

Israel's Ploy: Selling a Syrian Nuke Strike

The Iraq WMD fiasco wasn't the only time political pressure twisted U.S. intelligence judgments. In 2007, Israel sold the CIA on a dubious claim about a North Korean nuclear reactor in the Syrian desert, reports Gareth Porter.

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In September 2007, Israeli warplanes bombed a building in eastern Syria that the Israelis claimed held a covert nuclear reactor that had been built with North Korean assistance. Seven months later, the CIA released an extraordinary 11-minute video and mounted press and Congressional briefings that supported that claim.

But nothing about that alleged reactor in the Syrian desert turns out to be what it appeared at the time. The evidence now available shows that there was no such nuclear reactor, and that the Israelis had misled George W. Bush's administration into believing that it was in order to draw the United States into bombing missile storage sites in Syria. Other evidence now suggests, moreover, that the Syrian government had led the Israelis to believe wrongly that it was a key storage site for Hezbollah missiles and rockets.

The International Atomic Agency's top specialist on North Korean reactors, Egyptian national Yousry Abushady, warned top IAEA officials in 2008 that the published CIA claims about the alleged reactor in the Syrian desert could not possibly have been true. In a series of interviews in Vienna and by phone and e-mail exchanges over several months Abushady detailed the technical evidence that led him to issue that warning and to be even more confident about that judgment later on. And a retired nuclear engineer and research scientist with many years of experience at Oak Ridge National Laboratory has confirmed a crucial element of that technical evidence.

Published revelations by senior Bush administration officials show, moreover, that principal U.S. figures in the story all had their own political motives for supporting the Israeli claim of a Syrian reactor being built with North Korean help.

Vice President Dick Cheney hoped to use the alleged reactor to get President George W. Bush to initiate U.S. airstrikes in Syria in the hope of shaking the Syrian-Iranian alliance. And both Cheney and then CIA Director Michael Hayden also hoped to use the story of a North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria to kill a deal that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was negotiating with North Korea on its nuclear weapons program in 2007-08.

Mossad Chief's Dramatic Evidence

In April 2007 the chief of Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence agency, Meir Dagan, presented Cheney, Hayden and National Security Adviser Steven Hadley with evidence of what he said

was a nuclear reactor being constructed in eastern Syria with the help of the North Koreans. Dagan showed them nearly a hundred hand-held photographs of the site revealing what he described as the preparation for the installation of a North Korean reactor and claimed that it was only a few months from being operational.



President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney receive an Oval Office briefing from CIA Director George Tenet. Also present is Chief of Staff Andy Card (on right). (White House photo)

The Israelis made no secret of their desire to have a U.S. airstrike destroy the alleged nuclear facility. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called President Bush immediately after that briefing and said, “George, I’m asking you to bomb the compound,” according to the account in Bush’s memoirs.

Cheney, who was known to be a personal friend of Olmert, wanted to go further. At White House meetings in subsequent weeks, Cheney argued forcefully for a U.S. attack not only on the purported reactor building but on Hezbollah weapons storage depots in Syria. Then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who participated in those meetings, recalled in his own memoirs that Cheney, who was also looking for an opportunity to provoke a war with Iran, hoped to “rattle Assad sufficiently so as to end his close relationship with Iran” and “send a powerful warning to the Iranians to abandon their nuclear ambitions.”

CIA Director Hayden aligned the agency clearly with Cheney on the issue, not because of Syria or Iran but because of North Korea. In his book, *Playing to the Edge*, published last year, Hayden recalls that, at a White House meeting to brief President Bush the day after Dagan’s visit, he whispered in Cheney’s ear, “You were right, Mr. Vice-President.”

Hayden was referring to the fierce political struggle within the Bush administration over North Korea policy that had been underway ever since Condoleezza Rice had become Secretary of State in early 2005. Rice had argued that diplomacy was the only realistic way to get Pyongyang to retreat from its nuclear weapons program. But Cheney and his administration allies John Bolton and Robert Joseph (who succeeded Bolton as the key State Department policymaker on North Korea after Bolton became U.N. Ambassador in 2005) were determined to end the diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.

Cheney was still maneuvering to find a way to prevent the successful completion of the negotiations, and he saw the story of a Syrian nuclear reactor built secretly in the desert with help from the North Koreans as bolstering his case. Cheney reveals in his own memoirs

that in January 2008, he sought to sandbag Rice's North Korea nuclear deal by getting her to agree that a failure by North Korea to "admit they've proliferating to the Syrians would be a deal killer."

Three months later, the CIA released its unprecedented 11-minute video supporting the entire Israeli case for a North-Korean-style nuclear reactor that was nearly completed. Hayden recalls that his decision to release the video on the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor in April 2008 was "to avoid a North Korean nuclear deal being sold to a Congress and a public ignorant of this very pertinent and very recent episode."

The video, complete with computer reconstructions of the building and photographs from the Israelis made a big splash in the news media. But one specialist on nuclear reactors who examined the video closely found abundant reason to conclude that the CIA's case was not based on real evidence.

Technical Evidence against a Reactor

Egyptian national Yousry Abushady was a PhD in nuclear engineering and 23-year veteran of the IAEA who had been promoted to section head for Western Europe in the operations division of agency's Safeguards Department, meaning that he was in charge of all inspections of nuclear facilities in the region. He had been a trusted adviser to Bruno Pellaud, IAEA Deputy Director General for Safeguards from 1993 to 1999, who told this writer in an interview that he had "relied on Abushady frequently."

Abushady recalled in an interview that, after spending many hours reviewing the video released by the CIA in April 2008 frame by frame, he was certain that the CIA case for a nuclear reactor at al-Kibar in the desert in eastern Syria was not plausible for multiple technical reasons. The Israelis and the CIA had claimed the alleged reactor was modeled on the type of reactor the North Koreans had installed at Yongbyon called a gas-cooled graphite-moderated (GCGM) reactor.



Map of Syria.

But Abushady knew that kind of reactor better than anyone else at the IAEA. He had designed a GCGM reactor for his doctoral student in nuclear engineering, had begun

evaluating the Yongbyon reactor in 1993, and from 1999 to 2003 had headed the Safeguards Department unit responsible for North Korea.

Abushady had traveled to North Korea 15 times and conducted extensive technical discussions with the North Korean nuclear engineers who had designed and operated the Yongbyon reactor. And the evidence he saw in the video convinced him that no such reactor could have been under construction at al-Kibar.

On April 26, 2008, Abushady sent a “preliminary technical assessment” of the video to IAEA Deputy Director General for Safeguards Olli Heinonen, with a copy to Director General Mohamed ElBaradei. Abushady observed in his memorandum that the person responsible for assembling the CIA video was obviously unfamiliar with either the North Korean reactor or with GCGM reactors in general.

The first thing that struck Abushady about the CIA’s claims was that the building was too short to hold a reactor like the one in Yongbyon, North Korea.

“It is obvious,” he wrote in his “technical assessment” memo to Heinonen, “that the Syrian building with no UG [underground] construction, can not hold a [reactor] similar [to] NK GCR [North Korean gas-cooled reactor].”

Abushady estimated the height of the North Korean reactor building in Yongbyon at a 50 meters (165 feet) and estimated that the building at al-Kibar at a little more than a third as tall.

Abushady also found the observable characteristics of the al-Kibar site inconsistent with the most basic technical requirements for a GCGM reactor. He pointed out that the Yongbyon reactor had no less than 20 supporting buildings on the site, whereas the satellite imagery shows that the Syrian site did not have a single significant supporting structure.

The most telling indication of all for Abushady that the building could not have been a GCGM reactor was the absence of a cooling tower to reduce the temperature of the carbon dioxide gas coolant in such a reactor.

“How can you work a gas-cooled reactor in a desert without a cooling tower?” Abushady asked in an interview.

IAEA Deputy Director Heinonen claimed in an IAEA report that the site had sufficient pumping power to get river water from a pump house on the nearby Euphrates River to the site. But Abushady recalls asking Heinonen, “How could this water be transferred for about 1,000 meters and continue to the heat exchangers for cooling with the same power?”

Robert Kelley, a former head of the U.S. Department of Energy’s Remote Sensing Laboratory and former senior IAEA inspector in Iraq, noticed another fundamental problem with Heinonen’s claim: the site had no facility for treating the river water before it reached the alleged reactor building.

“That river water would have been carrying debris and silt into the reactor heat exchangers,” Kelley said in an interview, making it highly questionable that a reactor could have operated there.

Yet another critical piece that Abushady found missing from the site was a cooling pond facility for spent fuel. The CIA had theorized that the reactor building itself contained a “spent fuel pond,” based on nothing more than an ambiguous shape in an aerial photograph of the bombed building.

But the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon and all 28 other GCGM reactors that had been built in the world all have the spent fuel pond in a separate building, Abushady said. The reason, he explained, was that the magnox cladding surrounding the fuel rods would react to any contact with moisture to produce hydrogen that could explode.

But the definitive and irrefutable proof that no GCGM reactor had been present at al-Kibar came from the environmental samples taken by the IAEA at the site in June 2008. Such a reactor would have contained nuclear-grade graphite, Abushady explained, and if the Israelis had actually bombed a GCGM reactor, it would have spread particles of nuclear-grade graphite all over the site.

Behrad Nakhai, a nuclear engineer at Oak Ridge National Laboratory for many years, confirmed Abushady’s observation in an interview.

“You would have had hundreds of tons of nuclear-grade graphite scattered around the site,” he said, “and it would have been impossible to clean it up.”

IAEA reports remained silent for more than two years about what the samples showed about nuclear-grade graphite, then claimed in a May 2011 report that the graphite particles were “too small to permit an analysis of the purity compared to that normally required for use in a reactor.” But given the tools available to laboratories, the IAEA claim that they couldn’t determine whether the particles were nuclear grade or not “doesn’t make sense,” Nakhai said.

Hayden acknowledged in his 2016 account that “key components” of a nuclear reactor site for nuclear weapons were “still missing.” The CIA had tried to find evidence of a reprocessing facility in Syria that could be used to obtain the plutonium for a nuclear bomb but had been unable to find any trace of one.

The CIA also had found no evidence of a fuel fabrication facility, without which a reactor could not have gotten the fuel rods to be reprocessed. Syria could not have gotten them from North Korea, because the fuel fabrication plant at Yongbyon had produced no fuel rods since 1994 and was known to have fallen into serious disrepair after the regime had agreed to scrap its own plutonium reactor program.

Manipulated and Misleading Photographs

Hayden’s account shows that he was ready to give the CIA’s stamp of approval to the Israeli photographs even before the agency’s analysts had even begun analyzing them. He admits that when he met Dagan face-to-face he didn’t ask how and when Mossad had obtained the photographs, citing “espionage protocol” among cooperating intelligence partners. Such a protocol would hardly apply, however, to a government sharing intelligence in order to get the United States to carry out an act of war on its behalf.

The CIA video relied heavily on the photographs that Mossad had given to Bush administration in making its case. Hayden writes that it was “pretty convincing stuff, if we

could be confident that the pictures hadn't been altered."

But by his own account Hayden knew Mossad had engaged in at least one deception. He writes that when CIA experts reviewed the photographs from Mossad, they found that one of them had been photo-shopped to remove the writing on the side of a truck.

Hayden professes to have had no concern about that photo-shopped picture. But after this writer asked how CIA analysts interpreted Mossad's photo shopping of the picture as one of the questions his staff requested in advance of a possible interview with Hayden, he declined the interview.

Abushady points out that the main issues with the photographs the CIA released publicly are whether they were actually taken at the al-Kibar site and whether they were consistent with a GCGM reactor. One of the photographs showed what the CIA video called "the steel liner for the reinforced-concrete reactor vessel before it was installed." Abushady noticed immediately, however, that nothing in the picture links the steel liner to the al-Kibar site.

Both the video and CIA's press briefing explained that the network of small pipes on the outside of the structure was for "cooling water to protect the concrete against the reactor's intense heat and radiation."

But Abushady, who specializes in such technology, pointed out that the structure in the picture bore no resemblance to a Gas-Cooled Reactor vessel. "This vessel cannot be for a Gas-Cooled Reactor," Abushady explained, "based on its dimensions, its thickness and the pipes shown on the side of the vessel."

The CIA video's explanation that the network of pipes was necessary for "cooling water" made no sense, Abushady said, because gas-cooled reactors use only carbon dioxide gas — not water — as a coolant. Any contact between water and the Magnox-cladding used in that type of reactor, Abushady explained, could cause an explosion.

A second Mossad photograph showed what the CIA said were the "exit points" for the reactor's control rods and fuel rods. The CIA juxtaposed that photograph with a photograph of the tops of the control rods and fuel rods of the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon and claimed a "very close resemblance" between the two.

Abushady found major differences between the two pictures, however. The North Korean reactor had a total of 97 ports, but the picture allegedly taken at al-Kibar shows only 52 ports. Abushady was certain that the reactor shown in the photograph could not have been based on the Yongbyon reactor. He also noted that the picture had a pronounced sepia tone, suggesting that it was taken quite a few years earlier.

Abushady warned Heinonen and ElBaradei in his initial assessment that the photo presented as taken from inside the reactor building appeared to an old photo of a small gas-cooled reactor, most likely an early such reactor built in the U.K.

A Double Deception

Many observers have suggested that Syria's failure to protest the strike in the desert loudly suggests that it was indeed a reactor. Information provided by a former Syrian air force major who defected to an anti-Assad military command in Aleppo and by the head of Syria's atomic energy program helps unlock the mystery of what was really in the building at al-Kibar.

The Syrian major, “Abu Mohammed,” told The Guardian in February 2013 that he was serving in the air defense station at Deir Azzor, the city nearest to al-Kibar, when he got a phone call from a Brigadier General at the Strategic Air Command in Damascus just after midnight on Sept. 6, 2007. Enemy planes were approaching his area, the general said, but “you are to do nothing.”

The major was confused. He wondered why the Syrian command would want to let Israeli fighter planes approach Deir Azzor unhindered. The only logical reason for such an otherwise inexplicable order would be that, instead of wanting to keep the Israelis away from the building at al-Kibar, the Syrian government actually wanted the Israelis to attack it. In the aftermath of the strike, the Damascus issued only an opaque statement claiming that the Israeli jets had been driven away and remaining silent on the airstrike at al-Kibar.

Abushady told this writer he learned from meetings with Syrian officials during his final year at the IAEA that the Syrian government had indeed originally built the structure at al-Kibar for the storage of missiles as well as for a fixed firing position for them. And he said Ibrahim Othman, the head of Syria’s Atomic Energy Commission, had confirmed that point in a private meeting with him in Vienna in September 2015.

Othman also confirmed Abushady’s suspicion from viewing satellite photographs that the roof over the central room in the building had been made with two movable light plates that could be opened to allow the firing of a missile. And he told Abushady that he had been correct in believing that what had appeared in a satellite image immediately after the bombing to be two semi-circular shapes was what had remained of the original concrete launching silo for missiles.

In the wake of the Israel’s 2006 invasion of Southern Lebanon, the Israelis were searching intensively for Hezbollah missiles and rockets that could reach Israel and they believed many of those Hezbollah weapons were being stored in Syria. If they wished to draw the attention of the Israelis away from actual missile storage sites, the Syrians would have had good reason to want to convince the Israelis that this was one of their major storage sites.

Othman told Abushady that the building had been abandoned in 2002, after the construction had been completed. The Israelis had acquired ground-level pictures from 2001-02 showing the construction of outer walls that would hide the central hall of the building. The Israelis and the CIA both insisted in 2007-08 that this new construction indicated that it had to be a reactor building, but it is equally consistent with a building designed to hide missile storage and a missile-firing position.

Although Mossad went to great lengths to convince the Bush administration that the site was a nuclear reactor, what the Israelis really wanted was for the Bush administration to launch U.S. airstrikes against Hezbollah and Syrian missile storage sites. Senior officials of the Bush administration didn’t buy the Israeli bid to get the United States do the bombing, but none of them ever raised questions about the Israeli ruse.

So both the Assad regime and the Israeli government appear to have succeeded in carrying out their own parts in a double deception in the Syrian desert.

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