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## A STRIKE IN THE DARK

*What did Israel bomb in Syria?*

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Israel and the U.S. have avoided comment on press reports about a nuclear facility.

S ometime after midnight on September 6, 2007, at least four low-flying Israeli Air Force fighters crossed into Syrian airspace and carried out a secret bombing mission on the banks of the Euphrates River, about ninety miles north of the Iraq border. The seemingly unprovoked bombing, which came after months of heightened tension between Israel and Syria over military exercises and troop buildups by both sides along the Golan Heights, was, by almost any definition, an act of war. But in the immediate aftermath nothing was heard from the government of Israel. In contrast, in 1981, when the Israeli Air Force destroyed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor, near Baghdad, the Israeli government was triumphant, releasing reconnaissance photographs of the strike and permitting the pilots to be widely interviewed.

Within hours of the attack, Syria denounced Israel for invading its airspace, but its public statements were incomplete and contradictory—thus adding to the mystery. A Syrian military spokesman said only that Israeli planes had dropped some munitions in an unpopulated area after being challenged by Syrian air defenses, “which forced them to flee.” Four days later, Walid Moallem, the Syrian foreign minister, said during a state visit to Turkey that the Israeli aircraft had used live ammunition in the attack, but insisted that there were no casualties or property damage. It was not until October 1st that Syrian President Bashar Assad, in an interview with the BBC, acknowledged that the Israeli warplanes had hit their target, which he described as an “unused military building.” Assad added that Syria reserved the right to retaliate, but his comments were muted.

Despite official silence in Tel Aviv (and in Washington), in the days after the bombing the American and European media were flooded with reports, primarily based on information from anonymous government sources, claiming that

Israel had destroyed a nascent nuclear reactor that was secretly being assembled in Syria, with the help of North Korea. Beginning construction of a nuclear reactor in secret would be a violation of Syria's obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and could potentially yield material for a nuclear weapon.

The evidence was circumstantial but seemingly damning. The first reports of Syrian and North Korean nuclear cooperation came on September 12th in the *Times* and elsewhere. By the end of October, the various media accounts generally agreed on four points: the Israeli intelligence community had learned of a North Korean connection to a construction site in an agricultural area in eastern Syria; three days before the bombing, a "North Korean ship," identified as the *Al Hamed*, had arrived at the Syrian port of Tartus, on the Mediterranean; satellite imagery strongly suggested that the building under construction was designed to hold a nuclear reactor when completed; as such, Syria had crossed what the Israelis regarded as the "red line" on the path to building a bomb, and had to be stopped. There were also reports—by ABC News and others—that some of the Israeli intelligence had been shared in advance with the United States, which had raised no objection to the bombing.

The Israeli government still declined to make any statement about the incident. Military censorship on dispatches about the raid was imposed for several weeks, and the Israeli press resorted to recycling the disclosures in the foreign press. In the first days after the attack, there had been many critical stories in the Israeli press speculating about the bombing, and the possibility that it could lead to a conflict with Syria. Larry Derfner, a columnist writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, described the raid as "the sort of thing that starts wars." But, once reports about the nuclear issue and other details circulated, the domestic criticism subsided.

At a news conference on September 20th, President George W. Bush was asked about the incident four times but said, "I'm not going to comment on the matter." The lack of official statements became part of the story. "The silence from all parties has been deafening," David Ignatius wrote in the *Washington Post*, "but the message to Iran"—which the Administration had long suspected of pursuing a nuclear weapon—"is clear: America and Israel can identify nuclear targets and penetrate air defenses to destroy them."

It was evident that officials in Israel and the United States, although unwilling to be quoted, were eager for the news media to write about the bombing. Early on, a former officer in the Israel Defense Forces with close contacts in Israeli intelligence approached me, with a version of the standard story, including colorful but, as it turned out, unconfirmable details: Israeli intelligence tracking the ship from the moment it left a North Korean port; Syrian soldiers wearing protective gear as they off-loaded the cargo; Israeli intelligence monitoring trucks from the docks to the target site. On October 3rd, the London *Spectator*, citing much of the same information, published an overheated account of the September 6th raid, claiming that it "may have saved the world from a devastating threat," and that "a very senior British ministerial source" had warned, "If people had known how close we came to World War Three that day there'd have been mass panic."

However, in three months of reporting for this article, I was repeatedly told by current and former intelligence, diplomatic, and congressional officials that they were not aware of any solid evidence of ongoing nuclear-weapons programs in Syria. It is possible that Israel conveyed intelligence directly to senior members of the Bush Administration, without it being vetted by intelligence agencies. (This process, known as "stovepiping," overwhelmed U.S. intelligence before the war in Iraq.) But Mohamed ElBaradei, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations group responsible for monitoring compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, said, "Our experts who have carefully analyzed the satellite imagery say it is unlikely that this building was a nuclear facility."

Joseph Cirincione, the director for nuclear policy at the Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C., think tank, told me, "Syria does not have the technical, industrial, or financial ability to support a nuclear-weapons program. I've been following this issue for fifteen years, and every once in a while a suspicion arises and we investigate and there's nothing. There was and is no nuclear-weapons threat from Syria. This is all political." Cirincione castigated the press corps for its handling of the story. "I think some of our best journalists were used," he said.

A similar message emerged at briefings given to select members of Congress within weeks of the attack. The briefings, conducted by intelligence agencies, focussed on what Washington knew about the September 6th raid. One concern was whether North Korea had done anything that might cause the U.S. to back away from ongoing six-nation talks about its nuclear program. A legislator who took part in one such briefing said afterward, according to a member of his staff, that he had heard nothing that caused him "to have any doubts" about the North Korean negotiations—

“nothing that should cause a pause.” The legislator’s conclusion, the staff member said, was “There’s nothing that proves any perfidy involving the North Koreans.”

Morton Abramowitz, a former Assistant Secretary of State for intelligence and research, told me that he was astonished by the lack of response. “Anytime you bomb another state, that’s a big deal,” he said. “But where’s the outcry, particularly from the concerned states and the U.N.? Something’s amiss.”

Israel could, of course, have damning evidence that it refuses to disclose. But there are serious and unexamined contradictions in the various published accounts of the September 6th bombing.

The main piece of evidence to emerge publicly that Syria was building a reactor arrived on October 23rd, when David Albright, of the Institute for Science and International Security, a highly respected nonprofit research group, released a satellite image of the target. The photograph had been taken by a commercial satellite company, DigitalGlobe, of Longmont, Colorado, on August 10th, four weeks before the bombing, and showed a square building and a nearby water-pumping station. In an analysis released at the same time, Albright, a physicist who served as a weapons inspector in Iraq, concluded that the building, as viewed from space, had roughly the same length and width as a reactor building at Yongbyon, North Korea’s main nuclear facility. “The tall building in the image may house a reactor under construction and the pump station along the river may have been intended to supply cooling water to the reactor,” Albright said. He concluded his analysis by posing a series of rhetorical questions that assumed that the target was a nuclear facility:

How far along was the reactor construction project when it was bombed? What was the extent of nuclear assistance from North Korea? Which reactor components did Syria obtain from North Korea or elsewhere, and where are they now?

He was later quoted in the *Washington Post* saying, “I’m pretty convinced that Syria was trying to build a nuclear reactor.”

When I asked Albright how he had pinpointed the target, he told me that he and a colleague, Paul Brannan, “did a lot of hard work”—culling press reports and poring over DigitalGlobe imagery—“before coming up with the site.” Albright then shared his findings with Robin Wright and other journalists at the *Post*, who, after checking with Administration officials, told him that the building was, indeed, the one targeted by the Israelis. “We did not release the information until we got direct confirmation from the *Washington Post*,” he told me. The *Post*’s sources in the Administration, he understood, had access to far more detailed images obtained by U.S. intelligence satellites. The *Post* ran a story, without printing the imagery, on October 19th, reporting that “U.S. and foreign officials familiar with the aftermath of the attack” had concluded that the site had the “signature,” or characteristics, of a reactor “similar in structure to North Korea’s facilities”—a conclusion with which Albright then agreed. In other words, the Albright and the *Post* reports, which appeared to independently reinforce each other, stemmed in part from the same sources.

Albright told me that before going public he had met privately with Israeli officials. “I wanted to be sure in my own mind that the Israelis thought it was a reactor, and I was,” he said. “They never explicitly said it was nuclear, but they ruled out the possibility that it was a missile, chemical-warfare, or radar site. By a process of elimination, I was left with nuclear.”

Two days after his first report, Albright released a satellite image of the bombed site, taken by DigitalGlobe on October 24th, seven weeks after the bombing. The new image showed that the target area had been levelled and the ground scraped. Albright said that it hinted of a coverup—cleansing the bombing site could make it difficult for weapons inspectors to determine its precise nature. “It looks like Syria is trying to hide something and destroy the evidence of some activity,” he told the *Times*. “But it won’t work. Syria has got to answer questions about what it was doing.” This assessment was widely shared in the press. (In mid-January, the *Times* reported that recent imagery from DigitalGlobe showed that a storage facility, or something similar, had been constructed, in an obvious rush, at the bombing site.)

Proliferation experts at the International Atomic Energy Agency and others in the arms-control community disputed Albright’s interpretation of the images. “People here were baffled by this, and thought that Albright had stuck his neck out,” a diplomat in Vienna, where the I.A.E.A. is headquartered, told me. “The I.A.E.A. has been consistently telling journalists that it is skeptical about the Syrian nuclear story, but the reporters are so convinced.”

A second diplomat in Vienna acidly commented on the images: “A square building is a square building.” The diplomat, who is familiar with the use of satellite imagery for nuclear verification, added that the I.A.E.A. “does not

have enough information to conclude anything about the exact nature of the facility. They see a building with some geometry near a river that could be identified as nuclear-related. But they cannot credibly conclude that is so. As far as information coming from open sources beyond imagery, it's a struggle to extract information from all of the noise that comes from political agendas."

Much of what one would expect to see around a secret nuclear site was lacking at the target, a former State Department intelligence expert who now deals with proliferation issues for the Congress said. "There is no security around the building," he said. "No barracks for the Army or the workers. No associated complex." Jeffrey Lewis, who heads the non-proliferation program at the New America Foundation, a think tank in Washington, told me that, even if the width and the length of the building were similar to the Korean site, its height was simply not sufficient to contain a Yongbyon-size reactor and also have enough room to extract the control rods, an essential step in the operation of the reactor; nor was there evidence in the published imagery of major underground construction. "All you could see was a box," Lewis said. "You couldn't see enough to know how big it will be or what it will do. It's just a box."

A former senior U.S. intelligence official, who has access to current intelligence, said, "We don't have any proof of a reactor—no signals intelligence, no human intelligence, no satellite intelligence." Some well-informed defense consultants and former intelligence officials asked why, if there was compelling evidence of nuclear cheating involving North Korea, a member of the President's axis of evil, and Syria, which the U.S. considers a state sponsor of terrorism, the Bush Administration would not insist on making it public.

When I went to Israel in late December, the government was still maintaining secrecy about the raid, but some current and former officials and military officers were willing to speak without attribution. Most were adamant that Israel's intelligence had been accurate. "Don't you write that there was nothing there!" a senior Israeli official, who is in a position to know the details of the raid on Syria, said, shaking a finger at me. "The thing in Syria was real."

Retired Brigadier General Shlomo Brom, who served as deputy national-security adviser under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, told me that Israel wouldn't have acted if it hadn't been convinced that there was a threat. "It may have been a perception of a conviction, but there was something there," Brom said. "It was the beginning of a nuclear project." However, by the date of our talk, Brom told me, "The question of whether it was there or not is not that relevant anymore."

Albright, when I spoke to him in December, was far more circumspect than he had been in October. "We never said 'we know' it was a reactor, based on the image," Albright said. "We wanted to make sure that the image was *consistent* with a reactor, and, from my point of view, it was. But that doesn't confirm it's a reactor."

The journey of the Al Hamed, a small coastal trader, became a centerpiece in accounts of the September 6th bombing. On September 15th, the *Washington Post* reported that "a prominent U.S. expert on the Middle East" said that the attack "appears to have been linked to the arrival . . . of a ship carrying material from North Korea labeled as cement." The article went on to cite the expert's belief that "the emerging consensus in Israel was that it delivered nuclear equipment." Other press reports identified the Al Hamed as a "suspicious North Korean" ship.

But there is evidence that the Al Hamed could not have been carrying sensitive cargo—or any cargo—from North Korea. International shipping is carefully monitored by Lloyd's Marine Intelligence Unit, which relies on a network of agents as well as on port logs and other records. In addition, most merchant ships are now required to operate a transponder device called an A.I.S., for automatic identification system. This device, which was on board the Al Hamed, works in a manner similar to a transponder on a commercial aircraft—beaming a constant, very high-frequency position report. (The U.S. Navy monitors international sea traffic with the aid of dedicated satellites, at a secret facility in suburban Washington.)

According to Marine Intelligence Unit records, the Al Hamed, which was built in 1965, had been operating for years in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, with no indication of any recent visits to North Korea. The records show that the Al Hamed arrived at Tartus on September 3rd—the ship's fifth visit to Syria in five months. (It was one of eight ships that arrived that day; although it is possible that one of the others was carrying illicit materials, only the Al Hamed has been named in the media.) The ship's registry was constantly changing. The Al Hamed flew the South Korean flag before switching to North Korea in November of 2005, and then to Comoros. (Ships often fly flags of convenience, registering with different countries, in many cases to avoid taxes or onerous regulations.) At the time of the bombing, according to Lloyd's, it was flying a Comoran flag and was owned by four Syrian nationals. In earlier years, under other owners, the ship seems to have operated under Russian, Estonian, Turkish, and Honduran flags.

Lloyd's records show that the ship had apparently not passed through the Suez Canal—the main route from the Mediterranean to the Far East—since at least 1998.

Among the groups that keep track of international shipping is Greenpeace. Martini Gotjé, who monitors illegal fishing for the organization and was among the first to raise questions about the Al Hamed, told me, “I’ve been at sea for forty-one years, and I can tell you, as a captain, that the Al Hamed was nothing—in rotten shape. You wouldn’t be able to load heavy cargo on it, as the floorboards wouldn’t be that strong.”

**I**f the Israelis’ target in Syria was not a nuclear site, why didn’t the Syrians respond more forcefully? Syria complained at the United Nations but did little to press the issue. And, if the site wasn’t a partially built reactor, what was it?

During two trips to Damascus after the Israeli raid, I interviewed many senior government and intelligence officials. None of President Assad’s close advisers told me the same story, though some of the stories were more revealing—and more plausible—than others. In general, Syrian officials seemed more eager to analyze Israel’s motives than to discuss what had been attacked. “I hesitate to answer any journalist’s questions about it,” Faruq al-Shara, the Syrian Vice-President, told me. “Israel bombed to restore its credibility, and their objective is for us to keep talking about it. And by answering your questions I serve their objective. Why should I volunteer to do that?” Shara denied that his nation has a nuclear-weapons program. “The volume of articles about the bombing is incredible, and it’s not important that it’s a lie,” he said.

One top foreign-ministry official in Damascus told me that the target “was an old military building that had been abandoned by the Syrian military” years ago. But a senior Syrian intelligence general gave me a different account. “What they targeted was a building used for fertilizer and water pumps,” he said—part of a government effort to revitalize farming. “There is a large city”—Dayr az Zawr—“fifty kilometres away. Why would Syria put nuclear material near a city?” I interviewed the intelligence general again on my second visit to Damascus, and he reiterated that the targeted building was “at no time a military facility.” As to why Syria had not had a more aggressive response, if the target was so benign, the general said, “It was not fear—that’s all I’ll say.” As I left, I asked the general why Syria had not invited representatives of the International Atomic Energy Agency to visit the bombing site and declare that no nuclear activity was taking place there. “They did not ask to come,” he said, and “Syria had no reason to ask them to come.”

An I.A.E.A. official dismissed that assertion when we spoke in Vienna a few days later. “The I.A.E.A. asked the Syrians to allow the agency to visit the site to verify its nature,” the I.A.E.A. official said. “Syria’s reply was that it was a military, not a nuclear, installation, and there would be no reason for the I.A.E.A. to go there. It would be in their and everyone’s interest to have the I.A.E.A. visit the site. If it was nuclear, it would leave fingerprints.”

In a subsequent interview, Imad Moustapha, the Syrian Ambassador to Washington, defended Syria’s decision not to invite the I.A.E.A. inspectors. “We will not get into the game of inviting foreign experts to visit every site that Israel claims is a nuclear facility,” Moustapha told me. “If we bring them in and they say there is nothing there, then Israel will say it made a mistake and bomb another site two weeks later. And if we then don’t let the I.A.E.A. in, Israel will say, ‘You see?’ This is nonsense. Why should we have to do this?”

Even if the site was not a nuclear installation, it is possible that the Syrians feared that an I.A.E.A. inquiry would uncover the presence of North Koreans there. In Syria, I was able to get some confirmation that North Koreans were at the target. A senior officer in Damascus with firsthand knowledge of the incident agreed to see me alone, at his home; my other interviews in Damascus took place in government offices. According to his account, North Koreans were present at the site, but only as paid construction workers. The senior officer said that the targeted building, when completed, would most likely have been used as a chemical-warfare facility. (Syria is not a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention and has been believed, for decades, to have a substantial chemical-weapons arsenal.)

The building contract with North Korea was a routine business deal, the senior officer said—from design to construction. (North Korea may, of course, have sent skilled technicians capable of doing less routine work.) Syria and North Korea have a long-standing partnership on military matters. “The contract between Syria and North Korea was old, from 2002, and it was running late,” the senior officer told me. “It was initially to be finished in 2005, and the Israelis might have expected it was further along.”

The North Korean laborers had been coming and going for “maybe six months” before the September bombing, the senior officer said, and his government concluded that the Israelis had picked up North Korean telephone chatter at the

site. (This fit the timeline that Israeli officials had given me.) “The Israelis may have their own spies and watched the laborers being driven to the area,” the senior officer said. “The Koreans were not there at night, but slept in their quarters and were driven to the site in the morning. The building was in an isolated area, and the Israelis may have concluded that even if there was a slight chance”—of it being a nuclear facility—“we’ll take that risk.”

On the days before the bombing, the Koreans had been working on the second floor, and were using a tarp on top of the building to shield the site from rain and sun. “It was just the North Korean way of working,” the Syrian senior officer said, adding that the possibility that the Israelis could not see what was underneath the tarp might have added to their determination.

The attack was especially dramatic, the Syrian senior officer said, because the Israelis used bright magnesium illumination flares to light up the target before the bombing. Night suddenly turned into day, he told me. “When the people in the area saw the lights and the bombing, they thought there would be a commando raid,” the senior officer said. The building was destroyed, and his government eventually concluded that there were no Israeli ground forces in the area. But if Israelis had been on the ground seeking contaminated soil samples, the senior officer said, “they found only cement.”

A senior Syrian official confirmed that a group of North Koreans had been at work at the site, but he denied that the structure was related to chemical warfare. Syria had concluded, he said, that chemical warfare had little deterrent value against Israel, given its nuclear capability. The facility that was attacked, the official said, was to be one of a string of missile-manufacturing plants scattered throughout Syria—“all low tech. Not strategic.” (North Korea has been a major exporter of missile technology and expertise to Syria for decades.) He added, “We’ve gone asymmetrical, and have been improving our capability to build low-tech missiles that will enable us to inflict as much damage as possible without confronting the Israeli Army. We now can hit all of Israel, and not just the north.”

Whatever was under construction, with North Korean help, it apparently had little to do with agriculture—or with nuclear reactors—but much to do with Syria’s defense posture, and its military relationship with North Korea. And that, perhaps, was enough to silence the Syrian government after the September 6th bombing.

**I**t is unclear to what extent the Bush Administration was involved in the Israeli attack. The most detailed report of cooperation was made in mid-October by ABC News. Citing a senior U.S. official, the network reported that Israel had shared intelligence with the United States and received satellite help and targeting information in response. At one point, it was reported, the Bush Administration considered attacking Syria itself, but rejected that option. The implication was that the Israeli intelligence about the nuclear threat had been vetted by the U.S., and had been found to be convincing.

Yet officials I spoke to in Israel heatedly denied the notion that they had extensive help from Washington in planning the attack. When I told the senior Israeli official that I found little support in Washington for Israel’s claim that it had bombed a nuclear facility in Syria, he responded with an expletive, and then said, angrily, “Nobody helped us. We did it on our own.” He added, “What I’m saying is that nobody discovered it for us.” (The White House declined to comment on this story.)

There is evidence to support this view. The satellite operated by DigitalGlobe, the Colorado firm that supplied Albright’s images, is for hire; anyone can order the satellite to photograph specific coordinates, a process that can cost anywhere from several hundred to hundreds of thousands of dollars. The company displays the results of these requests on its Web page, but not the identity of the customer. On five occasions between August 5th and August 27th of last year—before the Israeli bombing—DigitalGlobe was paid to take a tight image of the targeted building in Syria.

Clearly, whoever ordered the images likely had some involvement in plans for the attack. DigitalGlobe does about sixty per cent of its business with the U.S. government, but those contracts are for unclassified work, such as mapping. The government’s own military and intelligence satellite system, with an unmatched ability to achieve what analysts call “highly granular images,” could have supplied superior versions of the target sites. Israel has at least two military satellite systems, but, according to Allen Thomson, a former C.I.A. analyst, DigitalGlobe’s satellite has advantages for reconnaissance, making Israel a logical customer. (“Customer anonymity is crucial to us,” Chuck Herring, a spokesman for DigitalGlobe, said. “I don’t know who placed the order and couldn’t disclose it if I did.”) It is also possible that Israel or the United States ordered the imagery in order to have something unclassified to pass to the press if needed. If the Bush Administration had been aggressively cooperating with Israel before the attack, why would Israel have to turn to a commercial firm?

Last fall, aerospace industry and military sources told *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, an authoritative trade journal, that the United States had provided Israel with advice about “potential target vulnerabilities” before the September 6th attack, and monitored the radar as the mission took place. The magazine reported that the Israeli fighters, prior to bombing the target on the Euphrates, struck a Syrian radar facility near the Turkish border, knocking the radar out of commission and permitting them to complete their mission without interference.

The former U.S. senior intelligence official told me that, as he understood it, America’s involvement in the Israeli raid dated back months earlier, and was linked to the Administration’s planning for a possible air war against Iran. Last summer, the Defense Intelligence Agency came to believe that Syria was installing a new Russian-supplied radar-and-air-defense system that was similar to the radar complexes in Iran. Entering Syrian airspace would trigger those defenses and expose them to Israeli and American exploitation, yielding valuable information about their capabilities. Vice-President Dick Cheney supported the idea of overflights, the former senior intelligence official said, because “it would stick it to Syria and show that we’re serious about Iran.” (The Vice-President’s office declined to comment.) The former senior intelligence official said that Israeli military jets have flown over Syria repeatedly, without retaliation from Syria. At the time, the former senior intelligence official said, the focus was on radar and air defenses, and not on any real or suspected nuclear facility. Israel’s claims about the target, which emerged later, caught many in the military and intelligence community—if not in the White House—by surprise.

The senior Israeli official, asked whether the attack was rooted in his country’s interest in Syria’s radar installations, told me, “Bullshit.” Whatever the Administration’s initial agenda, Israel seems to have been after something more.

The story of the Israeli bombing of Syria, with its mixture of satellite intelligence, intercepts, newspaper leaks, and shared assumptions, reminded some American diplomats and intelligence officials of an incident, ten years ago, involving North Korea. In mid-1998, American reconnaissance satellites photographed imagery of a major underground construction project at Kumchang-ri, twenty-five miles northwest of Yongbyon. “We were briefed that, without a doubt, this was a nuclear-related facility, and there was signals intelligence linking the construction brigade at Kumchang-ri to the nuclear complex at Yongbyon,” the former State Department intelligence expert recalled.

Charles Kartman, who was President Bill Clinton’s special envoy for peace talks with Korea, told me that the intelligence was considered a slam dunk by analysts in the Defense Intelligence Agency, even though other agencies disagreed. “We had a debate going on inside the community, but the D.I.A. unilaterally took it to Capitol Hill,” Kartman said, forcing the issue and leading to a front-page *Times* story.

After months of negotiations, Kartman recalled, the North Koreans agreed, under diplomatic pressure, to grant access to Kumchang-ri. In return, they received aid, including assistance with a new potato-production program. Inspectors found little besides a series of empty tunnels. Robert Carlin, an expert on North Korea who retired in 2005 after serving more than thirty years with the C.I.A. and the State Department’s intelligence bureau, told me that the Kumchang-ri incident highlighted “an endemic weakness” in the American intelligence community. “People think they know the ending and then they go back and find the evidence that fits their story,” he said. “And then you get groupthink—and people reinforce each other.”

It seems that, as with Kumchang-ri, there was a genuine, if not unanimous, belief by Israeli intelligence that the Syrians were constructing something that could have serious national-security consequences. But why would the Israelis take the risk of provoking a military response, and perhaps a war, if there was, as it seems, no smoking gun? Mohamed ElBaradei, expressing his frustration, said, “If a country has any information about a nuclear activity in another country, it should inform the I.A.E.A.—not bomb first and ask questions later.”

One answer, suggested by David Albright, is that Israel did not trust the international arms-control community. “I can understand the Israeli point of view, given the history with Iran and Algeria,” Albright said. “Both nations had nuclear-weapons programs and, after being caught cheating, declared their reactors to be civil reactors, for peacetime use. The international groups, like the U.N. and the I.A.E.A, never shut them down.” Also, Israel may have calculated that risk of a counterattack was low: President Assad would undoubtedly conclude that the attack had the support of the Bush Administration and, therefore, that any response by Syria would also engage the U.S. (My conversations with officials in Syria bore out this assumption.)

In Tel Aviv, the senior Israeli official pointedly told me, “Syria still thinks Hezbollah won the war in Lebanon”—referring to the summer, 2006, fight between Israel and the Shiite organization headed by Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

“Nasrallah knows how much that war cost—one-third of his fighters were killed, infrastructure was bombed, and ninety-five per cent of his strategic weapons were wiped out,” the Israeli official said. “But Assad has a Nasrallah complex and thinks Hezbollah won. And, ‘If he did it, I can do it.’ This led to an adventurous mood in Damascus. Today, they are more sober.”

That notion was echoed by the ambassador of an Israeli ally who is posted in Tel Aviv. “The truth is not important,” the ambassador told me. “Israel was able to restore its credibility as a deterrent. That is the whole thing. No one will know what the real story is.”

There is evidence that the preëemptive raid on Syria was also meant as a warning about—and a model for—a preëemptive attack on Iran. When I visited Israel this winter, Iran was the overriding concern among political and defense officials I spoke to—not Syria. There was palpable anger toward Washington, in the wake of a National Intelligence Estimate that concluded, on behalf of the American intelligence community, that Iran is not now constructing a nuclear weapon. Many in Israel view Iran’s nuclear ambitions as an existential threat; they believe that military action against Iran may be inevitable, and worry that America may not be there when needed. The N.I.E. was published in November, after a yearlong standoff involving Cheney’s office, which resisted the report’s findings. At the time of the raid, reports about the forthcoming N.I.E. and its general conclusion had already appeared.

Retired Major General Giora Eiland, who served as the national-security adviser to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, told me, “The Israeli military takes it as an assumption that one day we will need to have a military campaign against Iran, to slow and eliminate the nuclear option.” He added, “Whether the political situation will allow this is another question.”

In the weeks after the N.I.E.’s release, Bush insisted that the Iranian nuclear-weapons threat was as acute as ever, a theme he amplified during his nine-day Middle East trip after the New Year. “A lot of people heard that N.I.E. out here and said that George Bush and the Americans don’t take the Iranian threat seriously,” he told Greta Van Susteren, of Fox News. “And so this trip has been successful from the perspective of saying . . . we will keep the pressure on.”

Shortly after the bombing, a Chinese envoy and one of the Bush Administration’s senior national-security officials met in Washington. The Chinese envoy had just returned from a visit to Tehran, a person familiar with the discussion told me, and he wanted the White House to know that there were moderates there who were interested in talks. The national-security official rejected that possibility and told the envoy, as the person familiar with the discussion recalled, “‘You are aware of the recent Israeli statements about Syria. The Israelis are extremely serious about Iran and its nuclear program, and I believe that, if the United States government is unsuccessful in its diplomatic dealings with Iran, the Israelis will take it out militarily.’ He then told the envoy that he wanted him to convey this to his government—that the Israelis were serious.

“He was telling the Chinese leadership that they’d better warn Iran that we can’t hold back Israel, and that the Iranians should look at Syria and see what’s coming next if diplomacy fails,” the person familiar with the discussion said. “His message was that the Syrian attack was in part aimed at Iran.” ♦

ILLUSTRATION: GUY BILLOUT