buy one, first from Argentina, then from Russia. On those occasions, Israel reacted strongly but did not threaten military action. Earlier this year, Mr. Assad spoke publicly in general terms about Syria's desire to develop nuclear power, but his government did not announce a plan to build a new reactor.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, a group of Persian Gulf states, has also called for an expansion of nuclear power in the Middle East for energy purposes, but many experts have interpreted that statement as a response to Iran's nuclear program. They have warned that the region may be poised for a wave of proliferation. Israel is believed to be the only nuclear-armed nation in the region.

The partly constructed Syrian reactor was detected earlier this year by satellite photographs, according to American officials. They suggested that the facility had been brought to American attention by the Israelis, but would not discuss why American spy agencies seemed to have missed the early phases of construction.

North Korea has long provided assistance to Syria on a ballistic missile program, but any assistance toward the construction of the reactor would have been the first clear evidence of ties between the two countries on a nuclear program. North Korea has successfully used its five-megawatt reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear complex to reprocess nuclear fuel into bomb-grade material, a model that some American and Israeli officials believe Syria may have been trying to replicate.

The North conducted a partly successful test of a nuclear device a year ago, prompting renewed fears that the desperately poor country might seek to sell its nuclear technology. President Bush issued a specific warning to the North on Oct. 9, 2006, just hours after the test, noting that it was "leading proliferator of missile technology, including transfers to Iran and Syria." He went on to warn that "the transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable."

While Bush administration officials have made clear in recent weeks that the target of the Israeli raid was linked to North Korea in some way, Mr. Bush has not repeated his warning since the attack. In fact, the administration has said very little about the country's suspected role in the Syria case, apparently for fear of upending negotiations now under way in which North Korea has pledged to begin disabling its nuclear facilities.

While the partly constructed Syrian reactor appears to be based on North Korea's design, the American and foreign officials would not say whether they believed the North Koreans sold or gave the plans to the Syrians, or whether the North's own experts were there at the time of the attack. It is possible, some officials said, that the transfer of the technology occurred several years ago.

According to two senior administration officials, the subject was raised when the United States, North Korea and four other nations met in Beijing earlier this month.

Behind closed doors, however, Vice President Dick Cheney and other hawkish members of the administration have made the case that the same intelligence that prompted Israel to attack should lead the United States to reconsider delicate negotiations with North Korea over ending its nuclear program, as well as America's diplomatic strategy toward Syria, which has been invited to join Middle East peace talks in Annapolis, Md., next month.

Mr. Cheney in particular, officials say, has also cited the indications that North Korea aided Syria to question the Bush administration's agreement to supply the North with large amounts of fuel oil. During Mr. Bush's first term, Mr. Cheney was among the advocates of a strategy to squeeze the North Korean government in hopes that it would collapse, and the administration cut off oil shipments set up under an agreement between North Korea and the Clinton administration, saying the North had cheated on that accord.

The new shipments, agreed to last February, are linked to North Korea's carrying through on its pledge to disable

its nuclear facilities by the end of the year. Nonetheless, Mr. Bush has approved going ahead with that agreement, even after he was aware of the Syrian program.

Nuclear experts say that North Korea's main reactor, while small by international standards, is big enough to produce roughly one bomb's worth of plutonium a year.

In an interview, Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker of Stanford University, a former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, said building a reactor based on North Korea's design might take from three to six years.

Reporting was contributed by William J. Broad in New York, Helene Cooper in Washington and Steven Erlanger in Jerusalem.

By DAVID E. SANGER and MARK MAZZETTI  
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Israel attacked unfinished Syrian nuclear reactor: report  
Oct 14, 2007

WASHINGTON (AFP) — Israel bombed a site in Syria last month that Israeli and US intelligence believe was a partly built nuclear reactor possibly modeled after one in North Korea, The New York Times said Sunday.

If the North Korean link is confirmed, that would complicate disarmament talks with the Stalinist state, officials said.

Citing unnamed US and foreign officials with access to the intelligence reports, the report said it appeared Israel carried out the September 6 raid to demonstrate its determination to snuff out even a nascent nuclear project in a neighboring state.

A senior Israeli official told the newspaper the strike was intended to "re-establish the credibility of our deterrent power."

Several US officials said Israel may also have intended to send a similar signal to Iran regarding its nuclear aspirations.

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has said only that the target was an "unused military building" and that the bombs hit "nothing of consequence."

The administration of President George W. Bush was divided about the strike, the paper said, and some senior policymakers still regard it as premature and fear the repercussions.

"There wasn't a lot of debate about the evidence," the paper quoted a US official as saying of the discussions between the US and Israel.

"There was a lot of debate about how to respond to it."

The facility that the Israelis struck in Syria appears to have been much further from completion than the Osirak nuclear reactor that Israel destroyed in Iraq in 1981, the paper said.

Officials said it would have been years before the Syrians could have used the reactor to produce the spent nuclear fuel that could, through a series of additional steps, be reprocessed into bomb-grade plutonium.

North Korea has long provided military assistance to Syria, but any help in building a reactor would have marked the first clear evidence of ties between the two countries on a nuclear program.

Such cooperation would complicate multi-national talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

After the North Koreans conducted a nuclear test last year, Bush warned "the transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to state or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable."

US and foreign officials, however, would not confirm whether they believed the North Koreans sold or gave the plans to the Syrians, The New York Times reported.

Senator John McCain, a runner in the Republican White House race, said the report raised questions about North Korea's trustworthiness as the difficult talks on disarming its nuclear program continue.

"I really do believe that it argues... to make sure that any agreement we make with North Korea is a lot better than the one that failed under the Clinton administration," he said on CBS television Sunday.

North Korea previously shut down the Yongbyon reactor under a 1994 agreement clinched during the US administration of president Bill Clinton.

McCain said he would continue the present negotiations but press for "iron-clad agreements that have no loopholes whatsoever," calling also for China to exert more pressure on its North Korean ally.

In Washington and Israel, the raid has been shrouded in secrecy and information restricted to few officials. Israeli media has been allowed to publish only the fact that a raid occurred without comment from Israeli officials.

Visiting the region Sunday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice again refused to comment.

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Report: Israel hit Syrian nuclear site  
Oct 14 09:04 AM US/Eastern

WASHINGTON, Oct. 14 (UPI) -- Israel entered Syrian airspace last month to attack a nuclear facility far from completion, The New York Times reported Sunday.

The partially built reactor apparently was modeled on one North Korea built to stockpile fuel for atomic weapons, U.S. and foreign intelligence officials told the Times.

The Sept. 6 attack was similar to a raid in 1981 when Israeli jets destroyed the Osirak atomic reactor in Iraq before it could begin operating. Bush administration officials have said that attack set back Iraq's nuclear plan by years.

What remains unclear is the role of North Korea in providing nuclear assistance to Syria and whether Syria could make the case the facility was intended to produce electricity rather than aid a weapons program, the Times reported.

Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, has said only that Israeli jets bombed an unused building "related to the military."

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Israel attacked unfinished Syrian nuclear reactor  
Oct 13 05:55 PM US/Eastern

The air raid on Syria conducted by Israel last month reportedly targeted a site that Israeli and US intelligence specialists believe was a partly constructed nuclear reactor that may have been modeled after one in North Korea.

Citing unnamed US and foreign officials with access to the intelligence reports, The New York Times said it appeared Israel carried out the September 6 raid to demonstrate its determination to snuff out even a nascent nuclear project in a neighboring state.

The administration of President George W. Bush was divided about the strike, and some senior policymakers still regard it as premature, the report said.

The facility that the Israelis struck in Syria appears to have been much further from completion than the Osirak nuclear reactor that Israel destroyed in Iraq in 1981, the paper said.

Officials said it would have been years before the Syrians could have used the reactor to produce the spent nuclear fuel

that could, through a series of additional steps, be reprocessed into bomb-grade plutonium, according to The Times.

In Washington and Israel, the raid has been shrouded in secrecy and information restricted to few officials while the Israeli press has been prohibited from publishing information about the attack, the report said.

The officials did not say that the Bush administration had ultimately opposed the Israeli strike, but that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates were particularly concerned about the ramifications of a pre-emptive strike in the absence of an urgent threat, the paper said.

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Report: Israel air strike in Syria targeted partially built nuclear reactor  
Oct 13 08:00 PM US/Eastern  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - An Israeli air strike on Syria last month targeted a partially built nuclear reactor that was years away from completion, the New York Times reported Saturday, citing U.S. and foreign officials.

The report said U.S. President George W. Bush's administration had intense discussions with the Israeli government before the strike and U.S. officials were divided over whether it would be premature.

Syrian President Bashar Assad has said Israel bombed an "unused military building" in the Sept. 6 raid. Israel has been extremely secretive about the affair. It only recently relaxed censorship to allow Israel-based journalists to report that Israeli aircraft attacked a military target deep inside Syria.

In the weeks that followed the attack, U.S. officials said it was aimed either at a nuclear or missile facility that Syria operated jointly with North Korea.

The New York Times said the nuclear reactor was modelled on one North Korea had used to create its stockpile of nuclear weapons fuel, though the role of any North Korean assistance in building it remains unclear. North Korea has denied involvement in any such activities in Syria.

Satellite photographs detected the partly constructed Syrian reactor earlier this year, the Times said, citing American officials.

The Syrian reactor was years away from being able to produce the spent nuclear fuel that could be reprocessed into bomb-grade plutonium, the newspaper said.

Syria's nuclear program has long been considered minimal, and the country is known to have only a small research reactor.

The New York Times cited American officials as saying Israel's strike may have been intended as a signal to Iran and its nuclear aspirations. In 1981, Israeli warplanes destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor being built by Saddam Hussein's regime.

The White House and Israeli officials declined to comment on the report.

The Canadian Press, 2007

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Oct 13, 2007 23:13 | Updated Oct 14, 2007 10:40  
'Syria raid targeted unfinished reactor'  
By JPOST.COM STAFF

The IAF air strike in Syria last month targeted what US and Israeli intelligence analysts believed was a partially

constructed nuclear reactor modeled on a reactor used by North Korea to create its stockpile of nuclear weapons fuel, the New York Times reported on Sunday morning.

While the attack was reminiscent of the IAF raid on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, the facility that Israel struck in Syria appears to have been much further from completion, the Times quoted American and foreign officials as saying.

The Times quoted a senior Israeli official as saying that the strike was intended to "reestablish the credibility of our deterrent power."

According to the report, the American and foreign officials would not say whether they believed the North Koreans sold or gave the plans to the Syrians, or whether North Korea's own experts were there at the time of the attack.

The report, which was attributed to American and foreign officials with intelligence access, also alleged that the Bush administration was divided over the decision to carry out an air strike. According to the officials, policymakers did not view the attack as urgent because it would have been years before the Syrians could have used the reactor to produce enough nuclear fuel to create bomb-grade plutonium.

Israel has kept the details of the air strike secret, refusing until last week to even confirm that such a mission had been carried out. Reports said that the strike had been executed in tandem with a ground operation by IDF special forces, which reportedly confiscated weapons-related materials shortly before IAF planes attacked.

A recent article in The Washington Post claimed that the raid came after Israel and the US shared intelligence about possible nuclear weapons developments in Syria. According to some sources, North Korean weapons experts had been in Syria in the months before the raid.

While both Syria and North Korea have denied that they are cooperating on weapons development, representatives of the two nations met recently in North Korea to discuss "strengthening ties."

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Oct 11, 2007 16:05 | Updated Oct 11, 2007 20:14

Syria tries to save face at strike site

By JPOST.COM STAFF

A few days after an Israeli reporter entered Syria using a foreign passport and published pictures of himself outside what he said was the site attacked by the IAF in a September 6 air strike, Syrian officials told foreign journalists on Monday that reports of the raid were spurious.

New York Times reporter Hugh Naylor was one of a group shepherded around the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands in Deir ez Zor, a Beduin village in eastern Syria.

Center director Ahmed Mehdi denied not only that the facility was involved in any nuclear weapons program, but also that any IAF raid had ever occurred. "The allegations are completely groundless, and I don't really understand where all this [WMD] talk came from," Mehdi said.

"There was no raid here - we heard nothing," he added.

"You see - around us are farmers, corn, produce, nothing else," Mehdi told the visitors.

Yediot Aharonot reporter Ron Ben-Yishai, whose successful entry into Syria worried Syrian authorities, took pictures of himself in front of the research center's sign, but was denied access to the premises.

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 Oct 10, 2007 23:44 | Updated Oct 10, 2007 23:54

Analysis: Israel can take solace in its ability to go it alone

By HILARY LEILA KRIEGER AND CALEV BEN-DAVID

The Israeli strike on Syria last month has become a Rorschach test of sorts for Bush administration policy makers, many of whom are viewing the incident in relation to how they think the US should proceed on diplomatic nonproliferation initiatives.

In the reported incident, Israeli intelligence allegedly found signs of an incipient Syrian nuclear program being built with help from North Korea, leading to an attack that eliminated the facility.

As detailed in The New York Times Wednesday, US Vice President Dick Cheney and hawkish skeptics of the current negotiations with North Korea over dismantling its nuclear program are pointing to the incident as reason to reconsider the diplomatic effort.

On the other hand US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her backers don't consider the case sufficiently severe to disrupt the Six-Party talks with North Korea, which have continued even after the Israel action.

The Times article followed reports over the weekend that Israel had delayed the offensive due to US displeasure at the prospect of the strike, much of it from the State Department.

While some Israel advocates have taken umbrage at the suggestion of doubt being shed on Israeli intelligence - which they reject as unwarranted - others say the debate bolsters Israel's position because it indicates the Israelis are willing to act alone when necessary.

"Recently there's been the notion that [Israelis] are so dependent on the United States that they cannot make national security decisions that reflect their own perceived interests," noted one Washington source who is close to American and Israeli officials.

"The fact that there was an internal debate in the administration and no clear green light, but only acquiescence, enhances the deterrence and the perceived ability of Israel to act independently of the United States." Former CIA and US Defense Department official Bruce Reidel said the issue wasn't whether Israeli intelligence per se is reliable, but rather the generally uncertain nature of any information about North Korea.

"North Korea is a black hole for intelligence," he said, since its closed nature makes human intelligence assets almost unheard of.

"We are heavily dependent on technical intelligence, and technical intelligence is always subject to a high degree of analysis and evaluation," said Reidel, now a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy. "You have isolated data points and very little way of connecting them together." He said that leaves much of the intelligence gathered open to interpretation - and use by officials seeking to boost their agendas.

"The vice president's office will lean so far forward they'll fall of their face with their enthusiasm to use [technical intelligence] for military purposes" against places like Iraq and Iran, he said.

On the other hand, Reidel continued, the State Department would have "a very high standard of proof" for examining any such intelligence. He pointed to Rice's involvement with two "very visible" diplomatic initiatives - the negotiations with North Korea and the upcoming international peace meeting between Israel and Palestinians "both of which could become undone because of tensions between Israel and Syria." Though the larger fracture looms - and could have potent implications for Iran - one Washington observer believes the debate is over when it comes to North Korea.

"The fact is that this is a done deal," said the source, "and the administration would never would have let (Assistant Secretary of State) Chris Hill go and negotiate with the North Koreans after the Israeli strike, or sent the team of inspectors to North Korea this week to begin the disarmament process, if they were have second thoughts on moving ahead with it."

He added, "The few remaining neo-conservatives in the administration, or those like John Bolton who've left it, may not like the deal, but Rice wouldn't have closed it without the full support of Bush. This is one of the few successes so far they can point to, and the Israeli intelligence over a possible shipment of nuclear material to Syria wouldn't be enough to scuttle it." Bolton and other strong neo-conservative supporters of Israel in the US are indeed among those who have most strongly opposed the North Korean talks from the very start.

According to Prof. Gerald Steinberg of Bar-Ilan University, an expert in nuclear proliferation issues, Israel itself has no interest in being part of the debate over North Korea.

"Israel is rightly concerned about the issue of possible proliferation from North Korea, especially to Syria or Iran, as they dismantle their nuclear infrastructure," he said. "The Israeli interest is not to abandon the Six-Party framework, but to press to have a firm agreement on ending North Korea exports as part of the package."

Bush administration officials don't like to talk on the record about how the Israeli air strike has factored into policy in North Korea, and Rice avoided the Syrian incident when meeting with a group of Jewish leaders last week, according to those familiar with the meeting.

But it was reported that Hill brought up the incident with the North Koreans. The State Department officially reiterates the importance of nonproliferation as a goal of the Six-Party talks.

"The Six-Party talks are a mechanism to address a number of problems, particularly the nuclear program, so we are working through this process in an effort to get North Korea to abandon all of its existing nuclear [activities]," a State Department official said. "The administration is committed to trying to make this process work. Proliferation is something that has to be dealt with."

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