

The Attack on the Nuclear Reactor in Syria: The Intelligence Dimension

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After Israel took official responsibility for the attack on the nuclear reactor in Deir ez-Zor, emphasis in the ensuing public discourse was placed on the strategic aspects of the daring political decision to implement the “Begin Doctrine” on the one hand, and the originality and perfect execution demonstrated in the precision attack of the Israeli Air Force on the other hand. In contrast, the discussion on the contribution of the Israeli intelligence community was sparse and shallow, and tended to look for mistakes and failures in the intelligence realm. Oversized headlines on the “intelligence failure,” given the ostensibly late discovery of the reactor; reference to an erroneous, marginal, and shallow paragraph from the State Comptroller’s report on the Heads of the Intelligence Services Committee; and the in-fighting among the intelligence community as to who deserves the credit, all hinder a better understanding the affair and drawing system-wide insights that could help in contending with similar challenges in the future.

The discovery of the nuclear reactor in Syria was indeed a “strategic surprise,” but was not an intelligence failure. On the contrary, it was Intelligence that exposed the surprise and turned it into a “strategic success,” critical in its contribution to an important achievement: not only was the Syrian reactor destroyed, but in the wake of the attack, war did not break out between Israel and Syria.

Engaging in the Syrian nuclear issue requires conceptual clarification regarding the various components of the nuclear program in the plutonium track. Construction of the reactor is the first essential stage for realizing military nuclear capability. The reactor must be operational (“hot”) and produce plutonium in adequate quantities, and a plutonium separation plant is required. The last stage is developing a weapon system and launch platform. It would have been possible to claim that there was an “intelligence failure” if Intelligence discovered that Syria already possessed full military nuclear capability, or even if the reactor were discovered after it went online.

So far the public discourse has primarily revolved around the issue of the reactor’s discovery, but is important to analyze other issues connected to the role of intelligence, including:

- a. Comprehending the level of risk that the project poses to Israel
- b. Understanding the project’s time line and hence the time constraints in attacking it

- c. Planning the operation and assisting in its execution
- d. Assessing risks and reactions to the Israeli operation
- e. The campaign, post factum, for building international legitimacy.

The Syrian nuclear project began and progressed early in the early 2000s, “under the radar” of the intelligence community, when the information forthcoming was sparse and considered tenuous. The Iranian nuclear issue, which was accorded high priority in the community, pushed the Syrian nuclear issue to the sidelines. Nonetheless, a team was established in Military Intelligence to explore the possibility of a nuclear program in all neighboring countries, and the possibility was raised of the existence of a plutonium reactor near the Euphrates in Syria. Subsequently, a suspicious building was spotted, whose purpose was carefully concealed. In addition, persons suspected of leading the project were identified, and finally a series of operational moves were taken to gather more intelligence, the most significant being those of the Mossad in Europe, which helped to confirm the suspicion that a nuclear project was involved.

Intelligence operations did not end with the collection breakthrough. The community had to cope with two particular challenges: first, at the strategic level, it had to assess the type of reaction - or lack of reaction - to an attack likely to come from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This assessment had a direct impact on the political leadership when making a decision on the attack.

Developing the idea of Assad’s “room for denial” constituted a conceptual innovation, and was central to the planning of the attack and the understanding by the political echelon of the need to refrain from claiming Israeli responsibility. The attack on the reactor in Iraq 25 years earlier was different in the sense that Iraq did not possess the ability to retaliate to the Israeli attack by launching ballistic missiles, it had no common border with Israel, and it was in the midst of a war with Iran. Therefore, it was assumed that it would not opt to open another front. Syria, in contrast, apart from its common border with Israel, had considerable offensive capabilities and had observed less than stellar capabilities of elements within the IDF one year earlier in the Second Lebanon War. Intelligence assessed that if a low signature attack were launched and Israel did not claim responsibility for it, in all likelihood, Assad would opt not to go to war. Inter alia, the assessment was that Assad would be eager neither to reveal to Syria’s citizens the failure to defend the reactor nor to disclose to the international community Syria’s violation of the nuclear proliferation treaty (NPT).

This assessment was not a “prediction,” but a well-informed assessment that took into account the intelligence knowledge on the project in Syria, intelligence’s deep understanding of Assad, and the constraints bearing on the Syrian regime, as well as deep

knowledge of the operational alternatives. Intelligence was not required to be a prophet, but it developed a model grounded in intelligence understandings, which influenced the nature of the attack and helped the leaders reach a decision.

Regarding the second challenge, namely, the attack itself, the intelligence community had to provide accurate information on the facility, on the reactor, and on its surroundings. The intelligence information was not enough in itself, and execution of the attack necessitated close cooperation between the regular intelligence entities and the operational and operations research entities in the air force. In retrospect, it seems that the intelligence community, in its various elements, succeeded in uniting its efforts and operating with a high level of integration, or “jointness.” This was true regarding the transfer of intelligence missions from Military Intelligence to the Mossad as an intelligence collection organization, as well as the clarification of differences of opinion on assessments of the threat and possible reactions to the attack.

There are some who think it would be wiser to unite all the intelligence agencies in the community (for example, along the lines of the German model; such a proposal was raised in Israel in the 1960s by Meir Amit), but the attack in Syria underscores the advantages of constructive competition (“scholars’ rivalry”), which enables coping better with challenges.

Another issue emerging from the testimony of US administration officials at the time was the cautious approach of the US intelligence community led by the CIA, which was burned just a few years previously in its erroneous assessment of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The difference between US Intelligence’s approach and that of Israeli Intelligence stems from the difference in the location of the two intelligence communities. From Israel’s point of view, the construction of a reactor in a hostile country so close to Israel constitutes an unacceptable threat. For the US, however, even if the reactor were completed, it would take time to complete other components of the project (a plutonium separation plant, and development of a missile able to deliver a nuclear warhead). In addition, according to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates – both opposing a US and Israeli attack on the reactor – US intelligence officials expressed their doubts regarding the IDF’s ability to cope with an ensuing war in view of Israel’s performance in the Second Lebanon War. They also feared that Israel might drag the US into a third war, in addition to Afghanistan and Iraq. In other words, The US and Israel were not divided regarding the “facts,” since they shared all their information, but with regard to their interpretation and their respective viewpoints.

In the aftermath of the Syrian reactor affair, several lessons can be drawn from the intelligence point of view, including:

- a. The efforts of adversaries to attain nuclear capabilities will always be a unique intelligence challenge. As proved in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, the enemy will strive to advance a nuclear program under rigorous secrecy, deep compartmentalization, and maximum concealment.
- b. In order to cope with the challenge, it is important to ensure that the subject is at the top of the national priority intelligence requirements (PIR). In the practical sphere, it is necessary to ensure the allocation of extensive collection resources, routine and non-routine analysis frameworks (red teams), and institutionalized attention of the intelligence community's leadership to the subject.
- c. The development of nuclear projects in Libya and Syria proves that the ability to attain nuclear capability is not limited to countries possessing relatively sophisticated know-how. Those lacking the know-how can attain the required breakthrough with the aid of turnkey projects of foreign entities. Hence the considerable importance of broad cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies monitoring nuclear proliferation
- d. Intelligence's role does not end with discovery of the project. The intelligence input is extremely important for the operational response and for assessment of the enemy's reaction. To develop a model that predicts the enemy's reaction as a function of operational, political, and explanatory moves, high quality intelligence input is essential.
- e. The intelligence community should see national missions as shared missions. In Israel, in the absence of an authoritative central body overseeing the intelligence community and shaping its strategy, the intelligence community must enhance the jointness within it, nurturing the relative advantages of each agency and encouraging pluralism of thought.