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Israel Struck a Nuclear Project in Syria, Analysts Say

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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 pre-emptive 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.

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