

# Israel's 2007 Strike on Syrian Nuclear Reactor: Lessons Learned for Iran

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Apr 25, 2018

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**Israel's intelligence agencies deserve praise for their role in the operation, but they must also consider what their prior miscalculations mean for future counterproliferation efforts.**

**T**he destruction of the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 contains lessons that have been overwhelmed by the battle over who gets the credit. As the defense minister's chief of staff at the time, I followed the decision-making process closely. I would like to illuminate three major dimensions.

## THE INTELLIGENCE

**T**he fact is that a neighboring state hostile to Israel had been building a nuclear reactor for military purposes for about five years before Israel discovered it (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-the-intelligence-failure-surrounding-the-syria-strike-1.5914172>), close to it becoming "hot." From a result-oriented point of view, Israeli intelligence did succeed in discovering it in time, but it certainly needs some soul-searching with regard to the process. In my judgment, during the years preceding the reactor's discovery, Israeli intelligence subscribed to the mistaken conception that it was unreasonable for Syrian President Bashar Assad to try to develop nuclear military capabilities. As a result, proper collection efforts were not directed at this issue and relevant information was misinterpreted.

This conception had been correct for the era of Hafez Assad, Bashar's father. But after the younger Assad assumed power in 2000, there should have been intelligence attention focused on whether the new, inexperienced player would be tempted to go in new directions, first and foremost the nuclear one. However, due to inertia, Israel's intelligence remained mired in the old conception for several years.

That's how in 2004, when I was the defense minister's military secretary, we received an intelligence report to the effect that the Syrian regime was dealing with nuclear military issues. I asked the director of Military Intelligence to address the report in a meeting with the defense minister. The director rejected this possibility, both for lack of supporting evidence and on grounds it was "illogical." As we know, by then Syria was vigorously proceeding with the project, with strict compartmentalization within the Syrian government echelons themselves (and vis-a-vis their Iranian allies). Our intelligence missed the younger Assad's logic and the fact that rather than build local nuclear infrastructure, he had decided to buy the whole thing "off the shelf" from North Korea.

The methodology lesson here is that Israeli intelligence must constantly give real, practical priority to the acquisition of nuclear capabilities by countries in the region, given the strategic significance of this issue. Moreover, it must always check the validity of its assumptions when the leader of a country changes. The younger Assad was a relatively unknown quantity during his first years, but one could increasingly discern an adventurous side to his unbaked personality.

Israel's intelligence is worthy of praise for coming up with the critical information in time and for the precise accompaniment of the operation, including its assessments of possible responses to it. But along with patting itself on the back, it must investigate this case and learn its lessons, just as the Israel Air Force investigates "near misses" as if they were actual hits on its planes.

## **THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

**F**rom my years at the nexus of decision-making, I cannot recall a decision-making process that was as thorough and orderly as in this case. For months, a small forum of security establishment heads met every Friday in the Prime Minister's Residence to discuss each and every aspect of the attack and its ramifications.

During these discussions it was decided to provide Assad with a "zone of deniability" that would allow him to restrain himself from retaliating for the destruction of the reactor. Among other things, this decision was based on an assessment of the Syrian leader prepared by a designated group of psychologists. Throughout the process there was a fruitful dialogue between Israeli and American leaders and there was a series of secret cabinet debates before the decision was made. Israel exploited the advantage it had—that Assad didn't know that we knew—to work through a detailed process that also managed to maintain secrecy.

Weighing on this orderly course was the high tension between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, which combined a personal struggle with real differences in approach. Barak believed that Olmert lacked the appropriate background and skills to make such fateful decisions. We often heard him criticize the problematic management of the Second Lebanon War the preceding year, and especially how the war was launched without considering all dimensions and calculating a few steps ahead.

When Barak assumed the defense post in June 2007, he found that the main operating plan to attack the reactor would leave a heavy footprint that would be liable to demand a Syrian response. Moreover, he argued that since the operation carried a risk—however low—of an escalation into war, Israel had to be prepared so that if war would break out, the military would pursue unequivocal victory and not an ambiguous end, as in the Second Lebanon War. The Israel Defense Forces was in the midst of a significant process of rehabilitating itself from that war; Barak thought more time was needed in order to prepare for another possible major conflict, and that Israel had the necessary months at its disposal.

Barak definitely had a point in his assertions and his input inserted a dimension of depth to the decision-making process. The plan that was eventually executed indeed left a small footprint and the IDF took good advantage of the time provided to improve its readiness. Nevertheless, at some point during the summer it was no longer clear why Barak was continuing to delay the operation. Many in the decision-making circle wondered whether he had some

hidden motive. Barak has considerable knowledge and experience in the real diplomatic-security realm, but it's often hard to know at any given time what his primary motive is among the ensemble of motives that coexist in his complex personality.

Ironically, the synthesis of the contrasts represented by Olmert and Barak contributed to the successful outcome, despite the obstacles along the way. But the ultimate responsibility rests on the prime minister's shoulders, and just as Olmert was justifiably criticized for the management of the Second Lebanon War, he deserves the credit for the destruction of the Syrian reactor.

## **A CHALLENGE TO THE BEGIN DOCTRINE**

**T**he destruction of the reactor reflects the deep assimilation of the Begin Doctrine—that is, not allowing the development of any threatening nuclear capabilities in our region. Among those involved, there was broad consensus that there was no choice but to destroy the reactor in a military operation, even at the risk of a possible escalation.

Therefore, no other option was seriously considered suitable, including U.S. President George W. Bush's suggestion to Olmert to issue Assad an ultimatum: allow international inspectors to visit the reactor within a short, defined time or it would be attacked. There was a reasonable concern that under the "diplomacy first" option, Assad would take immediate steps to conceal and protect the reactor so as to make it impossible to destroy. Deep in the minds of decision-makers there was the view that Israel must not place the keys to critical parts of its national security in the hands of outside parties, as friendly as they might be. This principle remains valid.

The Iranian nuclear program presents a far more significant challenge to the Begin Doctrine than the programs destroyed in Iraq and Syria. The Iranian project is not built around a single reactor, but rather combines the uranium and plutonium tracks within a broad framework of human capital, know-how, facilities, and infrastructures, in a country that's farther away and which is building a substantial regional array—some of it close to us—and which has the ability to respond and cause significant damage to Israel, by acting either directly or through proxies like Hezbollah.

Unlike Assad at the time, Iran knows that Israel and the world are closely following its nuclear program and act accordingly. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear program has a broad and deep international context, and any action against it will necessarily influence and be influenced by this context. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the leading countries in the international community bought precious time, but did not take Iran's nuclear ambitions off the table, did not deprive Iran of its nuclear infrastructure, and will eventually allow it to become a nuclear threshold state. To this must we add the ties between Iran and North Korea and the apparent mutual influence of each country's progress or regression in the nuclear realm.

In light of all this, the major questions facing Israeli decision-makers relate mainly to the effectiveness of an Israeli military thwarting initiative and its potential impact on the chances of preventing Iran's accelerated return to the nuclear path "the day after," this time going underground and rushing to the weapon. This is a challenge of a different magnitude. It requires close and continuous monitoring and thorough and complex strategic thinking. We must not be passive because of the time bought by the nuclear agreement, which could be shortened if U.S. President Donald Trump decides to abandon it. We must begin preparing today for the time a concrete decision might be necessary; this includes focused intelligence, preparation of operational options, a close dialogue with the United States, and the creation of regional partnerships to the extent possible.

The challenge to Israel may be exacerbated by the possibility that some of the civilian nuclear programs now proliferating in the region will lay a foundation for future military programs. Saudi Arabia, which has issued an international tender to build two of 16 planned reactors, is demanding that the U.S. government deviate from the

“Golden Standard” it applies to civilian nuclear programs and allow it to have nuclear fuel facilities in its territory as was permitted to Iran, with its crown prince warning that if Iran acquires military nuclear capability, his country will as well. The bottom line is that while preparing options and laying the ground for continued implementation of the Begin Doctrine, Israel must constantly ask itself whether the conditions for enforcing this doctrine effectively still exist and if not, what the alternative may be.

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