

When Israel Destroyed Syria's Nuclear Reactor: The Inside Story

by Ori Wertman

Of the many security challenges facing Israel over the past decades, none has constituted a clearer and more direct existential threat than the possible attainment of nuclear weapons by enemy states openly committed to the Jewish state's destruction. On June 7, 1981, the Israeli airforce (IAF) destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor



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outside Baghdad, inaugurating what came to be known as the Begin Doctrine. This stipulated that the Israelis would not tolerate the attainment of nuclear weapons by their implacable enemies and would do whatever possible to prevent this eventuality.¹

Twenty-six years later, on September 6, 2007, the Begin Doctrine was put into effect again when IAF aircraft destroyed a Syrian nuclear reactor in a remote desert location, underscoring Jerusalem's continued resolve to fend off all existential threats, come what may.

This article describes the sequence of events that led to the bombardment of the Syrian nuclear reactor, from its discovery by Israeli intelligence until the Israeli security cabinet's decision to destroy the facility. Exploring the decision-making

¹ Amos Yadlin, "The Begin Doctrine: The Lessons of Osirak and Deir ez-Zor," *INSS Insight*, no. 1037, Mar. 21, 2018.

process behind this latter episode sheds intriguing light on both domestic and external political constraints confronting Israeli policymakers as they contend with the unique existential threats to the Jewish state.

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The Syrian Nuclear Reactor

In the summer of 2006, the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) intelligence directorate (or *Aman* as it is known by its Hebrew acronyms) discovered the construction of an isolated, well-hidden facility near the northeastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor.² Suspecting that the remote site might be a nuclear reactor in the making, especially in view of Damascus' growing covert collaboration with North Korea, Aman's director, Amos Yadlin, shared his concerns with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert; and while he had no conclusive evidence to back this supposition, by November 1, 2006, Aman had looked further into the matter and assessed that the site was probably used for nuclear-related activities.³

This assessment was dismissed by Mossad director Meir Dagan and his deputy, Ram Ben-Barak, who deemed Damascus as lacking the scientific knowhow and logistical capabilities to build a nuclear reactor, let alone to do so undetected by Israeli

intelligence services.⁴ As Yadlin persisted, in early March 2007 Olmert authorized the Mossad to hack the computer of the director of Syria's atomic energy commission who was passing through

Vienna for a professional meeting. The materials found in the director's computer proved beyond a shadow of doubt that the Assad regime was busy building a nuclear reactor, almost an exact replica of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear plant.⁵

On March 13, Dagan reported the striking findings to Olmert, who quickly shared it with his senior ministers—Defense Minister Amir Peretz and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni—together with IDF chief of general staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Shin Bet director Yuval Diskin. He also set up a small team of experts led by Yaakov Amidror, a former head of Aman's research division, to verify the newly-gained information and assess its implications. The team concluded that the Deir ez-Zor site was indeed a nuclear reactor, which would pose an existential threat to Israel upon its completion and which should, therefore, be destroyed without delay.⁶

Olmert needed no persuading. Upon hearing the disturbing news, he concluded that the possession of nuclear weapons by the

² Yoav Limor, "Sodi Beyoter," Keshet12 TV (Tel Aviv), [Mar. 21, 2018](#); Amos Yadlin, interview, *YNET News* (Tel Aviv), [Mar. 22, 2018](#).

³ Author interviews with Ehud Olmert, Zoom, Dec. 9, 2020, Feb. 15, 2021; author interview with Amos Yadlin, Zoom, Dec. 9, 2020; Roi Sharon and Carmela Menashe, "Kabel Arizona," KAN TV (Jerusalem), Mar. 21, 2018.

⁴ Author interview with Yadlin; Yaakov Katz, *Shadow Strike* (New York: St. Martin, 2019), p. 35; Raviv Drucker, "Hamakor," Reshet13 TV (Tel Aviv), Mar. 21, 2018.

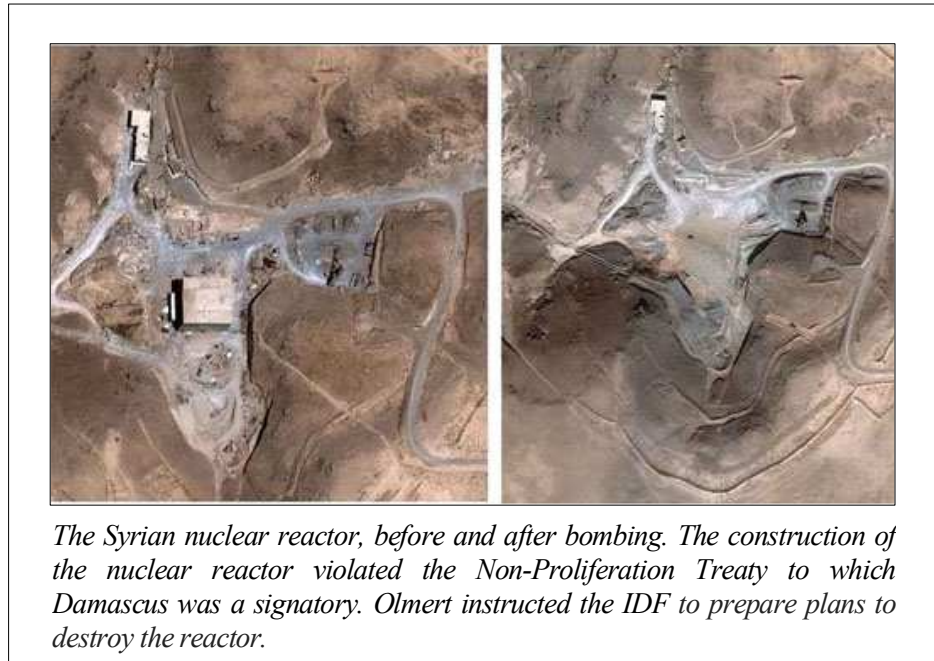
⁵ Ehud Olmert, *Beguf Rishon* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim, 2018), p. 195; David Makovsky, "The Silent Strike: How Israel bombed a Syrian nuclear installation and kept it secret," *The New Yorker*, [Sept. 10, 2012](#); Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 17, 40-1.

⁶ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 198-9.

Assad regime would pose an existential threat to Israel, both because it was impossible to predict how the regime would behave with a bomb and because a nuclear-armed Syria would further undermine Middle East stability.⁷ What remained to be done was only to decide when to destroy the nuclear reactor and how to do so in the most effective and least costly way.

Foremost, it was vitally important to know when the reactor would become operational so as to avert an ecological and environmental disaster. Given the site's proximity to the Euphrates River, the Israeli atomic energy committee estimated that the radioactive contamination from the destruction of a hot reactor would endanger millions of people.⁸ With this in mind, the military echelon re-commended that the operation be executed no later than September-October 2007, both to preempt the reactor's activation and to give the IDF, especially the IAF, the best operational conditions were the attack to escalate into an all-out Syrian-Israeli war.⁹

Indeed, the possibility of a new conflagration on the heels of the 2006 Lebanon war was the foremost concern among Israeli decision-makers since that war was viewed



by many Israelis as a failure with an official investigation of its conduct still underway. It was clear that a war with Syria, especially if Hezbollah were to join in the fighting, would exact a much higher human and material toll than the previous conflict, which had subjected millions of Israelis to sustained rocket and missiles attacks for thirty-four days. Policymakers also needed assurances that the IDF had sufficiently recovered from the 2006 conflict to be able to fight another major war.

On the other hand, Damascus had kept the nuclear reactor a secret because its very construction flagrantly violated the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Syria was a signatory. This kindled hopes that if the operation was sufficiently “low signature,” with Jerusalem not acknowledging its very occurrence, the Assad regime might forego retaliation to avoid widespread international censure of its underhanded activities.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., pp. 195-8; author interviews with Olmert.

⁸ Olmert, *Begif Rishon*, pp. 232-3; author interview with Yadlin; *YNET News*, [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

⁹ Author interview with Yadlin; Sharon and Menashe, “Kabel Arizona.”

¹⁰ *YNET News*, [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

Olmert thus instructed the IDF to prepare a number of operational plans that would ensure the destruction of the reactor without triggering a wider confrontation.

Should worse come to worst and war ensued, the IDF should strive to end the fighting in a swift and conclusive manner that would leave no doubt as to which side was the winner.¹¹

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Laying the Political Groundwork

These initial preparations notwithstanding, in mid-April 2007, Olmert sent Mossad director Dagan to alert the Bush administration to the discovery, in the hope of persuading Washington to undertake the nuclear reactor's destruction.¹² Olmert thought that such a move would not only preclude the likelihood of a Syrian retaliation but would also send an unmistakable message to Tehran regarding Washington's determination to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.¹³ The majority of the IDF general staff, including Yadlin and IAF commander Eliezer Shkedi, disagreed, maintaining that Jerusalem must confront Damascus on its own.¹⁴

Shortly after Dagan met with Vice President Dick Cheney, CIA director Michael Hayden, National Security Advisor Stephen

Hadley and his deputy Elliott Abrams, Olmert phoned President George W. Bush and asked him to bomb the Syrian reactor. Bush replied that he needed some time to look

at the intelligence and promised to provide an answer very soon. Olmert stressed that the reactor had to be destroyed by late August-early September before it became operational.¹⁵

In late April-early May, Olmert briefed the Israeli government's security cabinet—an "inner cabinet" headed by the PM for handling key defense and foreign affairs issues, including decisions on wars and major military operations—about the discovery of the Syrian reactor.¹⁶ In Olmert's account, the decision to update the U.S. administration before informing his own ministers emanated from the desire to maintain the utmost secrecy, which was vital to the operation's success. As he saw it, there was a higher danger of leaks from the security cabinet, which comprised over a dozen ministers, than from the U.S. administration's small circle of secret partners.¹⁷

With the memory of the 2006 Lebanon war fresh in their minds, the security cabinet members shared Olmert's hope that Washington would destroy the reactor and thus avoid the possibility of an all-

¹¹ Author interviews with Olmert; Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, p. 198.

¹² Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 198-9; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 15-7.

¹³ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 198-200; author interviews with Olmert; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p. 100.

¹⁴ Author interview with Yadlin; author interview with Eliezer Shkedi, Zoom, Mar. 11, 2021.

¹⁵ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), pp. 420-1; Elliott Abrams, *Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 227; Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), pp. 465-7; Drucker, "Hamakor."

¹⁶ Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 101-6; Maariv (Tel Aviv), [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

¹⁷ Author interviews with Olmert.

out Syrian-Israeli confrontation.¹⁸ As they awaited Washington's decision, the cabinet learned in early June that the reactor might become operational before long. The construction of two water canals between the reactor and the Euphrates—one for carrying water from the river for cooling the reactor's core, the other for carrying hot water from the reactor back to the river—was of particular concern. While nuclear reactors usually use chimneys to evaporate hot water, water canals would hide the facility's being a nuclear reactor. This increased the sense of urgency among Israeli decision-makers, with IDF chief of staff Ashkenazi and IAF commander Shkedi reporting to the security cabinet that the IDF was ready to strike and operationally prepared for the outbreak of hostilities, should the Syrian regime retaliate.¹⁹

At this point, however, a new factor entered the equation and changed the Israeli decision-making process: On June 13, Ehud Barak won the Labor party's leadership contest, and two days later he replaced the party's former leader Amir Peretz as minister of defense.

The Barak Factor

Like Olmert, Barak believed that the Syrian nuclear reactor posed an existential threat to Israel and had to be destroyed. Yet



Photo: Tal Shachar
Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (left) and the IDF leadership sought to destroy the Syrian reactor within a few weeks. Minister of Defense Ehud Barak (right) insisted that the Israelis explore all options before the dangerous move.

while Olmert and the IDF leadership sought to destroy the reactor within a few weeks, Barak insisted that Jerusalem explore all available options before embarking on this dangerous move. This allegedly reflected his perception of Olmert as a reckless politician who might drag Israel into a second uncontrollable confrontation within a year.²⁰ More specifically, Barak claimed that the two plans presented to him failed to meet the operation's prerequisites: The first plan did not ensure the reactor's destruction but had a sufficiently low signature to preclude Syrian retaliation, whereas the second ensured the facility's destruction but made war quite likely. Hence, he instructed the IDF planners to go back to the drawing board and come up with fresh operational ideas.²¹

¹⁸ Author interview with Isaac Herzog, minister of welfare and social services and member of the security cabinet, Tel Aviv, Apr. 2, 2018; Limor, "Sodi beyoter."

¹⁹ *Maariv*, [Mar. 21, 2018](#); Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p. 62; Yadlin, *YNET News*, [Mar. 22, 2018](#).

²⁰ Author interview with Ehud Barak, Zoom, Feb. 3, 2021; *Walla News* (Tel Aviv), [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

²¹ Ehud Barak, *My Country, My Life* (New York: St. Martin, 2018), pp. 411-12; author interview with Barak; *Globes* (Rishon Le-Zion), [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

While Barak's view was supported by Deputy PM and Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former defense minister and IDF chief of staff,²² Olmert, the security cabinet, the IDF leadership, and Mossad director Dagan opposed the postponement of the operation fearing the reactor would likely become operational. They were particularly taken aback by Barak's suggestion that an operative reactor could also be destroyed, implying that such action would not cause massive environmental damage. In his defense, Barak claimed that had Israeli intelligence discovered the reactor after it was already operational, the IDF would have destroyed it anyway; to which Olmert retorted that this might have indeed been the case, but the Israelis would have then been widely censured for failing to destroy the reactor while it was still inoperative. The radioactivity factor apart, the IDF maintained that should the operation trigger an all-out war, this had better happen before the onset of winter.²³

Whether or not Barak truly feared that the IDF was not ready for war and wanted to buy it precious time to complete its preparations, some decision-makers, including Aman director Yadlin, were convinced that his position was driven by ulterior motives. The prevalent suspicion was that Barak wished to postpone the strike because he hoped that Olmert would be forced to abdicate the premiership once the official commission of

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inquiry of the Lebanon war submitted its final report, which would allow Barak as minister of defense to take credit for the reactor's destruction.²⁴

This was not an unreasonable suspicion given the commission's scathing interim report (released on April 30, 2007), which had further dented Olmert's declining political standing at a time when Barak's prestige was at its peak after his political comeback. A mid-June poll showed that were elections to be held at the time, Olmert's Kadima Party would be reduced from its existing 29 parliamentary seats to a mere 11 whereas the Barak-led Labor would rise from 19 to 29 seats.²⁵

Other security cabinet ministers and defense establishment figures were prepared to give Barak the benefit of the doubt. IAF commander Shkedi, for example, claimed that he found it difficult to believe that someone who had served as IDF chief of staff, minister of defense, and prime minister would be guided by ulterior motives when addressing an existential threat.²⁶

U.S. Hesitation

The position of the Bush administration was close to the opposite of their Israeli counterparts. While there was no doubt in Jerusalem that the nuclear reactor had to be destroyed and the only differences related to the questions of when and how, most U.S. policymakers were opposed to such a move. The only proponent of destroying the reactor was Vice President Dick Cheney who viewed

²² Author interview with Shaul Mofaz, Zoom, Mar. 31, 2021; Haim Ramon, *Neged Haruah* (Israel: Miskal Digital Version, 2020), p. 2161.

²³ Author interviews with Barak, Olmert, and Herzog; Drucker, "Hamakor"; Ramon, *Neged Haruah?*, p. 2158.

²⁴ Limor, "Sodi beyoter"; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, p. 128.

²⁵ *NRG* (Tel Aviv), [June 14, 2007](#).

²⁶ Author interview with Shkedi.



Robert Gates
Secretary of Defense



Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State



Dick Cheney
Vice President

The only proponent of destroying the Syrian reactor within the Bush administration was Vice President Dick Cheney. In this, he was strongly opposed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Syria and Iran as terrorism-sponsoring rouge states that must be prevented from obtaining nuclear weapons. He maintained that, by destroying the Syrian nuclear reactor, Washington would be sending a powerful message not only to Damascus and Pyongyang but also to Tehran, whose nuclear program the administration strove to contain.²⁷ He was strongly opposed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who warned that a U.S. strike could trigger a regional war should Damascus choose to retaliate. While conceding that the reactor should not be allowed to become operational, they proposed limiting the struggle to the political and diplomatic fields, garnering international censure of the Syrian/North Korean violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions and the nonproliferation treaty. Gates even went so far as to suggest that Bush warn Olmert that a unilateral Israeli strike might jeopardize the entire U.S.-Israel relationship.²⁸

With the failure to find Saddam Hussein's nonconventional arsenal after the

2003 Iraq war still fresh in Bush's mind, and Iraq embroiled in a vicious internecine strife, the American president was reluctant to embark on yet another military adventure, not least, since the CIA doubted the veracity of Israeli reports about the nuclear reactor.²⁹ He, thus, accepted the majority recommendation to follow the diplomatic path; he informed Olmert of his decision by phone on July 13 and suggested sending Secretary of State Rice to Israel to hold a joint press conference that would pressure Damascus to destroy the reactor.³⁰

As the U.S. administration was still consumed by the "Iraq trauma," Olmert told Bush of his determination to go it alone: "This leaves me surprised and disappointed, and I cannot accept it." Olmert continued,

We told you from the first day, when Dagan came to Washington, and I have told you since then whenever we discussed the matter that the reactor had to go away. Israel cannot live with a Syrian

²⁷ Cheney, *In My Time*, pp. 468-70.

²⁸ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 708; Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (London: W.H. Allen, 2014), pp. 173-5; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 63-4.

²⁹ Michael Hayden, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 261-2.

³⁰ Bush, *Decision Points*, pp. 115-8, 421; Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, p. 205.

nuclear reactor; we will not accept it. It will change the entire region and our national security cannot accept it. You are telling me you will not act, so we will act. The timing is another matter, and we will not do anything precipitous.³¹

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According to Olmert, Bush responded, telling him that “the United States will not get in your way,” and acknowledging that Israel had the right to protect its national security and that he would instruct his officials to maintain absolute silence on the matter.³²

Deciding on a Strike

This was enough for Olmert. Having informed his ministers of President Bush’s decision not to destroy the Syrian nuclear reactor, he convened the security cabinet on August 1. By this time, the infighting between the prime minister and Minister of Defense Barak had skyrocketed to new heights, and the acrimony was starkly illustrated in the cabinet meeting. The heads of Mossad and Shin Bet told the ministers that the reactor must be demolished without delay. Then Ido Nehoshtan, director of the IDF Planning Division, presented the IDF’s position. But, as the general began to read the recommendation to destroy the reactor as soon as possible before it became operational, he was silenced by

Barak, who ordered him not to speak. Taken aback, Olmert took Nehoshtan’s notes and read the IDF’s recommendation to his ministers. He was followed by Aman director Yadlin, who stressed that

any delay could be disastrous and cause irreversible damage. Barak, for his part, reiterated his position that while the reactor must be destroyed, the right moment had not yet arrived.³³

In a follow-up meeting on August 8, the security cabinet heard a comprehensive review by Olmert of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the pros and cons of the reactor’s destruction. As proof of the reactor’s imminent activation, he cited a recent public boast by Bashar Assad that within a few months the regional balance of power would change completely. Olmert acknowledged that its destruction might trigger a Syrian-Israeli confrontation but argued that this was a risk worth taking because of the existential threat. He told the ministers that the IDF believed in its ability to carry out the operation with full success and minimum risk of escalation, and that time was running out. According to Herzog, this meeting was the tipping point on the reactor’s immediate destruction.³⁴

On August 31, Olmert met with the IDF leadership, and IAF commander Shkedi presented a plan for the reactor’s destruction. By this time, Sayeret Matkal, Israel’s foremost elite commando unit, had provided soil samples from the reactor that contained tiny

³¹ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 205-7; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, pp. 246-7; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 120-2; Drucker, “Hamakor.”

³² Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 205-7; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, pp. 246-7; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 120-2; Drucker, “Hamakor.”

³³ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 213-5; Drucker, “Hamakor”; author interview with Barak; Ramon, *Neged Haruah*, pp. 2159-60.

³⁴ Author interview with Herzog; Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 159-63.

traces of uranium. This indicated that the reactor was about to become operational, and Olmert told the officers that he would convene the security cabinet on September 5 to approve the operation.³⁵ But a day before the scheduled meeting, the Israeli embassy in Washington reported a query by an American journalist about the existence of a nuclear reactor in Syria. Whether the journalist was tipped by someone who wanted to jeopardize the operation or by someone who sought to expedite it, the September 5 meeting was held under the fear that the Syrians would find that their secret had been exposed and take security measures to prevent the reactor's destruction.³⁶

Ashkenazi told the security cabinet that the IDF was ready for action and that an air strike had to be carried out that night lest news about the reactor's existence broke out. He estimated the probability of escalation to war as low, and his assessment was backed by Yadlin who claimed that Assad was likely to refrain from retaliation as long as Jerusalem remained silent and did not embarrass Damascus publicly.³⁷ Olmert asked the cabinet to approve the operation, with the specific format and timing to be determined by himself, in consultation with Defense Minister Barak and Foreign Minister Livni. The suggestion was unanimously approved apart from an abstention by the minister for internal security, Avi Dichter, who insisted that the final

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decision on when and how not be left to the trio but rather be made by the security cabinet. Dichter's demand was ignored, and immediately after the security cabinet's meeting the triumvirate convened

and approved Ashkenazi's request for immediate action.³⁸

That night, September 6, eight IAF fighter jets took off to attack the Syrian nuclear reactor. The pilots were instructed to avoid shooting down enemy planes unless they interfered with the mission so as to prevent escalation. After two hours of flying, the planes reached their destination and dropped seventeen tons of explosives on the reactor, destroying it beyond repair.³⁹

Nervously awaiting Assad's response, Israeli policymakers were relieved to hear from Yadlin, a few hours after the attack, that Israeli intelligence did not identify any Syrian activities that might indicate a military response against Israel. Indeed, shortly afterward, the Syrian government issued an official statement that their air defense forces had foiled an attempted Israeli air attack, expelling the Israeli aircraft from Syrian territory.⁴⁰

Conclusion

While the destruction of the Syrian nuclear reactor constituted a clear-cut application of the Begin Doctrine whereby Jerusalem would not allow any of its enemies to obtain nuclear weapons, there was a major

³⁵ Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 159-63; Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 220-1.

³⁶ Drucker, "Hamakor"; Limor, "Sodi beyoter"; Sharon and Menashe, "Kabel Arizona."

³⁷ *Maariv*, [Mar. 21, 2018](#).

³⁸ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, p. 227; author interview with Avi Dichter, Zoom, Jan. 5, 2021; author interview with Tzipi Livni, telephone, Apr. 5, 2021.

³⁹ Katz, *Shadow Strike*, pp. 185-8.

⁴⁰ Olmert, *Beguf Rishon*, pp. 229, 241-2.

difference in the decision-making process leading to this action. Unlike Prime Minister Begin who chose to keep Washington in the dark regarding his decision to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor, Olmert not only deemed it necessary to involve the U.S. administration in the decision-making process but hoped that it would bomb the reactor, thus relieving his cabinet of the need to make this excruciating decision. That Jerusalem was forced to go it alone against Washington's clear preference for the diplomatic option underscores the difficulty in executing the Begin Doctrine even with a friendly U.S. administration.

This makes the challenge confronting the current Israeli government vis-à-vis Iran far greater than that faced by its predecessors. Not only is the Biden administration less sympathetic to Israel's nuclear predicament (and much more forbearing of the Islamist regime in Tehran) than the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, but the destruction of Iran's extensive nuclear infrastructure would require a sustained bombardment campaign, accom-

panied perhaps by ground operations, something that the Israelis may not be able to achieve on their own, certainly not without U.S. backing and support. In addition, Tehran has far greater retaliatory capacities, both directly and via proxy militias and terror organizations, than those of the Saddam Hussein or Bashar Assad regimes.

Whether the Bennett-Lapid government will dare implement the Begin Doctrine in defiance of the Biden administration remains to be seen.

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