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## CNS Feature Story

*The following story, written by guest contributor Richard Weitz of the Hudson Institute and edited by Leonard S. Spector and Sarah Diehl of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, provides a comprehensive look at international reaction to Israel's September 6, 2007, air strike against a site in the Syrian desert, now widely believed to have been a partially completed nuclear reactor.*

### Israeli Airstrike in Syria: International Reactions

*A comprehensive look at international reporting on Israel's September 6, 2007, air strike against a site in the Syrian desert, now widely believed to have been a partially completed nuclear reactor.*

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Much remains unknown about the September 6 incident in which Israeli warplanes entered Syrian air space. Not only do commentators disagree about the various motives of the diverse participants involved, but even the basic facts remain in dispute. Neither the Israeli, Syrian, nor U.S. government has offered a detailed description of what occurred. Outside experts and media commentators have filled the data vacuum by offering their own diverse interpretations about what precisely happened that night.

The mystery surrounding Israel's apparent air strike against Syria on September 6 gave observers considerable leeway to interpret the ambiguous event. Syrian leaders describe the affair as an Israeli stratagem designed to bolster the credibility of Israel's discredited military deterrent or disrupt unwelcome peace initiatives in the Middle East. In contrast, most Western media coverage implies that the target either involved a shipment of nuclear technology from North Korea or some other object of proliferation concern that alarmed Israeli officials

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SIX-PARTY TALKS

Nonproliferation experts have long worried that North Korea would sell or otherwise transfer its nuclear materials and technologies to foreign countries or non-state actors such as terrorists or criminals. These concerns intensified with the publication of news reports about possible North Korean assistance to a Syrian nuclear weapons program.

Under the terms of the February 13, 2007 agreement that ended the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks, North Korea pledged to shut down and eventually disable its Yongbyon nuclear complex in return for food, economic aid, and the prospect of normalizing relations with the five other countries participating in the talks, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.<sup>[1]</sup> The terms of the agreement do not formally prohibit North Korea from transferring nuclear weapons-related materials and technologies to third parties,

sufficiently that they felt compelled to act to counter a genuine threat. Some Western analysts, however, speculate that the Israelis acted in Syria primarily with an eye to shaping future developments in Iran.

## Background

According to the most common assessments offered in the open-source literature of what the media termed "Operation Orchard," on September 6, 2007, Israeli jets violated Syrian airspace, dropped munitions somewhere in northeastern Syria, and returned home without experiencing any casualties themselves.

The last time Israeli warplanes carried out operations against Syrian ground targets was in October 2003, when they attacked a training camp for Palestinian militants near Damascus. Israeli warplanes also buzzed the Syrian presidential palace during the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, but, on that occasion, did not release any ordnance. Prior to the 2003 operation, Israeli warplanes had not attacked a target on Syrian territory since the October 1973 War.

Several general background factors shaped media and other interpretations of the September 2007 incident. First, longstanding differences over the status of Golan Heights and Syria's support for anti-Israeli terrorist groups have prevented them from negotiating a peace agreement to end their formal state of hostilities, Efforts by third-party mediators to improve relations earlier this year, before September 6, proved unsuccessful. [1] When faced with obdurate security threats in the past, Israeli leaders have occasionally pursued a preemptive strategy, most notably with a devastating air strike at the beginning of the 1967 War and the 1981 bombing of the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq.

Second, for several years, the international media have published and broadcast reports of security collaboration between Syria and North Korea, including cooperation regarding ballistic missiles.[2] (North Korea is also widely thought to have sold ballistic missiles and their related technologies to other Middle Eastern countries.) Although there has been no definitive publicly available evidence of joint nuclear work between Damascus and Pyongyang, nonproliferation experts have long worried that North Korea would sell or otherwise transfer its nuclear materials and technologies to foreign countries or non-state actors such as terrorists or criminals.

Third, the September 6 incident occurred against the backdrop of escalating international tensions over Iran's nuclear program and the threat that its eventual realization could pose to

but the follow-on October 6 agreement states that North Korea is "committed not to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how." [2] In addition, the international community — through various UN resolutions and other measures — has declared such transfers impermissible.

After North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test, President Bush issued the following statement: "The North Korean regime remains one of the world's leading proliferator of missile technology, including transfers to Iran and Syria. 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 of the consequences of such action." [3]

In commenting on the September 6 incident, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton speculated that North Korea might have intended to transship nuclear material to Iran through Syria. [4] Bolton also published an op-ed suggesting that Pyongyang might be seeking to conceal its nuclear weapon assets in friendly Middle Eastern countries while it underwent international inspections of its nuclear holdings. [5] Major General Zeevi Farkash, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, told the Western media that North Korea and Syria might have shared a "constellation of interests" in which Syria wanted to strengthen its WMD

Israel. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner even warned shortly after the air strike that Iranian leaders' stubborn pursuit of nuclear technologies and threats regarding Israel risked provoking another war in the Middle East. [3] Reporters speculate that Israeli fears of Iran's developing a nuclear weapon might have influenced the Israelis decision to attack Syria, especially if they concluded that North Korea might provide Syria and Iran with nuclear materials or technologies.

Fourth, the tepid reaction by the regional Arab governments to the alleged Israeli air strike underscores the extent to which Syria's past interference in Lebanon, ties to Iran, and other foreign policies have alienated the current Syrian regime from Sunni Arab regimes. This isolation might have encouraged Syrian officials to seek to bolster their country's defense capacities through the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Finally, the one-year anniversary of the Lebanon War reminded observers throughout the Middle East of Israel's failure to achieve the expected decisive military victory over Lebanese Hezbollah, a Shiite paramilitary group allied with Syria and Iran. Some Israelis feared that their unexpectedly poor military performance weakened the credibility of Israel's conventional deterrent threats. For this reason, several observers reasoned that Israel perceived the raid against Syria as an opportunity to enhance its deterrent capabilities against Syria and its Lebanese and Iranian allies. [4]

### **Israeli Censorship Smothers Domestic Coverage**

Many observers commented on the unprecedented severity of the Israeli military censorship regarding the September 6 incident. [5] The Israeli government initially refused to acknowledge that the air strike had occurred, remaining silent even after the U.S. government confirmed the air strike on September 11. Israeli military censors permitted Israeli journalists to reference only information and arguments that had previously been published in the Western media. [6]

On September 19, Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli prime minister and current leader of the opposition Likud party, effectively confirmed the strike when he expressed his support for the operation in an interview with Israeli Channel One TV. Netanyahu also divulged that current Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had informed him of the operation "from the start." [7] The sharp rebukes he received from his colleagues might have discouraged other Israelis knowledgeable about the incident from offering their own attributable comments to the media.

deterrent and North Korea aimed to disperse its nuclear technologies "to preserve the knowledge it had accumulated and not just throw it away." [6]

Since the September 6 incident, President Bush and other U.S. officials have followed a complex line. On the one hand, while declining to accuse the North Koreans in public of assisting a possible Syrian nuclear weapons program, administration representatives have obliquely warned the North Koreans against transferring WMD-related materials and technologies to third parties. At the same time, they have also maintained that the best method to deal with the North Korean proliferation threat is through continuing the Six-Party Talks. When asked about the alleged transfer at an October 17 news conference, Bush replied: "The best way to solve this issue [of nuclear weapons proliferation] with North Korea peacefully is to put it in — keep it in the context of Six-Party talks. And the reason why is that diplomacy only works if there are consequences when diplomacy breaks down, and it makes sense for there to be other people at the table so that if North Korea were to have said to all of us, we're doing to do x, y, or z, and they don't, that we have other — people other than the United States being consequential." [7]

The governments of China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea have also declined to risk jeopardizing the Six-Party Talks, currently at an extremely delicate stage, by

It was not until October 3, after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad first spoke of the attack, that the Israeli Air Force acknowledged that it had attacked a military target "deep inside Syria" the previous month. [8] Nevertheless, the military censor issued a rare special directive prohibiting publication of operational details regarding the incident, including the target of the attack and which Israeli forces participated in the mission. [9] Subsequent commentary in the Israeli media continued mostly to cite various theories and facts offered by foreign sources because the Israeli government declined to provide any additional information — whether as official commentary or through informal leaks — about the attack.

Traditionally, the purpose of Israeli censorship has been to conceal military secrets. Commentators speculated on this occasion, however, that the Israeli authorities also wanted to minimize pressure on Syrian leaders to retaliate. [10] Other observers thought that the Israeli government might have sought to avoid a public debate about the reasons for the attack because some U.S. analysts and policy makers reportedly considered the available intelligence of a possible Syrian threat — nuclear or otherwise — insufficient to warrant the preemptive air strike. The alleged air strike occurred at a time when the Bush administration was seeking to promote its contentious proposal for a regional peace conference involving both Israel and Syria. [11]

Some Israeli nonproliferation experts did offer their views on the incident, but only several weeks after the event, and only in comments to the Western media. For example, several Israeli analysts expressed doubt about the popular view that the Israeli Air Force had attacked a nuclear target. They questioned why the Syrians would locate a sensitive nuclear facility in a region so close to Syria's troubled borders with Iraq and Turkey. These Israeli experts also observed that, historically, Syrian officials have felt comfortable relying on chemical — rather than nuclear — weapons as an adequate strategic deterrent against Israel. Efraim Inbar, the director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv, commented that the Syrians "have wanted strategic parity for years with Israel. But so far, they went with the cheapest and easiest way, which was chemical weapons." [12]

Other Israeli analysts, however, speculated that the current Syrian government might have felt so threatened by its regional isolation and the hostility of the Bush administration that it wanted to bolster its deterrence capacity by developing a nuclear option. Eyal Zisser, director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, observed that such an alternative "was not on the [Israeli intelligence] agenda before these reports, but this is very logical from the point of view of Syria." [13] Western observers have characterized Bashar Assad, who became president in 2000, as much more of a risk-taker than his cautious father. [14] In any case, an unidentified Israeli source observed that, "We've

challenging Pyongyang over its possible Syrian connections. South Korean representatives, eager to advance their bilateral and multilateral peace initiatives on the peninsula, have been especially eager to downplay any possible North Korean involvement in the September 6 incident. Senior South Korean nuclear negotiator Chun Yung-woo, besides expressing doubts about the accuracy of Israeli intelligence, cited the clause in the October 3 agreement as a reason why the issue should no longer appear on the agenda of the six-party talks: "After they (North Koreans) pledged they won't do it, what more is there to discuss?" [8]

[1] Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, "North Korea - Denuclearization Action Plan," February 13, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/february/80479.htm>.

[2] Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, "Six-Party Talks Agreement on Second-Phase Actions on North Korea," October 3, 2007, [http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=texttrans-english &y=2007&m=October&x=20071003172558\\_xjsnommis4.146975e-02](http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=texttrans-english &y=2007&m=October&x=20071003172558_xjsnommis4.146975e-02).

[3] Office of the White House Press Secretary, "President Bush's Statement on North Korea Nuclear Test," October 9, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061009.html>.

[4] Uzi Mahnaimi, Sarah Baxter, and Michael Sheridan, "Snatched: Israeli Commandos 'Nuclear' Raid," *Sunday Times*, September 23, 2007, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article2512105.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article2512105.ece).

[5] John Bolton, "Pyongyang's Upper Hand," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2007, [http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.all,pubID.26726/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.all,pubID.26726/pub_detail.asp).

[6] Steven Erlanger, "Israel Silent on Reports of Bombing within Syria," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/15/>

known for a long time that Syria has deadly chemical warheads on its Scuds, but Israel can't live with a nuclear warhead." [15]

Whatever the motivation, Israeli leaders have given the impression that they consider the operation a success. Amos Yadlin, the head of Israeli military intelligence, reportedly told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that "Israel's deterrence has been rehabilitated since the Lebanon war." [16]

### Syrian Denials and Threats

Syrian officials have offered varying interpretations of what happened on September 6. Although the Syrian government complained immediately about Israel's unauthorized intrusion into its air space, Syrian representatives initially claimed that the warplanes had rapidly retreated back to Israel after they encountered Syrian air defenses. [17] Subsequently, Syrian officials stated that the Israeli warplanes had dropped their munitions on Syrian territory, but had either failed to hit a concrete target, discarding their ordnance over an unpopulated desert region, or had simply destroyed an "empty warehouse." [18] A few days after the incident, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem reportedly showed European diplomats alleged photographs of the target site in order to support his contention that the Israelis had struck nothing. [19]

Syrian Vice-President Farouq al-Shara said that the Israeli Air Force had hit an Arab League agricultural facility. [20] More interestingly, al-Shara warned at a press conference that, "Those who continue to talk about this raid and to invent inaccurate details are aiming to justify a future aggression [against Syria]." He specifically attacked "Arab or international parties that write about things that did not happen and who claim North Koreans or others were killed," accusing those who made such arguments of "trying to conduct psychological warfare against Syria." [21]

Al-Shara also claimed that Israeli officials were taking bellicose actions to restore the credibility of their armed forces following Israel's military defeat (in Syria's view) in Lebanon the previous summer: "They want to rehabilitate the Israeli army after the Lebanese resistance broke it. But what Israel needs is to rehabilitate the Israeli mind, only then will a real opportunity for genuine peace be created." [22]

In his first comments on the topic, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told the BBC in an October 1 interview that the Israelis had bombed an "abandoned army base in the northeast of the country." He warned that "Syria reserves the right to retaliate to the attack," though his remarks left ambiguous whether the retaliation might involve a military counterstrike as opposed to diplomatic countermeasures: "Retaliate doesn't mean missile for missile and bomb for bomb. We have our means to retaliate, maybe politically, maybe in other ways. But we have the right to retaliate." [23] Defense analysts attribute the Syrian leadership's reluctance to retaliate militarily to its regional isolation, Russian opposition to escalatory actions, and to the Syrians' realization that their country would probably lose a conventional war with Israel. [24]

The one constant thus far in the Syrian response has been a resolute denial of rumors that Syria had been constructing a covert nuclear facility at the target site, with or without North Korean, Iranian, or other foreign assistance. In an interview with *Newsweek* a week after the

[world/middleeast/15mideast.html?\\_r=1 &oref=slogin](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071017.html).

[7] Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Press Conference by the President," October 17, 2007, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071017.html> .

[8] Lee Joo-hee, "N.K. Proliferation Issue Off the Table at Nuke Talks," *Korea Herald*, October 18, 2007, [www.koreaherald.co.kr:8080/servlet/cms.article.view?tpl=print&sname=National&img=/img/pic/ico\\_nat\\_pic.gif&id=200710180041](http://www.koreaherald.co.kr:8080/servlet/cms.article.view?tpl=print&sname=National&img=/img/pic/ico_nat_pic.gif&id=200710180041).

attack, Imad Moustapha, Syria's Ambassador to Washington, claimed that reports of a North Korean-Syrian nuclear cooperation project were "absolutely, totally, fundamentally ridiculous and untrue. There are no nuclear North Korean-Syrian facilities whatsoever in Syria." Moustapha also denied rumors that the target involved a joint Iranian-Syrian missile plant or a consignment of arms intended for Hezbollah. [25]

Even a translation error at a UN General Assembly meeting devoted to disarmament -- in which the freelance interpreter erroneously made it seem as if the Syrian representative was acknowledging that Israel attacked a nuclear facility — proved sufficient to trigger a rapid and categorical denial that Syria possessed any nuclear facilities. [26] Speaking at a meeting of the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, Ambassador Moustapha called allegations of Syrian-North Korean nuclear collaboration "an absolutely surrealistic story." He also insisted that, "There is no Syrian nuclear program whatsoever, absolutely not. Syria has never tried to acquire nuclear technology." [27]

The Syrian government remains a party to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which prohibits it from pursuing nuclear weapons. The treaty does allow all signatories in good standing under the treaty to research and develop civilian nuclear energy technologies, but requires such countries, including Syria, to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect all nuclear activities on their territories. The blanket denials issued after the UN misinterpretation notwithstanding, Syria, in fact, has declared one small (30-kilowatt) research reactor located near Damascus to the IAEA. [28] The Syrian government has permitted periodic agency inspections of its operations since it became operational in 1996. [29] Syria has also participated in several technical cooperation programs with the IAEA. [30] Most international experts have traditionally believed that Syria lacks the financial and technical resources to undertake a nuclear weapons program. If North Korea provided Syrian technicians with nuclear technologies, fissile materials, or other assistance, some of these economic and technical barriers to entry into the nuclear club would weaken.

When asked about possible nuclear ties with North Korea in his BBC interview, al-Assad responded that, "We have a relation with North Korea and this is not something in secret...we are not interested in any nuclear activity." [31] Mounir Ali, a spokesperson for Syria's Ministry of Information, likewise maintained that, if the Israelis had struck a nuclear site, "there would have been heavy anti-aircraft guns around, soldiers, radiation, scientists.... But they didn't even kill a goat." [32] Some five weeks after the event, Syrian authorities arranged a tour for foreign journalists of one of the suspected target sites to demonstrate that nothing was amiss. [33] The display reminded one U.S. analyst of similar exhibits arranged by the former Iraqi government when Saddam Hussein was seeking to repudiate suspicions about suspect Iraqi WMD sites. [34]

Several Syrian officials claimed that the Israeli action on September 6 was primarily a public relations ploy aimed at rehabilitating Jerusalem's discredited image as a military power following what Syrians described as Israel's embarrassing defeat during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Deputy President Farouk al-Shara claimed that, "Everything reported about this raid is wrong and is part of a psychological warfare that will not fool Syria." [35] In an October 11 interview with Tunisian journalists, Assad said that the U.S. and Israeli news blackout reflected their embarrassment at having acted on erroneous intelligence: "They are trying to cover up their failure by shrouding it with mystery." [36]

Some Syrian sources also implied that Israel was seeking to dictate the terms of Syria's engagement in regional peace initiatives. Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari asserted that the timing of the Israeli attack was not coincidental and that Israel's goal was "to undermine the ongoing international efforts aimed at activating the peace process and giving Syria its legitimate role." [37]



## The North Korean Dimension

Some observers of the consequences of the September 6 incident have also perceived the uncharacteristically vehement North Korean condemnation of the attack as suspicious given that the event involved two geographically distant countries. A North Korean Foreign Ministry official stated that, "This is a very dangerous provocation little short of wantonly violating the sovereignty of Syria and seriously harassing the regional peace and security...The Democratic People's Republic of Korea strongly denounces the above-said intrusion and extends full support and solidarity to the Syrian people in their just cause to defend the national security and the regional peace." [38]

A North Korean spokesperson subsequently accused those individuals alleging covert nuclear cooperation between Pyongyang and Damascus of engaging in "a clumsy plot hatched by dishonest forces who do not like to see any progress at the six-party talks and in the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea]-U.S. relations." [39] According to press reports, when Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill, the State Department official in charge of negotiating North Korea's nuclear disarmament, explicitly asked the North Korean delegation to the Six-Party Talks about allegations of North Korean-Syrian nuclear ties, the North Koreans flatly denied them. [40]

Pyongyang's strident response reinforced suspicions of a possible North Korean link to the target. Some observers speculated that to have provoked such a sharp rebuke, the Israelis must have killed a number of North Koreans in the attack, perhaps important nuclear technicians and military experts. [41] This interpretation may be reading too much into the DPRK declaration, however, since the country's government-run media has also condemned Israel in the past for violating Syrian air space, where no North Korean or Syrian fatalities were involved. [42]

Western media commentators also cited the longstanding diplomatic and military exchanges between Syria and North Korea as confirmation of close security relations between the two governments. For over a decade, Syria has worked with North Korea to develop its ballistic missile arsenal. Immediately before and after the September 6 incident, Syria and North Korea held several senior-level meetings. On August 14, the North Korean Minister of Foreign Trade visited Syria to sign the protocol on "co-operation in trade and science and technology," which might encompass military cooperation. [43]

Furthermore, three days before the Israeli attack, a North Korean merchant ship off-loaded cargo at the Syrian port of Tartus. Some commentators suspected the delivery included military material such as conventional weapons or nuclear technologies — perhaps even a nuclear warhead, which would explain why Israeli policy makers concluded they needed to launch an urgent preemptive strike. [44] Two weeks after the alleged Israeli air strike, the second highest official in the North Korean government, Kim Yong-Nam, met a senior Syrian government delegation in Pyongyang. [45] The following month, Choe Thae Bok, North Korea's parliament speaker, visited Damascus. [46]

President George Bush himself has not publicly cited any possible North Korean involvement in a Syrian nuclear weapons program, or repeated earlier warnings that his administration drew a "red line" against the transfer of North Korean nuclear material and technologies to other countries or to terrorist groups. When asked about the North Korean issue at a news conference, President Bush responded ambiguously that, "To the extent that they are proliferating, we expect them to stop that proliferation, if they want the Six-Party talks to be successful." [47] President Bush also refused to confirm any North Korean involvement in the September 6 incident during his October 17 press conference, although he again stressed U.S. opposition to nuclear proliferation. (*See side bar*) While insisting that the administration

was very concerned about any indications of illicit WMD proliferation, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that "We're handling those in appropriate diplomatic channels." [48]

In a television appearance on Fox News, however, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, while refusing to confirm either the Israeli air strike or rumored North Korean-Syrian nuclear collaboration, more bluntly cautioned that, "If such an activity were taking place, it would be a matter of great concern because the president has put down a very strong marker with the North Koreans about further proliferation efforts, and obviously any effort by the Syrians to pursue weapons of mass destruction would be a concern." [49]

The president's refusal to comment publicly on the nature of the Israeli strike might be due to the absence of definitive evidence about a North Korean-Syrian nuclear connection. Critics of the Six-Party Talks, however, claim that the administration does not want to risk disrupting the Korean denuclearization process once again at a time when the North Koreans appeared more cooperative than usual. [50]

### **Western Commentators Speculate About Nuclear Materials, Arms to Hezbollah, or Preparations for an Israeli Attack on Iran**

Despite Israel's silence and Syrian-North Korean denials, many Western media commentators readily speculated that Israel had launched an air strike against an object that the Israelis perceived as presenting a genuine threat. They maintained that Israel would not have risked provoking a war with Syria unless it calculated it had no choice but to destroy such a high-value target. [51]

**Nuclear Target.** The most popular interpretation was that Israel attacked a component associated with a possible Syrian-North Korean joint nuclear weapons program. For example, a September 18 article in the *New York Times* cited current and former Israeli and U.S. security experts, who had received Israeli briefings on the incident, as describing the target as a part of "a rudimentary Syrian nuclear program." [52]

According to ABC News, in July 2007, the Israeli government presented the Bush administration with satellite imagery showing a nuclear facility in northeast Syria. The Israelis also reportedly presented other intelligence indicating that North Korea had supplied nuclear technology to Syria. [53] ABC and other sources related that some U.S. policy makers found this evidence unconvincing. Reporters from *The Sunday Times* wrote that these U.S. uncertainties led the Israeli government to order a commando raid into Syria. Supposedly the Special Forces involved collected nuclear material that Israeli technicians confirmed was of North Korean origin. [54] According to *The Times*, the White House supposedly approved of the Israeli air strike after receiving this information. [55]

ABC News, however, reported that the Israelis feared that their knowledge of the existence of the Syrian nuclear facility would leak to the press. This concern led them to decide to attack the site despite American unease about the quality of the intelligence, the lack of urgency given the incipient nature of the Syrian nuclear program, and the possible adverse regional diplomatic and security consequences that could result from an Israeli preemptive strike. [56] On October 19, ABC News reported that Israel's confidence in the accuracy of its intelligence increased after Mossad managed to place a mole in the suspect Syrian nuclear facility. According to this report, the spy provided detailed photographs of the facility that, while not showing the presence yet of any fissile material at the site, nevertheless confirmed suspicions raised by other intelligence sources that North Korea was helping Syria construct a nuclear reactor complex. [57]



Emily Landau, director of the arms control and regional security program at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, might have represented Israeli government assessments when she told Western journalists that, "The one lesson that Israel has learned from the Iranian experience is that if you don't take care of something like this at the very initial stages, you're going to have a bigger problem later on." [58]

The *New York Times* reported that Israeli aircraft destroyed an incipient nuclear reactor that the Syrians were building with North Korean technical assistance. According to this account, the Israelis feared that the Syrians intended to use the graphite-moderated reactor in the same manner as the North Koreans: to produce the plutonium required to build atomic bombs. The *New York Times* correspondents argued that the Israeli government wanted the attack to show "its determination to snuff out even a nascent project in a neighboring state." [59]

Most recently, on October 23, the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) published privately obtained satellite images that show what could have been a nuclear reactor under construction in Syria, just east of the Euphrates River. This location may have been the site Israeli warplanes attacked on September 6. The ISIS analysts also identify several possible similarities between the techniques North Korea used to construct its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and those suggested by the photographs of the Syrian site. [60] U.S. and international experts and officials shown the pictures by the *Washington Post* stated that "there was a strong and credible possibility that they depict the remote compound that was attacked." [61] The co-author of the ISIS report, David Albright, told the *Post* that he was "pretty convinced that Syria was trying to build a nuclear reactor," though one of the prominent nuclear experts interviewed — John E. Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org — said he found the ISIS imagery inconclusive. [62]

**Practice Strike against Iran.** A less common explanation of the September 6 incident was that Israeli warplanes were attempting to rehearse an attack against nuclear facilities in Iran. International analysts sharing this interpretation note that Syria and Iran both rely on similar air defense systems based on Soviet and Russian technologies. [63] For example, Syria recently purchased Russia's Pantsyr air defense system, which Iran is also currently integrating into its own defense network. Although the Syrian network is currently more elaborate, an attack against it could provide insights into how best to circumvent Iranian air defenses. [64]

Several aviation experts writing in Western journals stated that Israeli fighters relied on recently developed American technologies that allowed the Israeli Air Force to hack into Syria's air defense networks and, once inside, monitor and disable its components. [65] Two detachable fuel tanks normally used by Israel's latest generation long-range bomber, the Raam F151, were found inside Turkey near its border with Syria. Attached to the Raam, the tanks extend the aircraft's range to over 2,000 kilometers (km), sufficient to reach targets in Iran. [66] From the perspective of this interpretation, the operation also allowed Israel to gauge neighboring countries' potential responses to an Israeli air strike against Iran, another isolated Middle Eastern country. [67]

If concerns about Iran determined the Israeli response, the Israelis might have hoped to convince Iranian officials that their nuclear facilities were vulnerable to a comparable Israeli air strike, and thereby ensure Tehran's cooperation in international negotiations seeking to clarify the status of the Iranian nuclear program and curb its expansion. Adherents to this hypothesis maintain that, through their public silence, the United States and Arab governments are signaling their approval of this negotiating stratagem. [68] One Western analyst recalled the Chinese proverb that "sometimes you have to kill the chicken to scare the monkey." [69] (A contrary interpretation would be that an Israeli

air strike against Syria might lead the Iranians to take additional steps to strengthen their air defenses, harden potential targets, further conceal and disperse sensitive facilities, and pursue other measures to reduce their vulnerability.)

**Non-Nuclear WMD.** A report in the September 17 issue of *Jane's Defence Weekly* outlining joint Syrian-Iranian efforts to equip Syrian ballistic missiles with chemical warheads generated some media speculation that Israel conducted an air strike to warn both countries that Tel Aviv would respond vigorously to any possible chemical weapons threat against it. [70] The Syrian armed forces appear to have developed a wide variety of chemical munitions for delivery by missiles, aircraft, and other means. Hundreds of Syrian Scud missiles can attack targets in Israel, including its large population centers, from launch sites anywhere in Syria. [71] According to *Jane's*, a late July explosion at a Syrian military installation near the city of Aleppo occurred when Syrian and Iranian personnel were attempting to load a warhead containing mustard gas on a Scud-C missile. *The New York Times* cited a "former intelligence official" as asserting that Syria might have been seeking to develop an "airburst capability for its ballistic missiles" that would considerably increase the destructive capacity of its chemical warheads. [72] Western diplomats also speculate that North Korea has been seeking to compensate for the poor accuracy of the Scud design by helping Syria deploy chemical weapons on the missile. [73]

**Conventional Weapons for Hezbollah.** An alternative hypothesis, widely reported initially but with declining frequency thereafter, is that the Israeli warplanes attacked a consignment of conventional weapons that Iranians were sending via Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This interpretation argues that Israeli policy makers had become so concerned about the unending flow of Iranian arms to Hezbollah that they used the opportunity provided by their transshipment through neighboring Syria to send Damascus and Tehran a powerful warning to end these transfers. [74]

The unusually long and comprehensive Israeli censorship surrounding the incident soon led many commentators to question this interpretation. In particular, they noted that Israeli officials would have logical reasons to publicize the attack in order to underscore Syria's continuing interference in Lebanon's internal affairs in violation of several international agreements. [75]

### **Arab and Iranian Governments Largely Silent**

No Arab government besides Syria has formally commented on the September 6 incident. The Egyptian weekly *Al-Ahram* accurately commented on the "synchronized silence of the Arab world." [76]

The most prominent declaration by a non-Syrian source occurred after Syrian Vice President al-Shara said that the Israelis had mistakenly bombed the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD). The center issued a formal statement denying the allegation, though without directly criticizing their host government: "Leaks in the Zionist media concerning this ACSAD station are total inventions and lies." [77] A few nongovernmental Arab media sources also discussed the September 6 incident. For example, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Watan* claimed that a U.S. plane covered the Israeli aircraft from a higher altitude. [78] But for the most part the Arab media has simply avoided the controversial subject.

Western commentators took the position that the lack of official non-Syrian Arab condemnations of Israel's action, threats of retaliation

against Israel, or even professions of support for the Syrian government or people must imply that their governments tacitly supported the Israeli action. [79]

Iranian officials also have not formally commented on the Israeli attack or Syria's reactions. At an October 9 meeting of the Interparliamentary Union in Geneva, Iranian parliamentary speaker Hadad Alel told reporters that, "The violation of the airspace of Syria by Israeli planes was not meant to be a signal for Iran" because "Israel is not in a position to have the illusion of attacking Iran." [80] Nevertheless, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reportedly sent his nephew, Akbar Mehrabian, to Syria to evaluate the results of the attack first-hand. [81]

### **China and Moscow Treat Incident as Crisis Management Issue**

According to open-source press commentary, the air strike initially led the Chinese government to postpone a forthcoming session of the Six-Party Talks, which seek to secure North Korea's abandonment of its nuclear weapons program in return for various diplomatic and economic benefits. Chinese officials were allegedly concerned that "America might confront the North Koreans over their weapons deals with Syria" and only rescheduled them after they had become convinced the talks would be "constructive." [82]

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Sultanov reportedly urged Syria to proceed no further than submitting a letter of protest to the United Nations. [83] The Israeli paper *Yediot Ahronot* related an unnamed Israeli security official as saying that, after the attack, the Russian government directed Russian merchant ships to beam electronic signals into Israel to assess Israel's information warfare assets and disrupt Israelis' commercial television programs as punishment: "I believe that they sent ships to the region equipped with electronic warfare systems...to try and examine Israel's capabilities in electronic warfare and also to give trouble to those who gave them trouble." [84] Neither the Russian foreign nor defense ministries formally commented on these reports.

### **Conclusion**

Additional information about what actually happened on September 6 would not necessarily clarify the objectives of those involved. Does the Syrian leadership want a nuclear deterrent to induce Israel into negotiations or is it seeking a nuclear shield to hide behind while using Hezbollah as a proxy sword against Israel? Did Israeli leaders attempt to eliminate an incipient Syrian WMD threat or did they primarily aim to send a warning to Iran about presenting Israel with a much more imminent nuclear danger? Is North Korea seeking to circumvent the Six-Party agreement before its implementation or would evidence of nuclear collaboration with Syria simply testify to North Korea's continuing efforts to earn foreign currency even through the sale of WMD technologies to questionable clients? Furthermore, the complexity of these questions increases exponentially when analysts try to discern differences among the various government factions, or the motives of other possible domestic and foreign actors that might influence each government's WMD policies.

The prominence of the allegations regarding various multinational connections among countries of proliferation concern make the incident especially important for those interested in WMD nonproliferation issues. Speculation about North Korean nuclear materials flowing to Syria, North Korean-Syrian collaboration on chemical warheads for ballistic missiles, and possible trilateral cooperation on special weapons that also

involves Iran reinforces concerns about the persistence of state-sponsored proliferation networks despite heightened international action against them in recent years and the Bush administration's insistence that such transfers cross various "red lines" defining vital U.S. national security interests.

The incident also highlights a major weakness in the existing nuclear nonproliferation regime. Following the intense media speculation that the target of the Israeli air strike was a nuclear facility in northeastern Syria, the IAEA formally asked Syria and other governments to provide whatever information they might possess about undeclared nuclear activities in Syria. A September 15 statement succinctly summarized the agency's position:

- "The IAEA has no information about any undeclared nuclear facility in Syria and no information about recent reports.
- "We would obviously investigate any relevant information coming our way.
- "The IAEA Secretariat expects any country having information about nuclear-related activities in another country to provide that information to the IAEA.
- "The IAEA is in contact with the Syrian authorities to verify the authenticity of these reports." [85]

In October 2007, a diplomatic source knowledgeable about IAEA activities indicated that the agency had made informal inquiries to Damascus shortly after the incident, but had not received a response from the Syrian government. [86] At present, IAEA experts are reviewing satellite imagery of the site of the alleged attack to determine (after the fact) whether Syria was constructing a nuclear facility at the location. [87] In the meantime, the Syrians are in the process of dismantling the remains of the facility, which will reduce the intelligence value of any possible on-site inspections. [88]

Notwithstanding the IAEA inquiry, the legal status of any possible Syrian nuclear activities is problematic. Although Syria is a signatory of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, as noted the NPT explicitly grants all countries in good standing the right to construct nuclear reactors in order to generate electric power or for other peaceful purposes. In addition, some analysts believe that the NPT does not require governments to declare the existence of reactors during their earliest stages of construction. [89]

Israel's response, if motivated by concerns about a possible Syrian nuclear weapons program, demonstrates that some governments do not consider these safeguards sufficiently strong security guarantees — and will employ controversial unilateral measures, including the use of force, if necessary to address these concerns.

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