



The affair around Syrian nuclear program

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Syria has registered a very positive development in the field of international politics in the last months. After signing the Agreement of Doha between Lebanese antisyrrian coalition and prosyrian opposition forces, France as the presidency country of the European Union showed an effort for reinforcing political and - as it was shown later - also economic relationships with Damascus **(1)**, which can also be demonstrated by the successive meetings of Presidents of both countries in July and September.

At the same time, Damascus has led an official indirect peace talks with the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert through Turkey for several months. At the end of August, the accusation of the current Syrian President Bashar Assad by the former President Abdul Halim Khaddam, living in exile now, turned out to be false. Bashar Assad supposedly threatened former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri before the assassination attempt that took place in February 2005. According to Associated Press **(2)**, a military court in Damascus judged the statement of Khaddam, who has repeatedly called for an overthrow of the current government from exile, a lie.

At the same time, Syria has taken several steps that irritated the current American administration: in the first place, it supported Russia in Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and it suggested the possibility for the placement of Iskander rocket complexes on its territory **(3)**. Apart from that, Syrian President Bashar Assad offered himself as a mediator in the Iranian nuclear program talks in the beginning of August **(4)**, and he declared that all the countries



associated in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), including Iran, have right to use nuclear energy for peace purposes. (5)

Syria, which is at the moment under the investigation of the IAEA inspectors for the suspicion of building a secret nuclear reactor with the help of North Korea, only added fuel to the fire. In April 2008, American intelligence services put out a dramatic video (6), reportedly filmed by an Israeli spy, on which North Korean technicians help build a nuclear reactor in Syria according to the Yongbyon reactor model that enables the plutonium enrichment for military purposes. It was supposed to be in the Al-Kiber complex in Dair al Zor, which was destroyed by Israeli fighter planes during the attack on September 6, 2007. However, Syria denied any cooperation with North Korea in building a nuclear reactor and it identified the complex as a military warehouse without nuclear activity (7). It is true that probably no country would choose an unprotected complex in the open desert for the placement of a nuclear facility, especially for military purposes. However, it is interesting to note that Damascus did not mark the attack as an act of war and it did not request any consequences on the international soil.

Until April 2008, the USA and Israel kept quiet about the attack as well. However, the attack was probably preceded by a Russian Pastsyr-S1 system of anti-aircraft system in the middle of August 2007, and entering of a ship with a supposed cargo of cement from North Korea into Syrian port Tartus on September 3, 2007. Israel arrived at a conviction that the ship transported nuclear fuel for the reactor and it decided to attack the facility before the insertion of fuel in the reactor, in order to prevent a possible contamination. However, Israel could not officially admit violation of the territorial integrity of a neighbor state, and Syria could not admit the existence of a nuclear program, so both countries were quiet about the attack. Even

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after the CIA video recording went public in April, Washington was not able to provide any proof about the fuel being in the facility or the fact that the complex would, if finished, produce electric energy, let alone weapons. At the same time, the USA did not inform IAEA soon enough so it would be able to verify the accusation on the spot. IAEA expert were able to get into the facility only in June 2008, and Syria allowed only one visit, any others were refused. In the beginning of the year, BBC brought news that after the notification of the international inspection, Syria rapidly cleared the remains of the Israeli raid and it constructed a new building on the same spot (8). If we take into consideration the declarations of Assad about the unused military complex, that seems incomprehensible in the least.

It remains a fact that Syria has tried to obtain nuclear equipment from the Soviet Union, China or Argentina for a long time. In 1989, the order for a 10 MW reactor from the Soviet Union was cancelled by Syria itself. In 1991, the order for a 30 MW research reactor from China was blocked by International Atomic Energy Agency under the influence of the USA and Israel for the suspicion of its abuse for military purposes. Later in 1998, a research neutron reactor in Dair al Hajjar near Damascus was installed under the supervision of IAEA, as a reward of the USA for Syria's support during the Persian Gulf War. At the same time, Syria became a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapon. However, it did not sign the amendment protocol to the Treaty, which would cede almost unlimited authority over the control of suspicious facilities on its territory and the successive steps in case of breaking the Treaty to the IAEA - same as Iran, Israel or the USA.

In July 2003, Nuclear Threat Initiative organization came to a conclusion that „ overall, Syria is a country with limited nuclear resources and capabilities. Most of these are focused on research and development and the practical application of radioisotopes for use in industry. It



is unclear how many nuclear facilities Syria actually has, but they all appear to be meant for the purpose of advancing the cause of nuclear science and industry in that country.“ (9) Authors of a study of Swedish Ministry of Defense in 2004 came to a similar conclusion. (10)

According to news published in May 2008 in Israeli journal Yedioth Ahronoth, Syrian nuclear program was launched in cooperation with North Korea in 2000. It a mystery in the least why Syria decided to copy the Yongbyon reactor model based on 40-year old technologies, while for example Libya or Iran „bought“ technologies through the illegal network of the „father“ of the Pakistan’s nuclear bomb Abdul Qadeer Khan. The North Korean cooperation with Syria thesis was further supported by the news of Japanese press agency NHK on April 28, 2008, according to which Israeli military forces killed 10 North Korean agents active in weapons military technologies trafficking.

The speculation about the Syrian-North Korean cooperation appeared at the time when the USA and the international community negotiated the Treaty of Nuclear Disarmament with North Korea. Therefore, the information released by the CIA under the pressure of the neoconservative block grouped around Vice-President Dick Cheney could have been only efforts to reverse the course of negotiations and the signing of the Treaty – too benevolent towards Pyongyang. The topic of Al Kibar facility was reopened by Americans at the time when first news about the indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel became public and after President Assad sent first signals of the efforts to break Syria’s international isolation. Qatar and France became the negotiations mediators, besides Turkey. And the Americans found themselves in the position of helpless viewers of the development in the Middle East for the first time. Israeli Likud party and its American allies will therefore sabotage any agreement with Syria that would be based on the return of Golan Heights occupied by Israel



in 1967, even at the cost of contact interruption of Damascus with Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah movement or Palestinian Hamas. Last year's attack on Al Kibar was only a warning, however, in the neoconservative camp in Washington in the first half of 2008, voices that called for the attack on Iran, Lebanon and Syria before George Bush junior steps out of the office, grew stronger (11). The reason for that was the conviction that American attack on these countries would work in favor of Senator John McCain in the November presidential election. However, the election of a new President and creation of the government of national unity in Lebanon took the wind out of their sails.

It is quite difficult to predict how the negotiations between Israel and Syria will end at the moment. Both countries almost made peace in the 90s. The basic controversial questions regarding entering into diplomatic relations, security, access to water resource and pulling back from the Golan Heights were already resolved, and despite all that Ehud Barak backed off from the agreement at the last moment. However, the reintegration into the international community is becoming a question of survival for poor Syria with rapidly rising population, outdated infrastructure and blocked foreign investments. Ehud Olmert who is at the end of his political career when he was forced to give up the post of his party's leader, is trying to prove that his primary interest lies in achieving peace for Israel and pressure Palestinians who would find themselves in total isolation in case of the agreement of Syria and Israel.

It seems that the topic of Syrian nuclear program is above all a political affair oriented on reversing the events happening during the last months – nuclear disarmament negotiations between North Korean and international community and peace talks between the long rivals Israel and Syria. Only the results of the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors' inquiry and time will tell whether the American intelligence service again resorted to



fabrication of non-related pictures and disinformation, as in the case of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction a few years ago, or whether Damascus did rely on the fact that an unprotected object in a remote part of the desert in the heart of Syria would not draw the attention of Israeli and American agents.

Notes:

- (1) Podľa Pétain, A.: Total se renforcera en Syrie. Le Figaro, 2.9.2008. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/societes/2008/09/02/04015-20080902ARTFIG00556-total-se-renforcera-en-syrie-.php>, bol členom delegácie Nicolasa Sarkozyho v Sýrii aj prezident francúzskej rafinárskej spoločnosti Total.
- (2) Associated Press, 30.8.2008.
- (3) Galeev, R.. Novyj region. 20.8.2008.
- (4) IRNA, 4.8.2008.
- (5) Nucléaire iranien : la Syrie partie prenante dans le reglement de la crise. Xinhua, 4.8.2008. www.mediterranee.com/Syrie/Politique/Nucleaire-iranien-la-Syrie-partie-prenante-dans-le-reglement-de-la-crise.html.
- (6) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/video/2008/04/24/VI2008042403257.html?sid=ST2008042501916>.



- (7) Allain, E.: Damas nie une aide nucléaire de Pyongyang. 25.4.2008.
<http://www.france24.com/fr/20080425-syrie-etats-unis-coree-nord-accusation-cooperation-nucleaire>.
- (8) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7366615.stm.
- (9) Nuclear Threat Initiative.
http://66.102.9.104/translate_c?hl=fr&langpair=en%7Cfr&u=http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Syria/Nuclear/2074.html&prev=/translate_s?hl%3Dfr%26q%3Dnucl%25C3%25A9aire%2Bsyrie%26tq%3DNuclear%2BSyria%26sl%3Dfr%26tl%3Den&usg=ALkJrhhG3YDeVehiP34luZaWvKoSzR4azQ.
- (10) <http://www2.foi.se/rapp/foir1290.pdf>.
- (11) Weitz, R.: New Insights about 2007 Israeli Air Strike in Syria. WMD Insights, jún 2008.
http://www.wmdinsights.com/I25/I25_ME2_NewInsights.htm.
- Gaouette, N.: Timing of Nord Korea revelations questioned. Los Angeles Times, 28.4.2008.
<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/28/world/fg-intel28>.