

What Israel Really Gained by Bombing Syria

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Sep 24, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Sometimes in international relations it is good to preserve mystery. The irony is that often when an action has been taken but not admitted, everyone seems to know anyway. That certainly seems to be the case with Israel's military strike against a target in northern Syria.

The Israelis aren't talking about it or acknowledging anything. The Syrians are describing an episode in which they fired on Israeli aircraft, the aircraft dropped something, and fled Syrian airspace. The President of the United States won't comment on the event -- of course, by not denying it, he leaves the impression that something significant absolutely took place.

And, it appears, something did. The sketchy reports that have emerged, again all citing anonymous sources in Israel or in the intelligence community here, are that Israel took out a facility in northern Syria in which North Korea was helping Syria develop a nuclear capability. The absence of leaks coming out of Israel lends credence to the reports. Israel used to be one of the best keepers of secrets. Excluding this episode, it has become one of the worst.

Everything seems to leak -- and not in drips, but in torrents. (Once when I was negotiating, the Israeli prime minister at the time insisted on a one-on-one meeting with me because, he told me, this was the only way he could ensure that nothing would leak out of the meeting. He wasn't concerned with my side, but his.)

In this case, Israel has played it very smartly. Much is being made about the silence of Arab criticism of the apparent Israeli raid and what it says about Arab attitudes toward Syria. In fact, had Israel taken credit for the raid, Arab states would have felt duty-bound to condemn it, Israel's resort to force, and its unilateral effort to impose its will once again.

Why would Israel carry out such a raid now? Anything involving a Syrian nuclear development is going to be a concern for the Israelis -- and their threshold of tolerance is going to be low. Israel has tracked the North Korea-Syrian military relationship very closely for a long time. North Korea has provided Syria with advanced missile technology and surface-to-surface rockets of increasing range, accuracy, and payload. Moreover, the Israelis know that North Korea has practically never developed a weapons system that it has not sold. Given that history, North Korea's nuclear developments and continuing military cooperation with Syrian has drawn extremely close Israeli scrutiny.

So, on one level the Israeli raid simply reflected an effort to blunt North Korean-Syrian nuclear development before it could allow the Syrians to develop a nuclear capability. But that is only part of the story.

The Israeli security establishment has become increasingly concerned about significant Syrian weapons acquisitions, forward deployment of forces, training exercises, and directives about a possible war. Israeli military officials to whom I have spoken have become convinced that Syria's president, Bashar al Assad, has begun to believe that he could fight a limited war against Israel. Using as many as 20,000 rockets -- with some chemically armed as a reserve and a deterrent to prevent Israel from striking at the strategic underpinnings of his regime -- he appears, at least according to many in Israel's intelligence community, to believe he could fight a war on his terms. He was impressed by what Hezbollah did in the war with Israel in the summer of 2006 and believes he, too, could win by not losing in a limited war.

Israel has been looking for ways to convince Assad that he is miscalculating; that he will not be allowed to fight a war on his terms; and that he had better not play with fire. This summer, Israel has conducted military exercises designed not just to improve Israel's readiness but to convey a message to Assad. The raid not only blunts Syria's nuclear development but also reinforces the Israeli message of deterrence. In effect, it tells President Assad that Syria has few secrets it can keep from Israel. For a conspiratorial and paranoid regime, this is bound to keep its leaders preoccupied internally trying to figure out what Israel knows and doesn't know.

Beyond this, the raid sends the message that Israel can hit what it wants -- no matter how valuable and sensitive to the regime -- when it wants, and Syria is powerless to stop it. Here the silence from the Arab world, even if a function of Israel's silence, can provide small comfort to President Assad. No one in the Arab world much cares if Syria suffers blows to its prestige and losses to its military capabilities.

So, the raid is as much about preemption of a potential nuclear threat as it is about reestablishing Israel's deterrent in the eyes of the Syrian regime. Indeed, Major General Amos Yadlin, the head of Israel's military intelligence, was quoted as telling the Israeli cabinet that Israel had "restored its deterrence."

From this standpoint, Israel may also have had Iran in mind. The press is now reporting that an accident took place in July in Syria at a chemical plant at which a number of Iranian experts were killed. Perhaps this is just a coincidence. Or perhaps Israel is also sending messages to Iran that it has the capacity, and more importantly, the will to protect itself from those who would seek to threaten it with weapons of mass destruction.

At a time when Iran appears to be determined to press ahead with its nuclear program and may have doubted Israel's will to do anything about it, Israel may well be acting to show it will do whatever it takes to ensure its security. With the United States bogged down in Iraq and apparently unable or unwilling to prevent Iran's nuclear developments, the Israelis may be signaling everyone, including the Bush Administration, that if the international community doesn't take more decisive action, it will.

Statecraft involves using all the tools of the state to affect the behavior of friends and foes alike. Israel's raid against the Syrian plant reflects the use of a military instrument applied quite selectively to affect the psychologies of many different actors on the world stage. Whether it will have the affect the Israelis desire remains to be seen. But for now, the Israelis have made a statement without triggering a wider conflict in the process.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

Read this op-ed at *New Republic Online*. (<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070924&s=ross092407>)

Subscribe (<https://ssl.tnr.com/sumo/0405suboffer>) to the New Republic. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



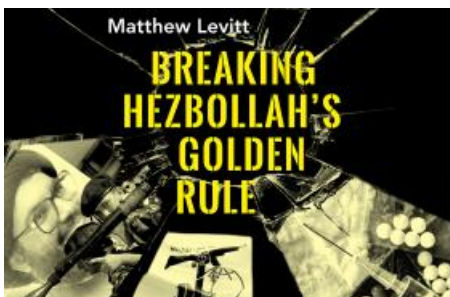
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)