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The Story of 'Operation Orchard'

How Israel Destroyed Syria's Al Kibar Nuclear Reactor

By Erich Follath and Holger Stark

In September 2007, Israeli fighter jets destroyed a mysterious complex in the Syrian desert. The incident could have led to war, but it was hushed up by all sides. Was it a nuclear plant and who gave the orders for the strike?

The mighty Euphrates river is the subject of the prophecies in the Bible's Book of Revelation, where it is written that the river will be the scene of the battle of Armageddon: "The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East."

Today, time seems to stand still along the river. The turquoise waters of the Euphrates flow slowly through the northern Syrian provincial city Deir el-Zor, whose name translates as "monastery in the forest." Farmers till the fields, and vendors sell camel's hair blankets, cardamom and coriander in the city's bazaars. Occasionally archaeologists visit the region to excavate the remains of ancient cities in the surrounding area, a place where many peoples have left their mark -- the Parthians and the Sassanids, the Romans and the Jews, the Ottomans and the French, who were assigned the mandate for Syria by the League of Nations and who only withdrew their troops in 1946. Deir el-Zor is the last outpost before the vast, empty desert, a lifeless place of jagged mountains and inaccessible valleys that begins not far from the town center.

But on a night two years ago, something dramatic happened in this sleepy place. It's an event that local residents discuss in whispers in teahouses along the river, when the water pipes glow and they are confident that no officials are listening -- the subject is taboo in the state-controlled media, and they know that drawing too much attention to themselves in this authoritarian state could be hazardous to their health.

Some in Deir el-Zor talk of a bright flash which lit up the night in the distant desert. Others report seeing a gigantic column of smoke over the Euphrates, like a threatening finger. Some talk of omens, while others relate conspiracy theories. The pious older guests at Jisr al-Kabir, a popular restaurant near the city's landmark suspension bridge, believe it was a sign from heaven.

All the rumors have long since muddied the waters as to what people may or may not have seen. But even the supposedly advanced Western world, with its state-of-the-art surveillance technology and interconnectedness through the mass media, has little more solid information than the people in this Syrian desert town. What happened in the night of Sept. 6, 2007 in the desert, 130 kilometers (81 miles) from the Iraqi border, 30 kilometers from Deir el-Zor, is one of the great mysteries of our times.

'This Incident Never Occurred'

At 2:55 p.m. on that day, the Damascus-based Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Israeli fighter jets coming from the Mediterranean had violated Syrian airspace at "about one o'clock" in the morning. "Air defense units confronted them and forced them to leave after they dropped some ammunition in deserted areas without causing any human or material damage," a Syrian military spokesman said, according to the news agency. There was no explanation whatsoever for why such a dramatic event was concealed for half a day.

At 6:46 p.m., Israeli government radio quoted a military spokesman as saying: "This incident never

occurred." At 8:46 p.m., a spokesperson for the US State Department said during a daily press briefing that he had only heard "second-hand reports" which "contradict" each other.

To this day, Syria and Israel, two countries that have technically been at war since the founding of the Jewish state in 1948, have largely adhered to a bizarre policy of downplaying what was clearly an act of war. Gradually it became clear that the fighter pilots did not drop some random ammunition over empty no-man's land on that night in 2007, but had in fact deliberately targeted and destroyed a secret Syrian complex.

Was it a nuclear plant, in which scientists were on the verge of completing the bomb? Were North Korean, perhaps even Iranian experts, also working in this secret Syrian facility? When and how did the Israelis learn about the project, and why did they take such a great risk to conduct their clandestine operation? Was the destruction of the Al Kibar complex meant as a final warning to the Iranians, a trial run of sorts intended to show them what the Israelis plan to do if Tehran continues with its suspected nuclear weapons program?

In recent months, SPIEGEL has spoken with key politicians and experts about the mysterious incident in the Syrian desert, including Syrian President Bashar Assad, leading Israeli intelligence expert Ronen Bergman, International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohammed ElBaradei and influential American nuclear expert David Albright. SPIEGEL has also talked with individuals involved in the operation, who have only now agreed to reveal, under conditions of anonymity, what they know.

These efforts have led to an account that, while not solving the mystery in its entirety, at least delivers many pieces of the puzzle. It also offers an assessment of an operation that changed the Middle East and generated shock waves that are still being felt today.

Syria's Unpredictable President

Tel Aviv, late 2001. An inconspicuous block of houses located among eucalyptus trees is home to the headquarters of the legendary Israeli foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad. A memorial to agents who died in commando operations behind enemy lines stands in the small garden. There are already more than 400 names engraved on the gray marble, with room for many more. In the main building, intelligence analysts are trying to assemble a picture of the new Syrian president.

In July 2000, Bashar Assad succeeded his deceased father, former President Hafez Assad. The Israelis believed that the younger Assad, a politically inexperienced ophthalmologist who had lived in London for many years and who was only 34 when he took office, would be a weak leader. Unlike his father, an unscrupulous political realist nicknamed "The Lion" who had almost struck a deal with the Israelis over the Golan Heights in the last few months of his life, Bashar Assad was considered relatively unpredictable.

According to Israeli agents in Damascus, the younger Assad was trying to consolidate his power by espousing radical and controversial positions. He supplied massive amounts of weapons to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, for their "struggle for independence" from the "Zionist regime." He received high-ranking delegations from North Korea. The Mossad was convinced that the subject of these secret talks was a further upgrading of Syria's military capabilities. Pyongyang had already helped Damascus in the past in the development of medium-range ballistic missiles and chemical weapons like sarin and mustard gas. But when Israeli military intelligence informed their Mossad counterparts that a Syrian nuclear program was apparently under discussion, the intelligence professionals were dismissive.

Nuclear weapons for Damascus, a nuclear plant literally on Israel's doorstep? For the experts, it seemed much too implausible.

Besides, the senior Assad had rebuffed Abdul Qadeer Khan, the Pakistani "father of the atom bomb," when Khan tried to sell him centrifuges for uranium enrichment on the black market in the early 1990s. The Israelis also knew all too well how complex the road to the bomb is, after having spent a

lengthy period of time in the 1960s to covertly procure uranium and then develop nuclear weapons at their secret laboratories in the town of Dimona in the Negev desert. They took extreme measures to prevent then-Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from following their example: On a June night in 1981, Israeli F-16s, in violation of international law, entered Iraqi airspace and destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad.

Key Phase

The Israelis took a pinprick approach to dealing with the "little" Assad. In 2003, the air force conducted multiple air strikes against positions on the Syrian border, and in October Israeli fighter jets flew a low-altitude mission over Assad's residence in Damascus. It was an arrogant show of power that even had many at the Mossad shaking their heads, wondering how Assad would respond to such humiliating treatment.

At that time, the nuclear plant on Euphrates had likely entered its first key phase. In the spring of 2004, the American 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 responsible for radio reconnaissance and has its antennas set up in the hills near Tel Aviv. Al-Kibar was "flagged," as they say in intelligence jargon.

In late 2006, Israeli military intelligence decided to ask the British for their opinion. But almost at the same time as the delegation from Tel Aviv was arriving in London, a senior Syrian government official checked into a hotel in the exclusive London neighborhood of Kensington. He was under Mossad surveillance and turned out to be incredibly careless, leaving his computer in his hotel room when he went out. Israeli agents took the opportunity to install a so-called "Trojan horse" program, which can be used to secretly steal data, onto the Syrian's laptop.

The hard drive contained construction plans, letters and hundreds of photos. The photos, which were particularly revealing, showed the Al Kibar complex at various stages in its development. At the beginning -- probably in 2002, although the material was undated -- the construction site looked like a treehouse on stilts, complete with suspicious-looking pipes leading to a pumping station at the Euphrates. Later photos show concrete piers and roofs, which apparently had only one function: to modify the building so that it would look unsuspecting from above. In the end, the whole thing looked as if a shoebox had been placed over something in an attempt to conceal it. But photos from the interior revealed that what was going on at the site was in fact probably work on fissile material.

One of the photos showed an Asian in blue tracksuit trousers, standing next to an Arab. The Mossad quickly identified the two men as Chon Chibu and Ibrahim Othman. Chon is one of the leading members of the North Korean nuclear program, and experts believe that he is the chief engineer behind the Yongbyon plutonium reactor. Othman is the director of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission.

By now, both Israeli military intelligence and the Mossad were on high alert. After being briefed, then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked: "Will the reactor be up and running soon, and is there is a need to take action?" Hard to say, the experts said. The prime minister asked for more detailed information, preferably from first hand.

The CIA Catches a Big Fish

Istanbul , a CIA safe house for high-profile defectors, February 2007. An Iranian general had decided to switch sides. He was a big fish, of the sort rarely caught in the nets of the CIA and the Mossad.

Ali-Reza Asgari, 63, a handsome man with a moustache, was the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard in Lebanon in the 1980s and became Iran's deputy defense minister in the mid-1990s. Though

well-liked under the relatively liberal then-President Mohammad Khatami, Asgari fell out of favor after the election victory of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Because he had branded several men close to Ahmadinejad as corrupt, there was suddenly more at stake for Asgari than his career: His life was in danger.

Sources in the intelligence community claim that Asgari's defection to the West was meticulously planned over a period of months. However Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, a former Iranian media attaché in Beirut who fled to Berlin in 2003 and who had known Asgari personally for many years, told SPIEGEL that the general contacted him twice to ask for help in his escape -- first from Iran in the second half of 2006 and later from Damascus. In Ebrahimi's version of events, Asgari succeeded in crossing the border into Turkey at night with the help of a smuggler. Ebrahimi says he only notified the CIA and turned his friend over to the Americans after Asgari had reached Istanbul.

But from that point on, the versions of the story coincide again. The Americans and Israelis soon discovered that the Tehran insider was an intelligence goldmine. For the Israelis, the most alarming part of Asgari's story was what he had to say about Iran's nuclear program. According to Asgari, Tehran was building a second, secret plant in addition to the uranium enrichment plant in Natanz, which was already known to the West. Besides, he said, Iran was apparently funding a top-secret nuclear project in Syria, launched in cooperation with the North Koreans. But Asgari claimed he did not know any further details about the plan.

After a few days, the general's handlers flew him from Istanbul, considered relatively unsafe, to the highly secure Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt. "I brought my computer along. My entire life is in there," Asgari told his friend Ebrahimi, who identified him for the Americans. Asgari contacted Ebrahimi another two times, once from Washington and then from "somewhere in Texas." The defector wanted his friend to let his wife know that he was safe and in good hands. The Iranian authorities had announced that Asgari had been "kidnapped by the Mossad and probably killed." But then nothing further was heard from Asgari. The American authorities had apparently created a new identity for their high-level Iranian source. Ali-Reza Asgari had ceased to exist.

The Need for US Support

Olmert was kept apprised of the latest developments. In March 2007, three senior experts from the political, military and intelligence communities were summoned to his residence on Gaza Street in Jerusalem, where Olmert swore them to absolute secrecy. The trio was to advise him on matters relating to the Syrian nuclear program. Olmert wanted results, knowing that he would have to gain the support of the Americans before launching an attack. At the very least, he needed the Americans' tacit consent if he planned to send aircraft into regions that were only a few dozen kilometers from military bases in Turkey, a NATO member.

In August, Major General Yaakov Amidror, the trio's spokesman, delivered a devastating report to the prime minister. While the Mossad had tended to be reserved in its assessment of Al Kibar, the three men were now more than convinced that the site posed an existential threat to Israel and that there was evidence of intense cooperation between Syria and North Korea. There also appeared to be proof of connections to Iran. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi, who experts believed was the head of Iran's secret "Project 111" for outfitting Iranian missiles with nuclear warheads, had visited Damascus in 2005. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad traveled to Syria in 2006, where he is believed to have promised the Syrians more than \$1 billion (€675 million) in assistance and urged them to accelerate their efforts.

According to this version of the story, Al Kibar was to be a backup plant for the heavy-water reactor under construction near the Iranian city of Arak, designed to provide plutonium to build a bomb if Iran did not succeed in constructing a weapon using enriched uranium. "Assad apparently thought that, with his weapon, he could have a nuclear option for an Armageddon," says Aharon Zeevi-Farkash, the former director of Israeli military intelligence.

Suspicious Ships

Olmert approved a highly risky undertaking: a fact-finding mission by Israeli agents on foreign soil. On an overcast night in August 2007, says intelligence expert Ronen Bergman, Israeli elite units traveling in helicopters at low altitude crossed the border into Syria, where they unloaded their testing equipment in the desert near Deir el-Zor and took soil samples in the general vicinity of the Al Kibar plant. The group had to abort its daring mission prematurely when it was discovered by a patrol. The Israelis still lacked the definitive proof they needed. However those in Tel Aviv who favored quick action argued that the results of the samples "provided evidence of the existence of a nuclear program."

One of them was the head of the trio of experts, Yaakov Amidror. Amidror, a deeply religious man strongly influenced by his fear of a new Holocaust, also found evidence suggesting that construction on the Syrian plant was to be accelerated. He told Olmert about a ship called the *Gregorio*, which was coming from North Korea and which was seized in Cyprus in September 2006. It was found to have suspicious-looking pipes bound for Syria on board. And in early September 2007, the freighter *Al-Ahmad*, also coming from Pyongyang, arrived at the Syrian port of Tartous -- with a cargo of uranium materials, according to the Mossad's information.

At the time, no one was claiming that Al Kibar represented an immediate threat to Israel's security. Nevertheless, Olmert wanted to attack, despite the tense conditions in the region, the Iraq crisis and the conflict in the Gaza Strip. Olmert notified then-US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and gave his own military staff the authority to bomb the Syrian plant. The countdown for Operation Orchard had begun.

'Target Destroyed'

Ramat David Air Base, Sept. 5, 2007. Israel's Ramat David air base is located south of the port city of Haifa. It is also near Megiddo, which according to the Bible will be the site of Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil.

The order that the pilots in the squadron received shortly before 11 p.m. on Sept. 5, 2007 seemed purely routine: They were to be prepared for an emergency exercise. All 10 available aircraft, known affectionately by their pilots as "Raam" ("Thunder"), took off into the night sky and headed westward, out into the Mediterranean. It was a maneuver designed to deflect attention from the extraordinary mobilization that had been taking place behind the scenes.

Three of the 10 F-15's were ordered to return home, while the remaining seven continued flying east-northeast, at low altitude, toward the nearby Syrian border, where they used their precision-guided weapons to eliminate a radar station. Within an additional 18 flight minutes, they had reached the area around Deir el-Zor. By then, the Israeli pilots had the coordinates of the Al Kibar complex programmed into their on-board computers. The attack was filmed from the air, and as is always the case with these strikes, the bombs were far more destructive than necessary. For the Israelis, it made little difference whether a few guards were killed or a larger number of people.

Immediately following the brief report from the military ("target destroyed"), Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, explained the situation, 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. Israel, Olmert said, did not want to play up the incident and was still interested in making peace with Damascus. He added that if Assad chose not to draw attention to the Israeli strike, he would do the same.

In this way, a deafening silence about the mysterious event in the desert began. Nevertheless, the story did not end there, because there were many who chose to shed light on the incident -- and others who were intent on exacting revenge.

Washington , DC , late October 2007. The independent Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) is located less than a mile from the White House. It is more important than some US federal departments.

The office of its founder and president, David Albright, who holds a degree in physics and was a member of the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) group of experts in Iraq, is in suite 500 of the brick building that houses the ISIS. As relaxed as he seems to his staff, in his pleated khaki trousers and rolled up shirtsleeves, they know that it is no accident that Albright has managed to turn the ISIS into one of the leading think tanks in Washington. Albright's words carry significant weight in the world of nuclear scientists.

The ISIS spent four weeks analyzing the initial reports about the mysterious air strike in Syria, combing over satellite images covering an area of 25,000 square kilometers (9,650 square miles) before they discovered the destroyed complex of buildings in the desert.

In April 2008, Albright received an unexpected invitation from the CIA to attend a meeting. There, then-CIA Director Michael Hayden showed him images that the Israelis had obtained from the Syrian computer in London (much to the outrage of officials in Tel Aviv, incidentally, as it provided insights into Mossad sources). The photos enabled Albright, who was familiar with the dimensions and characteristics of North Korea's Yongbyon reactor, to compare the various stages at Al Kibar. "There are no longer any serious doubts that we were dealing with a nuclear reactor in Syria," the scientist concluded.

Albright believes that the CIA's strange behavior had to be understood in the context of the Iraq disaster. At the time, the administration of then-President George W. Bush, citing CIA information, constantly repeated the false claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. This time around, American intelligence wanted to prove that the threat was real.

But where did the Syrians get the uranium they needed for their heavy-water reactor, and in which secret plants was it enriched? In addition to the North Koreans, were the Iranians also involved? And what did the latest images of this "Manhattan project" in the Syrian desert actually depict -- the conversion of an existing plant or a completely new facility?

The Sisyphus of Non-Proliferation

Vienna, the UN complex on Wagramer Straße, headquarters of the IAEA's nuclear detectives. An impressive collection of national flags hangs in the lobby, like sails waiting for a tailwind. Of the 192 UN member states, 150 are also members of the IAEA, and almost all UN members have signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The problem children of the nuclear world, Israel, Pakistan and India, have not signed the treaty. All three of them possess -- or in the case of Israel, are believed to possess -- nuclear weapons.

Signatory states like Syria and Iran are entitled to support in pursuing the peaceful use of nuclear energy. They are also required to either phase out nuclear weapons and prevent their proliferation (in the case of the nuclear "haves") or refrain from developing them in the first place (in the case of the "have-nots").

The IAEA, whose job is to verify compliance with the provisions of the NPT, has 2,200 employees and an annual budget of roughly \$300 million. That may sound impressive, but it is really just peanuts if the claim repeatedly made by politicians around the world is true, namely that the possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of blackmailing dictators or terrorists poses the greatest danger to humanity.

During an [interview with SPIEGEL](#) in his Vienna office in May 2009, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei, 67, sighed as he took stock of his life. At times, the IAEA boss says, he has felt like Sisyphus, the tragic figure in Greek mythology who is constantly pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to lose hold of it shortly before the summit. ElBaradei, the winner of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, has repeatedly pointed out that his organization is subject to the whims of the member states. The nuclear detectives can admittedly be deployed to use their highly sensitive testing equipment to obtain a "nuclear fingerprint" in any particular place, but they also need access to reactors. Libya has caused problems in the past, while today's recalcitrants are North Korea and Iran -- in other words,

the usual suspects. And now Syria. The news about the desert nuclear plant came as a great shock to the IAEA.

"What the Israelis did was a violation of international law. If the Israelis and the Americans had information about an illegal nuclear facility, they should have notified us immediately," says ElBaradei, who only learned of the dramatic incident from media reports. "When everything was over, we were supposed to head out and search for evidence in the rubble -- a virtually impossible task."

Alarming Findings

But he had underestimated his inspectors. In June 2008, a team of IAEA experts visited the destroyed Al Kibar plant. The Syrians had given in to pressure from the weapons inspectors, but they had also done everything possible to dispose of the evidence first. They removed all the debris from the bombed facility and paved over the entire site with concrete. They told the inspectors that it had been a conventional weapons factory, and not a nuclear reactor, which they would have been required to report to the IAEA. They also insisted that foreigners had not been involved.

The IAEA experts painstakingly collected soil samples, and used special wipes to remove minute traces of material from furnishings or pipes still on the site. The samples were sent to the IAEA special laboratories in Seibersdorf, a town near Vienna, where they were subjected to ultrasensitive isotope analyses capable of determining whether samples had come into contact with suspicious uranium. And indeed, the analysis produced some very alarming findings.

In its report, the IAEA describes "a significant number of anthropogenic natural uranium particles (i.e. produced as a result of chemical processing)" which were "of a type not included in Syria's declared inventory of nuclear material." The Syrian authorities claimed that the uranium was introduced by the Israeli bombing, something that the IAEA said was of "low probability."

In its latest report, released in June 2009, the IAEA demanded, in no uncertain terms, that Damascus grant it permission for another series of inspections, this time with access to "three other locations" that may have been related to Al Kibar. "The characteristics of the complex, including the cooling water capacities, bear a strong similarity to those of a nuclear reactor, something which urgently requires clarification," says one IAEA expert. In the cautious language of UN officials, this is practically a guilty verdict.

In the Crosshairs

"Syria is not giving us the transparency we require," ElBaradei says angrily. A picture hanging in his office seems to reflect his mood. It is a print of "The Scream," by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, which depicts a deeply distraught person. ElBaradei does not believe that he is too lenient with those suspected of illegally pursuing nuclear weapons programs, as the Bush administration repeatedly claimed, particularly in relation to Iran. The IAEA, he says, will probably receive permission for a new inspection trip to Syria soon. Or at least he hopes it will.

If and when that happens, a different host will greet the UN team. The affable Brigadier General Mohammed Suleiman, an Assad confidant in charge of all manner of "sensitive security issues," was formerly in charge of presiding over the inspections. However he was assassinated in 2008. He landed in the crosshairs of his pursuers, just like Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah.

For the Israelis, Mughniyah was the epitome of terror, the most notorious terrorist mastermind in the Middle East. He was responsible for the bloody attack on American military headquarters in Beirut in the 1980s and on Jewish institutions in Argentina in the 1990s, attacks in which hundreds of innocent people died. He is regarded by some as the inventor of the suicide attack and was deeply rooted in Iranian power structures.

The Mossad had information that Mughniyah was planning to avenge the air strike on Al Kibar with an attack on an Israeli embassy -- either in the Azerbaijani capital Baku, Cairo or the Jordanian capital

Amman.

Assassinated in an SUV

Damascus, the building complex of the Atomic Energy Commission of Syria in the city's Kafar Soussa diplomatic quarter, February 2008. Visitors are not welcome. "Please contact post office box 6091," says the guard at the entrance. There is also an email address (atomic@aec.org.sy). But inquiries sent to both addresses remain unanswered. No wonder, say experts, who speculate that the threads of a secret nuclear weapons program come together in the inconspicuous AECS complex.

It was precisely on the street where the AECS complex is located that Imad Mughniyah, a.k.a. "The Fox," parked his Mitsubishi Pajero on Feb. 12, 2008 while he attended a reception at the nearby Iranian embassy. It was a rare appearance by a man who normally avoided being seen in public. But on that evening Mughniyah knew that he would be among friends, including Hamas leader Khaled Mashal and Syrian General Mohammed Suleiman, whom he had met many times in Tehran and at Hezbollah centers in Lebanon.

Shortly after 10:30 p.m., Mughniyah drank his last glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Then he kissed the host, the newly installed Iranian diplomat Ahmed Mousavi, on both cheeks, as local custom dictates, and left the party. Mughniyah was "probably the most intelligent, most capable operative we've ever run across," said former CIA agent Robert Baer, who had been tracking him for a long time. The terrorist knew that he was at the very top of the Mossad's hit list, and he also knew that the FBI was offering a \$5 million reward for information leading to his arrest. But he felt relatively safe in Syria, as he did in Beirut and Tehran, which he visited on a regular basis.

The explosion completely destroyed the SUV and ripped apart Mughniyah's body. He was killed instantly. But the explosive charge was apparently calculated so carefully that nearby buildings were barely harmed. The terrorist leader remained the only victim on that night in Damascus.

Whoever committed the act, "the world is a better place without this man," the American government announced the next day through State Department spokesman Sean McCormack. Hezbollah, which had no doubts as to who was responsible for the killing, called Mughniyah a "martyr" and vowed to retaliate against the "Zionists."

The Israel government neither confirmed nor denied any involvement in the assassination. But agents at the Mossad could hardly contain their delight. According to information leaked to intelligence expert Uzi Mahnaimi, Israeli agents had removed the driver's seat headrest and filled it with a compound that would detonate on contact. Intelligence expert Ronen Bergman can even describe the reaction of Israelis who were involved. "It was a shame about that nice new Pajero," one of them reportedly said.

Tartous, a medieval stronghold of the Knights Templar on the Syrian Mediterranean coast, five months later. It was at this port city, 160 kilometers northwest of Damascus, that the mysterious freighter *Hamed* had once berthed with its supposed cargo of cement from North Korea. Here, on a beach 13 kilometers north of the medieval city walls, General Suleiman had a weekend house, not far from the Rimal al-Zahabiya luxury beach resort. In the summer, Suleiman traveled to his weekend house almost every Friday to review files, relax and swim. On this first August weekend in 2008, President Assad's eminence grise must have taken along a particularly large number of documents. A few days later, he had planned to accompany Assad on a secret visit to Tehran.

As always, Suleiman drove from Damascus to Tartous in an armored vehicle. Additional bodyguards were waiting for him at his chalet. They never let him out of their sight, even escorting him into the water when he went swimming. After Mughniyah's murder on a busy Damascus street, security was at the highest possible level. The general, who interacted with the global community as the regime's senior representative on nuclear issues, was considered particularly at risk.

The sea was calm that morning. Yachts were cruising off the coast, and there was nothing to raise suspicions in Tartous, a popular sailing destination for Syria's moneyed aristocracy where boats can be chartered for visits to nearby Arwad Island and its fish restaurants. An unusually sleek yacht came within 50 meters of the coast, but it was not close enough to raise any red flags with the bodyguards when their boss decided to jump into the sea.

No one even heard the gunshots, which were probably fired from precision rifles equipped with silencers. But they clearly came from offshore, striking Sulaiman in the head, chest and neck. The general died before his bodyguards could do anything for him. The yacht carrying the snipers turned away and disappeared into international waters.

Hushed Up

The Syrian authorities kept the news of the murder from the public for days. After that, it issued terse statements about the "vicious crime." According to the official account, the general was "found shot dead near Tartous." There was no mention of a yacht or of the angle from which the shots were fired.

Speculation was rife in Damascus. Diplomats assumed that Suleiman had become too powerful for his fellow cabinet members, and that his killing was evidence of an internal Syrian power struggle. According to Western critics of the president, Suleiman had become a burden for Assad after the debacle involving the bombed nuclear plant and the Mughniyah murder, and he was eliminated on orders from Assad. For experts, however, the most likely scenario is that the Israelis were behind the highly professional assassination.

Suleiman, who was nicknamed "the imported general" because of his European appearance, was buried in a private ceremony in his native village of Draykish two days after his murder. President Assad sent his younger brother Maher to attend the secret funeral, while he himself embarked on his scheduled trip to Tehran. It was important for him to put on a show of self-control, no matter how distressed he may have felt.

Can bomb attacks and hit squads against real or presumed terrorists bring about progress in the Middle East? Is it true that Arabs and Israelis only understand the language of violence, as many in Tel Aviv are now saying? Did the operation against the Al Kibar complex, which violated international law, bring the Syrian president to his senses, or did it merely encourage him to harden his position?

And what does all this mean for a possible Iranian nuclear bomb?

The Consequences of Operation Orchard

"The facility that was bombed was not a nuclear plant, but rather a conventional military installation," Syrian President Bashar Assad insisted during a [SPIEGEL interview](#) at his palace near Damascus in mid-January 2009. "We could have struck back. But should we really allow ourselves to be provoked into a war? Then we would have walked into an Israeli trap." What about the traces of uranium? "Perhaps the Israelis dropped it from the air to make us the target of precisely these suspicions."

Damascus, he said, is not interested in becoming a nuclear power, nor does it believe that Tehran is developing the bomb. "Syria is fundamentally opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. We want a nuclear-free Middle East, Israel included."

Assad, outraged over Israeli belligerence in the Gaza Strip, has suspended secret peace talks with the enemy, which had been brokered by Turkey. But it is also abundantly clear that Assad is eager to remove himself from the list of global political pariahs and enter into dialogue with the United States and Europe.

In the autumn of 2009, relations between Damascus and the West seem to be on the mend, probably as the result of American concessions rather than Israeli bombs. French President Nicolas Sarkozy received Assad at the Elysée Palace and told him that the normalization of relations would depend on the Syrians meeting a provocatively worded condition: "End nuclear weapons cooperation with Iran."

In the first week of October, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad traveled to Washington to meet with his counterparts there. And Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, with Washington's explicit blessing, went to Damascus in an attempt to make a shift to the moderate camp more palatable for Assad.

President Barack Obama will probably send a US military attaché to Damascus soon, followed by an ambassador. Syria could be removed from the US's list of state sponsors of terrorism, a list which also includes Iran, Cuba and Sudan. The prospect of billions in aid, as well as transfers of high technology, is being held out to Assad. The Syrian president knows that this is probably his only hope to revive his ailing economy in the long term.

Relations between Damascus and Tehran have worsened considerably in recent weeks. Western intelligence agencies report that the Iranian leadership is demanding that Syria return -- in full and without compensation -- substantial shipments of uranium, which it no longer needs now that its nuclear program has been destroyed.

The latest news from Damascus, the ancient city where Saulus turned into Paulus according to the old scripts: According to information SPIEGEL has obtained from sources in Damascus, Assad has been considering taking a sensational political step. He is believed to have suggested to contacts in Pyongyang that he is considering the disclosure of his "national" nuclear program, but without divulging any details of cooperation with his North Korean and Iranian partners. Libyan revolutionary leader Moammar Gadhafi reaped considerable benefits from the international community after a similar "confession" about his country's nuclear program.

The reaction from North Korea was swift and extremely harsh: Pyongyang sent a senior government representative to Damascus to inform Syrian authorities that the North Koreans would terminate all cooperation on chemical weapons if Assad proceeded with his plan. And this regardless whether he mentioned Pyongyang in this context or not.

Tehran's reaction is believed to have been even more severe. Saeed Jalili, the country's leading nuclear negotiator and a close associate of Iran's supreme religious leader, apparently brought along an urgent message from the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in which Khamenei called Assad's plan "unacceptable" and threatened that it would spell the end of the two countries' strategic alliance and a sharp decline in relations.

According to intelligence sources, Assad has backed down -- for the time being. However he is also looking for ways to do business with his enemies, even Israel's hard-line prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Nevertheless, Assad is loath to give up his contacts to Hezbollah and Tehran completely, and he will demand a very high price for the possible recognition of Israel and for playing the role of mediator with Tehran, namely the return of the entire Golan Heights.

Time on Its Side

Did Operation Orchard make an impression on the Iranians, and did they understand it the way it was probably intended by the Israelis: as a final warning to Tehran?

The Iranians have -- literally -- entrenched themselves, and not only since the Israeli attack on Syria. Many of the centrifuges they use for uranium enrichment are now operating in underground tunnels. Not even the bunker-busting super-bombs the Pentagon has requested be made available soon, citing "urgent operational requirements," are capable of fully destroying facilities like the one in Natanz.

The Americans -- or the Israelis -- would have to conduct air strikes for several weeks and destroy more than a dozen known nuclear facilities to set back the Iranian nuclear program by more than a few weeks. It would be a far more complex undertaking than the Israelis' past attacks on the Osirak reactor in Iraq and Syria's Al Kibar nuclear plant. And even after such a comprehensive operation, which would expose them to counterattacks, they could not be entirely sure of having wiped out all key elements of the Iranian nuclear program. Just in September, Tehran surprised the world with the

confession that it had built a previously unreported uranium enrichment plant near Qom.

Operation Orchard achieved only one thing: If the Iranians had planned to build a "spare" nuclear plant in Syria, that is, a backup plutonium factory, their plans were thwarted. But Tehran has time on its side. The Iranians are already believed to have reached breakout capacity -- in other words, the ability to begin building a nuclear weapon if they so desire. Iran is on the verge of becoming a nuclear power.

And Syria? There is nothing to suggest that Damascus will or is even able to play with fire once again. A conventional factory has in fact been built over the ruins of the Al Kibar plant. There is no access to the plant -- for "security reasons," as residents of Deir el-Zor say tersely -- at the roadblock near the great river and the desert village of Tibnah.

The turquoise-colored river flows slowly, the river that Moses, according to the Bible, promised to the Israelites as part of their holy land. To this day, many radical Israelis take the relevant passage in the Bible as seriously as an entry in the land register: "Every place that your foot shall tread upon shall be yours. From the desert, and from Libanus, from the great river Euphrates unto the western sea."

Referring to the same river, the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have said: "The Euphrates reveals the treasures within itself. Whoever sees it should not take anything from it."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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