

Syria, September 6

Sharpening Questions and Dilemmas

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From reports that have appeared mainly in the US and British media, on September 6, 2007 Israel apparently attacked a nascent nuclear facility in Syria that was under construction through the help of North Korea. Some recent reports assess that it could have been something even more ominous: a facility for assembling bombs. While none of the major protagonists are showing their cards, there is mounting evidence that supports the conclusion that highly suspicious activity was underway at the site. The fact that according to satellite images Syria flattened the area that was hit – which leaves nothing for the IAEA to inspect – has convinced the more hard-core skeptics of this. Already from the beginning, however, there were good reasons to believe that this was the site of some form of nuclear activity, particularly since it is highly implausible that Israel would have risked a war with Syria following a tension-ridden summer for anything less than what it perceived as a supreme strategic goal.¹

That Syria is apparently seeking to supplement its chemical deterrence with a nuclear one is of course a serious source of concern, and the fact that it is acting clandestinely indicates that Syria was violating its international commitments according to the NPT. At the same time, more important strategic questions are at stake that relate not only to Syria, but also to Iran, North Korea, and relations between the three states. And while experts may continue to pore over satellite images and debate whether there is conclusive evidence that the attacked site was designated to be a nuclear reactor, the emergent strategic questions, in light of what seems likely to have happened, are particularly pressing.

From Syria's vantage, the question is not only whether Syria was striving for an additional layer of deterrence (beyond its chemical weapons threat), but whether it was also seeking the enhanced regional standing that comes with nuclear capabilities. In that case, however, what would be the implications for Syria's relations with Iran? In fact, when relations with Iran are



Satellite photos of the site in Syria, before and after it was bombed, GettyImages/ Imagebank

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factored in, it is hard to imagine that Iran was not involved in Syria's decision. In addition, the facility was presumably the product of cooperation with North Korea, which works in cooperation with Iran in the non-conventional realm (and perhaps even received the financing from Iran). In that case, what would Iran's calculation be in allowing its strategic partner to develop the same capabilities that it was striving for? An additional possibility was that Iran and North Korea were perhaps hoping to use Syria as a kind of "safe haven" for their own nuclear technologies and components when they came under greater international scrutiny. To understand the new proliferation challenges and shifting strategic realities, these are at least some of the questions that must be considered.

As for Israel, the possibility was raised that this attack could very well have been a message to Iran, indicating Israel's willingness to employ military force in that sphere as well. While this could be the case, a different interpretation – that has more far-reaching implications for the control of WMD in the Middle East – is that Israel's attack was the expression not so much of *future* options vis-à-vis Iran, but rather of a conclusion that Israel has drawn from *past* experience, namely, the ineffective handling of the Iranian nuclear file from 2002 until today. In this sense, the lesson is that if nuclear activity is not nipped in the bud, it sprouts into a problem that is more difficult to resolve, either with diplomacy or through use of military force.

In other words, not only is the NPT not able to ensure that a determined proliferator will not attain nuclear weapons, but different forms of diplomacy attempted by strong states might not do the job either. And when it finally becomes clear that diplomacy has failed, too much time will have elapsed, rendering the military option too difficult to carry out, for both technical and political reasons.

The severe limitations of the global NPT regime, as well as the inability of strong international players to employ diplomacy successfully could very well encourage states to take matters into their own hands in the future. Another option open to states – in the immediate context, to Middle East states – is to both contemplate more seriously and search actively for solutions that are grounded in *regional dynamics*: regional dialogue on arms control, in order to foster new regional rules of the game. This is particularly apt when we take into account that both the motivation to proliferate and the strongest motivation to *stop* proliferation (on the part of Israel) are very much grounded in regional calculations.

Beyond the complex regional issues, there is a global problem as well that demands attention on the international level. The possible North Korea/Iran/Syria connection brings into sharper focus the changing nature of the global non-proliferation challenge, which makes it imperative to explore new directions for international arms control and nonproliferation efforts.

Note

- 1 William J. Broad and Mark Mazzetti, "Photos Show Cleansing of Suspect Syrian Site," *New York Times*, October 26, 2007.

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