

When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST COLD WAR ERA —

The Destruction of Al-Kibar

by Peter C. Oleson

"Just before midnight on September 5, 2007, four [Israeli Air Force] F-15s and four F-16s took off.... After flying north along the Mediterranean Coast, the planes turned east and followed the Syrian-Turkish border... Using standard electronic scrambling tools, the Israelis blinded Syria's air-defense system." Their target was a large building at Al-Kibar, in northeastern Syria, near Deir al-Zour. [B]etween 12:40 and 12:53 a.m., the pilots uttered the computer-generated code word of the day, "Arizona," indicating that seventeen tons of explosives had been dropped on their target, a plutonium nuclear reactor still under construction but nearing completion, which was totally destroyed.¹

Initial Concerns

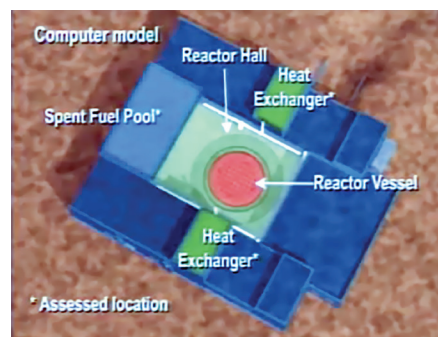
Israeli intelligence leaders were surprised in December 2003 to learn of the existence of a Libyan nuclear program, which the US and the British had uncovered and persuaded Libya's dictator, Moammar Qaddafi, to dismantle. Mossad's analysts in February 2004 reported that Syria also had a nuclear program, but Mossad's head, Meir Dagan, was skeptical.²

Syria was a long-standing customer for North Korean weapons, including Scud ballistic missiles.³ When Bashar Assad succeeded his father, Hafez Assad, in 2000, he began to supply weapons to Hezbollah and received a delegation from North Korea. "The Mossad was convinced that the subject of these secret talks was

a further upgrading of Syria's military capabilities." But no one suspected a nuclear connection.⁴

NSA TIP-OFF. "In the spring of 2004, the... National Security Agency (NSA) detected a suspiciously high number of telephone calls between Syria and North Korea, with a noticeably busy line of communication between the North Korean capital Pyongyang and a place in the northern Syrian desert called Al-Kibar. The NSA dossier was sent to the Israeli military's '8200' unit," which is NSA's equivalent.⁵

SATELLITE IMAGERY. US satellite imagery had detected a large structure at Al-Kibar in 2006, but it was



A screenshot of a CIA computer model of the Syrian nuclear reactor at Al Kibar.

not identified as nuclear related. While unusually large, it was rectangular and lacking a visible iconic dome structure.⁶ Israeli intelligence nicknamed it

"the Cube."⁷

What was only understood later was that the Syrians were engaged in a deception about Al-Kibar. There was no security surrounding a sensitive facility that was built in a ravine and not noticeable from nearby roads. There were no nearby defensive surface-to-air missiles. The "reactor was built to look like an old Ottoman-era fort."⁸ There was rubble in the surrounding area and animals wandering around.⁹

A DEFECTOR. In December 2006 (or February 2007) Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

4. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, "The Story of 'Operation Orchard,' How Israel Destroyed Syria's Al-Kibar Nuclear Reactor, Part 2, *Spiegel Online*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-story-of-operation-orchard-how-israel-destroyed-syria-s-al-kibar-nuclear-reactor-a-658663-2.html>. Libya's program had been abetted by Pakistani A.Q. Khan, who became a freelance nuclear trafficker. Hafez Assad had rejected A.Q. Khan's offers to sell nuclear technology to Syria. (Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, "Inside Israel's Secret Raid on Syria's Nuclear Reactor," *Politico*, March 20, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/03/20/inside-israels-secret-raid-on-syrias-nuclear-reactor-217663>.)

5. Follath and Stark, Part 2. Also *Weekly Intelligence Note* #41-09, November 10, 2009, Association of Former Intelligence Officers, citing an article by Michael Crowley of November 6 in *The National Review*.

6. Yaakov Katz, *Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019, p271.

7. Amos Harel and Aluf Benn, *Haaretz.com*.

8. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p18.

9. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p18. See also Amos Harel and Aluf Benn, *Haaretz.com* and Isabel Kershner, "Ending Secrecy, Israel Says It Bombed Syrian Reactor in 2007," *New York Times*, March 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/world/middleeast/israel-syria-nuclear-reactor.html>.

1. David Makovsky, "The Silent Strike: How Israel Bombed a Syrian Nuclear Installation and Kept It Secret," *The New Yorker*, September 10, 2012.

2. Amos Harel and Aluf Benn, "No Longer a Secret: How Israel Destroyed Syria's Nuclear Reactor," *Haaretz.com*, March 23, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/MAGAZINE-no-longer-a-secret-how-israel-destroyed-syria-s-nuclear-reactor-1.5914407>.

3. *NightWatch* for the Night of 25 June 2019. *NightWatch@jfmnightwatch.com*.

General Ali Reza Askari disappeared. He had been security advisor to Iranian president Mohammad Khatami and a vice minister of defense. Despite rumors that he had been kidnapped in Istanbul and that he had been a spy for the West for years,¹⁰ he apparently defected to the US and provided valuable intelligence on Iran and Syria. He confirmed that Syria had a nuclear weapons program that was assisted by North Korea and financed by Iran. The US shared this intelligence with Israel.¹¹

INCONCLUSIVE ANALYSIS. Despite the accumulating evidence, including new satellite imagery revealing a cooling station alongside the near-by Euphrates River connected to the Cube, there were many unknowns.

Getting the Needed Intelligence

TARGETING IBRAHIM OTHMAN. With accumulating evidence, in mid-2006, Israeli military intelligence, AMAN, had informed Mossad of AMAN's suspicions concerning a possible Syrian nuclear program and requested help in confirming or denying the possibility.¹² AMAN did not conduct covert operations; Mossad did.¹³ It was decided to target Ibrahim Othman, the head of Syria's Atomic Energy Commission.

In early March 2007, Mossad agents in Vienna surreptitiously entered the residence of Othman, who was attending a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹⁴ The agents downloaded the contents of his computer's hard drive and installed a Trojan Horse that would allow for continued monitoring of Othman's computer activities.¹⁵ On the hard drive were almost three dozen photographs of a building in various stages of construction that appeared to be a nuclear processing facility. Included were photos of North Korean workers.¹⁶ "When the intelligence people analyzed the material from Vienna, they were

appalled. The material left no room for doubt."¹⁷ On March 8, Meir Dagan, the director of Mossad, informed Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.¹⁸

BRINGING IN THE AMERICANS. Ten days later, on April 18, 2007 during a scheduled visit to Israel Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was informed of the Israel's discovery.¹⁹ Later that month Mossad's Dagan visited the White House to brief Vice President Cheney and top national security officials on the photos from Othman's computer.²⁰ Most revealing was one photo of Othman standing next to Chon Chibu, the head of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear weapons facility, who was well known to the US as a member of Pyongyang's delegation to the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program.²¹ US intelligence had also noted the Chibu was taking frequent trips to Damascus.²²

Dagan also brief CIA Director Michael Hayden with whom Mossad had developed close relations.²³ Israel needed American expertise on the photos of the reactor and on the North Korean connection.²⁴ When informed President Bush, mindful of the Iraqi WMD debacle, told his intelligence chiefs to verify the Israeli intelligence. He said "Gotta be secret, and gotta be sure."²⁵

CIA's analysis of past reporting surfaced intelligence about mysterious shipments from North Korea to Syria as early as 2001.²⁶ The National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) did detailed analysis of overhead imagery. A Red Team established to challenge others' conclusions finally stated "If it's not a nuclear reactor, then it's a fake nuclear reactor."²⁷

COMMANDO RECONNAISSANCE. In June Israel infiltrated a special operations group to "within a mile of the site to take and transmit additional photos, bring back soil samples, and provide... other information... needed for a strike."²⁸ Because the infiltrators

10. Uzi Mahnaimi, "Defector Spied on Iran for Years," *The Sunday Times*, March 11, 2007.

11. See Erich Follath and Holger Stark, "How Israel Destroyed Syria's Al Kibar Nuclear Reactor, Part 3: 'The CIA Catches a Big Fish,'" Nov. 2, 2009, *Spiegel ONLINE*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-story-of-operation-orchard-how-israel-destroyed-syria-s-al-kibar-nuclear-reactor-a-658663-3.html>. See also Marcel Serr, "North Korea Built a Nuclear Reactor for Syria (And Israel Destroyed It)," *The National Interest*, Jan. 4, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/north-korea-built-nuclear-reactor-syria-israel-destroyed-it-23922>.

12. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p32.

13. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p32.

14. David Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*.

15. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p40.

16. Erich Follath and Holger Stark in their *Spiegel Online* article state that Mossad's covert operations occurred when Othman was visiting London. Other reports indicate it took place in Vienna.

17. Amos Harel and Aluf Benn, *Haaretz.com*.

18. David Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*.

19. *Ibid*.

20. Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p15.

21. *Ibid*, p17. This intelligence revealed that while North Korea was negotiating with the US and other nations about non-proliferation it was involved in doing exactly that. (Katz, p59.)

22. *Ibid*, p18

23. *Ibid*, p28.

24. *Ibid*, p29.

25. Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*.

26. Katz, p53. Apparently, Bashar al Assad had begun a relationship with North Korea in June 2000, soon after he succeeded his father, Hafez Assad. The first North Korean scientists arrived in Syria in 2002. (Marcel Serr, "North Korea Built a Nuclear Reactor for Syria (And Israel Destroyed It)," *The National Interest*, January 4, 2018. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/north-korea-built-nuclear-reactor-syria-israel-destroyed-it-23922>.)

27. Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*.

28. *Ibid*. See also Serr, *The National Interest*.

were discovered they did not collect convincing evidence of what was happening at Al-Kibar.²⁹

Subsequently Mossad received intelligence that a North Korean freighter, Al-Ahmad, had arrived in Syria in September carrying uranium materials.³⁰ The previous September another North Korean shipment of suspicious looking pipes had been seized in Cyprus.³¹ Assad's own words in early June were a warning: He "predicted that toward the end of the summer there would be a development that would completely change the reality of the Middle East."³²

Operation Orchard



Before and after picture of building struck during Operation Orchard in Syria

As knowledge of Al-Kibar spread, Israeli officials were concerned about a leak, which could alert Syria, so they acted quickly. The air raid on Al-Kibar on the night of September 5/6 was disguised initially as an exercise over the Mediterranean. Some of the scrambled Israeli Air Force jets returned to base. The eight Operation Orchard³³ aircraft flew north. One report indicates that they eliminated a radar station enroute.³⁴ Aircraft imagery of the results showed a total destruction of the Cube. "Ten North Korean nuclear engineers reportedly were killed in that raid."³⁵ Some reports indicated three dozen may have been killed.³⁶

Israeli "Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan... and asked him to inform President Assad in Damascus that Israel

would not tolerate another nuclear plant – but that no further hostile action was planned."³⁷

"Israel sought to avoid escalation into a military confrontation with Syria by opting for a small-footprint, targeted, unacknowledged strike that would allow Bashar al-Assad to deny the existence of a nuclear program in Syria and refrain from a military response."³⁸

Finishing the Job

"After rebuffing repeated requests by the IAEA to visit the site, Syria ultimately permitted a small group of inspectors... to visit for one day in June 2008." The inspectors noted that the site had been cleaned up. Nevertheless, they found "particles of man-made uranium in the samples, which Syria claimed were the residue of the bombing. In 2009, the inspectors reported that graphite had also been found at the site; Syria again issued a denial. In its most recent report, the IAEA concluded that the site was 'very likely' a nuclear reactor."³⁹

On February 12, 2008 Imad Mughniyah, who was the international operations chief for the Lebanese terrorist group, Hezbollah, and who had escaped numerous attempts to capture or kill him, died in a car bomb attack in Damascus.⁴⁰ According to press reports the assassination was a joint US-Israeli affair but carried out by Mossad. Mughniyah was "the most notorious terrorist mastermind in the Middle East."^{41,42} "The Mossad had information that Mughniyah was planning to avenge the air strike on Al-Kibar with an attack

37. Ibid.

38. Elena Chachko, "The Al-Kibar Strike: What a Difference 26 Years Make," *Lawfare*, April 2, 2018. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-kibar-strike-what-difference-26-years-make>. Operation "Opera," the 1981 Israeli Air Force bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor outside Baghdad, implemented what became known as the "Begin Doctrine," according to which Israel would not allow an adversary to pursue nuclear weapons and would resort to force if necessary. The Al-Kibar strike is another instance of that same doctrine.

39. Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*. See also Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part V.

40. Jeff Stein, "Escape Artist: How a Legendary Hezbollah Terrorist Eluded the CIA," *Newsweek*, 2/16/15. <https://www.newsweek.com/mughniyah-kidnapped-cia-305155>.

41. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part 5.

42. Mughniyah had been tied to the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 4 Israelis and 25 Argentines; 1983 bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut, which killed 63 including 8 in the CIA station; the 1984 kidnapping, torture and murder of CIA station chief William Buckley in Lebanon; the bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that killed 85 also in 1994; the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847 and the killing of US Navy diver Robert Stethem; the planning for the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US military; and hundreds of American troops in Iraq after 2003. (Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad killed senior Hezbollah figure in car bombing," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2015.)

29. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part 3.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Amos Harel and Aluf Benn, *Haaretz.com*.

33. There were various codenames associated with the Israeli operation: "Orchard" and "Outside the Box" being the two most cited.

34. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part 4.

35. *NightWatch* for the night of 25 June 2019.

36. Makovsky, "The Silent Strike," *The New Yorker*.

on an Israeli embassy – either in the Azerbaijani capital Baku, Cairo or the Jordanian capital Amman.”⁴³



Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Suleiman from the Special Services Group (SSG).

On August 1, General Mohammad Suleiman was killed by a sniper while swimming at his home on the coast of Lebanon near Tartus. Close to Assad and in charge of support to Hezbollah he was one of the few senior Syrian officials knowledgeable of the Al-Kibar reactor and believed to be the principal contact with the North Koreans.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Israel kept secret the September 2007 air raid on Al-Kibar for a decade. Although press reports leaked out about the raid, Israel was concerned that publicizing the raid could cause Assad embarrassment and lead to war. “Syria has consistently denied that it had a reactor.”⁴⁵ Israel briefed its allies and other nation’s chiefs of what it had done to assuage them and remind them of the danger of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of an unstable regime or a terrorist group. The secrecy worked. Assad remained quiet. No broader war erupted. An existential threat was eliminated.

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43. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part 5.

44. Erich Follath and Holger Stark, Part 6. Serr writes that Suleiman was shot while having a dinner party.

45. Makovsky, “The Silent Strike,” *The New Yorker*.