

Background Briefing with Senior U.S. Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement

April 24, 2008

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Hello. My name is [Senior Intelligence Official 1]. And I have the start-off role. It's been a pretty busy morning and afternoon, as you might imagine. We've been on the Hill having dialogue with our committees.

What I want to do is just frame the issue. I read the press reporting coming out here. So I'm almost at the point of saying are there any questions. But just let me say that what we're going to discuss is a nuclear reactor. It was constructed by the Syrians in the eastern desert of Syria along the Euphrates River on the east side. The Syrians constructed this reactor for the production of plutonium with the assistance of the North Koreans.

Our evidence goes back an extended period of time. We have had insights to what was going on since very late '90s, early 2000, 2001 that something was happening. Our issue was pinning it down and being more precise. We had increasing appreciation for what was happening in the 2003, 2006 timeframe. But we still couldn't quite pin it down, as will become apparent to you when we show you more of the physical evidence that you'll see in just a moment.

In the spring of last year, we were able to obtain some additional information that made it conclusive. And so, we engaged in this policy process of now that we have the evidence, what do we do about it? The evidence concluded a nuclear reactor, as I mentioned, constructed by the Syrians, started probably in 2001, completed in the summer of 2007. And it was nearing operational capability.

So from that point of departure, I am joined by [Senior Intelligence Official 2] who will provide details on the intelligence and what we knew and so on. We will show you a video of the evidence – so give you a chance to ask questions about that. And then [a Senior Administration Official], seated to my right will be available for responding to any policy questions you might have. So with that, I'll turn it over to [Senior Intelligence Official 2].

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: The format I've got, I'll talk a bit; I've got some slides that will show up behind me that shows some data. And then, we'll run the video. The video may overlap a bit with some of the information I give verbally or on the slides. Given some of this information will be your first exposure to it, we just thought that was the best way of doing it. And I think you're all aware that the video presentation, I think everyone will get a copy.

As [Senior Intelligence Official 1] said, information we acquired since 2001 has indicated cooperation between North Korean nuclear entities and high-level Syrian officials. And we went to the 2001 data – and I know this is true in your business – when you learn something, it doesn't just illuminate the future; it illuminates the past. And when we acquired information in 2001 and then were able to look backward on information that had been collected but not quite understood,

it's clear to us that this cooperation between North Korean nuclear-related personalities and entities and high-level Syrian officials began probably as early as 1997, which – and now this is estimate now, all right, not court-of-law evidence – puts it into the Hafez al Assad regime in terms of the original decision to begin this cooperation.

Now, as early as 2003, we judged that the interactions probably were nuclear-related, again, because of who it was we were seeing in these interactions. But we had no details on the nature or location of the cooperative projects. We assessed the cooperation involved work at sites probably within Syria. But again, we didn't know exactly where. So we had this body of evidence, kind of – almost like a cloud of, boy, there's something going on here but we can't get a whole lot of precision about it.

We received indications in '05 that the Syrians and North Koreans were involved in a project in the Dayr az Zawr region of eastern Syria, but again, no specific information on the nature or the exact location of the work. But you can see, as evidence mounts, more confident there is cooperation, more confident it involves nuclear-related people. And now, we've got a fairly good sense as to where the center point of the cooperation might be.

Imagery searches of the region revealed a large unidentified building under construction in a remote area near the Euphrates River near a point that we call al Kibar. And there you see the photo. The first time we saw it was after this evidence – look out there – remember '05, '06 timeframe – take a look there. We identified the facility. And once again, sometimes the present illuminates not just the future but can illuminate the past. We looked back on historical imagery that found that the only high-quality imagery we had was of a building that looked pretty much like this. It was externally complete.

And it's hard to figure out looking at that building what its purpose is. And it certainly didn't have any observable, externally observable characteristics that would say, oh, yeah, you got yourself a nuclear reactor here – things like a massive electrical-supply system, massive ventilation, and most importantly a cooling system. We acquired information, though, in the spring of '07 that enabled us to conclude that this non-descript-looking building in al Wadi, near the Euphrates River in eastern Syria was indeed a covert nuclear reactor. The information included photographs of the interior and the exterior of the building located in Dayr az Zawr showing key features of the reactor.

Now, we carefully compared these photos, which are obviously handheld – and we've got a certain volume of them measured in the dozens – these handheld photos with the overhead photos. And I'm here to assure you that all the windows, doors, holes in the wall, and so on, matched up; i.e., these handheld photos are of that building we showed you in the overhead photo. And that's very important because the handheld photos reveal construction activity at the site in a period of time prior to the external completion of the building. Does that make sense? Okay, good.

The reactor inside that building was clearly not configured to produce electricity. We saw no way and there are no power lines coming out of it, none of all the switching facilities that you would need, and frankly was less well-suited for research – I mean, obviously, we're holding up

hypotheses here, right – less well-suited for research than some existing nuclear facilities that we and the Syrians know about and have been made public in Syria.

Now, we assess that North Korea has assisted Syria with this reactor because, one, it uses North Korean-type technology. The building resembles North Korea's Yongbyon plutonium power reactor. That's Yongbyon on the left. That's that non-descript building in the eastern Syrian Desert before the curtain walls and false roof were put on the top of it to hide its shape, which, without those curtain walls and false roofs seem to carry the telltale signatures similar to the facility at Yongbyon.

Internal photographs of the reactor vessel under construction shows that it's a gas-cooled graphite-moderated reactor similar in technology and configuration to the Yongbyon reactor. And you can see that more clearly in this photo that compares the control rods and the refueling-tube arrangements of both reactors. That's internal imagery of al Kibar on the left and Yongbyon on the right.

And just to hit a point I said earlier, you see the kind of crawlspace back there? If you have access to the wealth of photographs that we had, you can work from the crawlspace to the wall to the windows to the ventilation duct to the duct coming out the window, and now you're looking at the overhead photography of that window in the right place with the duct coming out of it. See what I'm trying to describe for you – that we are very confident that that on the left is inside that building that we showed you in the overhead imagery.

Our information also indicates involvement of nuclear-related North Koreans in a project somewhere in the area. And we also have evidence of cargo being transferred from North Korea, most likely to his reactor site in 2006. The reactor was destroyed in an Israeli air strike early in the morning of 6 September 2007 as it was nearing completion but before it had been operated and before it was charged with uranium fuel.

Shortly after the attack, the Syrians began – this is mid-September now – a massive effort to destroy the ruined reactor building and to remove all potentially incriminating nuclear-related equipment and structures. Much of the work was done at night or was hidden by tarps in an attempt to conceal it from our overhead observation.

The Syrian efforts to dismantle and destroy the building revealed features of the internal arrangements and structure that corroborated what we saw before and were consistent with the ground photos that we had obtained. If you understand what we're doing here, you have the building. There were real hard reinforced concrete things in there like the sarcophagus around the reactor and as you can see heat exchanges and so on. The Israeli strike make it inoperable; Syrians decide, okay, we've got to take it down. As you begin to blow it up, what remains – the hard, reinforced concrete structures, which are the guts of the reactor. And that's what you're seeing. This is after the Syrians had begun to dismantle what the Israelis destroyed and the telltale signs of it being a nuclear reactor become even more visible as they go about the destruction.

Now, we prepared a video presentation that summarizes our assessment of this Syrian covert-reaction project and their efforts to cover up its existence. And so, although some of this will repeat what I've said, I think it's of use to us. Why don't we just let it roll. And I've got a word or two to follow. And then I think [the Senior Administration Official] has some things to say.

(Begin video segment.)

MODERATOR: Syria's covert nuclear reactor at al Kibar. This presentation describes a nuclear reactor Syria was building secretly, its destruction and Syria's subsequent efforts to cover up evidence of the reactor project.

The reactor was built in a remote area of eastern Syria near the Euphrates River. The nearest town is called al Kibar. Our information supports the following key points: Syria was building a gas-cooled graphite-moderated reactor that was nearing operational capability in August 2007. The reactor would have been capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. It was not configured to produce electricity and was ill-suited for research.

The reactor was destroyed in early September 2007 before it was loaded with nuclear fuel or operated. We are convinced, based on a variety of information, that North Korea assisted the Syrian's covert nuclear activities both before and after the reactor was destroyed. Only North Korea has built this type of reactor in the past 35 years.

Features of the facility and its location indicate Syria attempted to maintain its secrecy. Syria moved quickly to cover up its covert nuclear activities by demolishing and burying the reactor building and by removing incriminating equipment. These actions probably were intended to forestall identification of reactor debris by international inspectors and are inconsistent with peaceful nuclear intentions.

We have detailed information showing that the al Kibar facility was a nuclear reactor. A three-dimensional computer model of the facility has been created using features and dimensions through photographs of the facility. This diagram shows key features of a gas-cooled graphite-moderated reactor, the type built at al Kibar. We have photographs showing some of these important reactor components under construction including vertical tubes in the top of the reactor for control rods and for refueling, a reinforced-concrete steel-lined reactor vessel, and the water-supply systems use heat exchangers to remove heat from the carbon-dioxide coolant.

The main feature of the reactor hall, shown here in the center of the building, was the top of the reactor vessel. The pattern of holes on the floor were the ends of vertical tubes used for control rods and refueling of the core, a key feature of gas-cooled reactors. We judge other features of the building, such as heavily sealed reinforced-concrete rooms for heat exchangers and a spent-fuel holding pool also are consistent with typical gas-cooled reactors.

This photograph shows the top of the reactor vessel in the reactor hall before concrete was poured around the vertical control rod and refueling tubes. Note the similar arrangement of vertical tube openings in the top of the Syrian reactor on the left and North Korea's Yongbyon plutonium production reactor on the right. We assess the Syrian reactor was similar in size and

capacity to this North Korean reactor. Only North Korea has built such gas-cool graphite-moderated reactors in the past 35 years.

This photograph shows the steel liner for the reinforced-concrete reactor vessel before it was installed. The network of small pipes on the outside of the liner is for cooling water to protect the concrete against the reactor's intense heat and radiation. The animated model shows how this component was positioned in the reactor vessel. This photograph and view of the computer model shows the concrete reactor vessel under construction. The photograph shows the steel liner in place within the vessel.

Satellite imagery, together with ground photographs of the facility under construction, showed features of the cooling water-supply system. A key feature was pipes running up a canyon to supply water from the Euphrates River to an underground storage tank at the reactor site. The site lacked key features of alternative facilities such as fuel storage and turbines for an oil-fired power plant or pipes from the site for irrigation or water treatment. The water would have been pumped from the tank through heat exchangers in the reactor building and the hot water would return to the river by a separate pipeline.

When the pipeline and pump house were externally completed in early August 2007, no further observable construction was necessary before the reactor could begin operations. We assess that the reactor could have been complete and that start of operations could have begun at any time although additional weeks to months of testing were likely.

We have information spanning more than a decade that indicates sustained nuclear cooperation between Syria and North Korea. We obtained this photograph, for example, showing the head of North Korea's nuclear reactor fuel manufacturing plant in Yongbyon. Seen also at the Six-Party talks in the photograph on the right, together is Syria with the head of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission.

Other examples of cooperation include senior North Koreans from the Yongbyon nuclear complex made multiple visits to Syria before construction of the al Kibar reactor began in 2001. In 2002, North Korean officials were procuring equipment for an undisclosed site in Syria. North Korea, that same year, sought a gas-cooled reactor component we believe was intended for the Syrian site. A North Korean nuclear organization and Syrian officials involved in the covert nuclear program reportedly were involved in a cargo transfer from North Korea to probably al Kibar in 2006.

North Korean nuclear officials were located in the region of the reactor both early and late in 2007. Our information shows that North Korean advisors also probably assisted with damage-assessment inference after the reactor was destroyed. A high-level North Korean delegation traveled to Syria shortly after the reactor was destroyed and met with officials associated with Syria's covert nuclear program. The reactor building was irreparably damaged early in the morning of September 6th, 2007, before it became operational, causing a collapse of the central reactor hall and surrounding light walls and roof structures.

Damascus, including Syrian President Assad has specifically and forcefully denied that a nuclear facility was destroyed or that it has any undeclared nuclear facilities. Syria has gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal the existence and nature of the al Kibar reactor both during its construction and after it was destroyed. These photographs show how a light roof and thin curtain walls were added after the main reactor hall was completed. They alter the building's outline, which otherwise resembles the profile of North Korea's plutonium-production reactor at Yongbyon seen in the photograph on the left.

This photograph shows how much the building's appearance changed after the curtain walls and roof were added. The reactor building was located in a remote area of the Syrian Desert and was built in a canyon which concealed it from view. Further measures including earthen wall or mound that has been in place to block the view of the reactor from the bottom of the canyon. The concealment afforded by the reactor site's terrain and by the building modifications suggest Syrian attempts to maintain the secrecy of the facility.

Immediately after the building was destroyed, the Syrians began taking additional measures to limit potential observation of the reactor and their activities including covering the exposed reactor vessel with tarpaulins; erecting structures to prevent satellite observation of their activities; and opening holes in the building, probably to remove heavy reactor-related equipment.

Syria destroyed the remainder of the reactor building with a massive controlled demolition on October 10th, 2007, as part of an ongoing effort to remove all evidence of the reactor's existence. Demolition of the building, however, revealed key nuclear-related interior structures that remain because they were made of heavily reinforced concrete. These corresponded in configuration and location to key gas-cooled reactor features of our photography-based computer model, including the concrete reactor vessel, the shielded heat-exchanger rooms, and the probably spent fuel storage pool area.

Syria continued to demolish the building and remove equipment and by late October covered the excavation for the reactor building and remaining debris with earth. Syria subsequently erected a light metal-framework building over the site of the destroyed reactor and began preparing a pipeline to connect the site's water-pumping system to a water-treatment plant a few kilometers away, most likely an attempt to further cover up the nuclear nature of the al Kibar site. We do not know the function of the new building, but we assess it is not nuclear related and primarily is intended to discourage excavation of any remaining reactor debris.

In conclusion, our information shows that Syria was building a gas-cooled, graphite-moderated reactor that was nearing operational capability in August 2007. The reactor would have been capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. It was not configured to produce electricity and was ill-suited for research. The reactor was destroyed in early September 2007 before it was loaded with nuclear fuel or operated. We are convinced based on a variety of information that North Korea assisted Syria's covert nuclear activities both before and after the reactor was destroyed. Only North Korea has built this type of reactor in the past 35 years.

Features of the facility and its location indicate Syria attempted to maintain its secrecy. Syria moved quickly to cover up its covert nuclear activities by demolishing and varying the reactor building and by removing incriminating equipment. These actions probably were intended to forestall identification of reactor debris by international inspectors and are inconsistent with peaceful nuclear intentions.

(End video segment.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just like to make a couple of points – one of the questions you may have is why are we making this disclosure now and why not before. Our first concern was to prevent conflict and perhaps an even broader confrontation in the Middle East region. We were concerned that if knowledge of the existence and then destruction of the reactor became public and was confirmed by sources that the information would spread quickly and Syria would feel great pressure to retaliate. And, obviously, that would have been a threat to Israel and risked the possibility of a broader regional confrontation which we hoped to avoid.

As time has passed, our assessment is that that risk has receded. We have an obligation to keep Congress informed with matters such as this. We had briefed 22 members of Congress in positions of leadership and chairs and ranking members of key committees last September and October. We wanted and Congress wanted us to brief more widely within Congress.

We also felt that we could – and we also felt that we could use public disclosure to advance a number of policy objectives. So the calculation was the risks of greater discussion and disclosure had declined and were now acceptable and that, for a number of reasons, timing was good now to advance some policy objectives

We are at the point in the – for example, first let me take North Korea. We are at the point in the Six-Party talks where we believe going public will strengthen our negotiators as they try to get an accurate accounting of North Korea's nuclear programs. We believe and hope that it will encourage North Korea to acknowledge its proliferation activity, but also to provide a more complete and accurate disclosure of their plutonium activities and their enrichment activities as well.

With respect to Iran, the Syrian episode reminds us of the ability of states to obtain nuclear capability covertly and how destabilizing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East would be. And obviously everyone is concerned about that with respect to Iran, and we hope that disclosure will underscore that the international community needs to rededicate itself to ending Iran's nuclear enrichment activities, and needs to take further steps to ensure that Iran does not obtain nuclear weapons. And countries can start by the full implementation of the U.N. Security Council resolutions already dealing with Iranian nuclear activities, which are not being implemented as aggressively and fully as they should.

Finally, with respect to Syria, at the present time there are major initiatives underway to advance the cause of freedom and peace in the Middle East: There are talks between Israelis and Palestinians; there is progress in building a stable and democratic Iraq; there are efforts in Lebanon to consolidate its sovereignty after a long period of foreign occupation. Actions by the

Syrian regime threaten progress along each of these tracks. Disclosure of Syria's nuclear activities, we hope, will help us in convincing other nations to join us in pressuring Syria to change its policies.

One of the things that I'm sure also people are wondering is whether there was any discussion between us and the Israelis about policy options and how to respond to these facts. We did discuss policy options with Israel. Israel considered a Syrian nuclear capability to be an existential threat to the state of Israel. After these discussions, at the end of the day Israel made its own decision to take action. It did so without any green light from us – so-called “green light” from us; none was asked for, none was given.

We understand the Israeli action. We believe this clandestine reactor was a threat to regional peace and security, and we have stated before that we cannot allow the world's most dangerous regimes to acquire the world's most dangerous weapons.

Thank you.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Okay, are you going to moderate for us? Go ahead.

Q: I – just some detail on the North Korean involvement – and you showed that one photograph in the video presentation. The question is where was that taken and when was it taken? And are there any other photographic – other photos or video of North Koreans actually at the site of the reactor?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: No. First of all, the video you've seen is the video we have, okay? The photo is undated and we are certain that the photo was taken in Syria. You saw the license plates on the vehicle behind the two individuals were Syrian license plates.

Was there a third piece here?

Q: Yeah. Is there any other – are there any other – I mean, so there is no other photographic evidence or video that shows North Koreans at the facility?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: There are some – there's none more compelling than what we showed you.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: There are also some things that you're going to ask questions about – sources – and so we're not going to be able to answer those. There's a rich level of information here that we – we can't discuss the sources or methods, and that's what we're going to try to work around to let you see what we can show you, which we have showed you, and we just won't comment on specificity about we knew this point or that point or when.

Q: I just have a follow-up. The information I had earlier today is that at least one of the images – it may have been this particular image – was North Korean nuclear scientist Chon Chibu, who was linked directly to Yongbyon.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: That's him.

Q: That's him? And then my other question is a very basic question. This video presentation I would assume was put together by the CIA or –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: [Senior Intelligence Official 1] asked us, when this all started breaking about a year ago, really picked up pace, to marshal the resources of the entire community. So what you've seen here was constructed here, that's right.

Q: And this was shown on the Hill today.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Yes.

Q: [Senior Intelligence Official 2], it has been awhile – Syria kind of committed to trying to counterbalance the Israeli nuclear program several years ago and started working on that, and Syria has been a crossroad for all types of unsavory activity for many years, so are you fairly certain that this is the only type of activity going on there – was the only type of activity going on there?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: In terms of the nuclear program? Clearly, it's something we'll continue to keep a full-court press on, all right? Let me say that. But with the destruction of this facility, this is – I'll use the word "achievement;" I don't have time to think of a better one – in terms of ending that kind of behavior. There is cooperation that continues, however, between North Korea and the Syrians with regard to the Syrian missile program, and we see that same kind of cooperation between North Korea and Iran.

Q: A quick follow-on: Would the U.S. have considered any kind of activity had the Israelis not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We obviously were looking very closely at options, and we had looked at some approaches that involved a mix of diplomacy and the threat of military force with the goal of trying to ensure that the reactor was either dismantled or permanently disabled, and therefore never became operational.

We looked at those options. There were, as I mentioned to you, conversations with the Israelis. Israel felt that this reactor posed such an existential threat that a different approach was required. And as a sovereign country, Israel had to make its own evaluation of the threat and the immediacy of the threat, and what actions it should take. And it did so.

Q: You said in your briefing that the only apparent purpose of this reactor was to use plutonium not for power but apparently for weapons purposes.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: It lacked the –

Q: Can you give us an assessment and tell us what kind of information you might have about the existence – if it does exist and if you have the information – of a Syrian nuclear weapons design

program? And secondly, can you tell us whether these pictures from inside the building are at different stages or are they all at one particular point in time?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: The pictures inside of the building are over a period of time, okay? And I really don't have anything more to add with regard to a Syrian weapons program.

Q: Two questions along those same lines. While there is similarity with the Yongbyon plant, there is no reprocessor, which of course is right next to the Yongbyon plant – at least that you've showed us today.

It's unclear from your presentation how they would have obtained the fuel which have been the process, I would guess, if you – you would have seen. And you note the similarity with the North Korean reactor and said no reactor like that had been made in some time, but this is a Calder Hall reactor whose design has been sort of out there for a long while, so could they have obtained the technology as opposed to needing help from individuals?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: The body of evidence that we have over a period that spans a decade gives us very high confidence that, A, this is a nuclear reactor; B, that there was long-term, detailed cooperation between the North Koreans and the Syrians in terms of nuclear cooperation; and if anything, the actions since the strike that we have been able to detect reinforce our belief that North Koreans were actually involved – not just in kind of a theoretical or a broad-based nuclear cooperative effort with the Syrians, but were cooperating at this site.

Q: And the reprocessor and the fuel?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: There is no reprocessing facility in the region of al Kibar.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: I might add something that would helpful here. These are lessons learned that are – that came out of previous experience about how to put more rigor into our process. So there's a difference between evidence and an assessment. And when we examined this information, and what [Senior Intelligence Official 2] alluded to, let me just reinforce: very sensitive; everybody wants to know; everybody wants to have a part of the decision. So the decision was taken by the President to restrict access significantly. So we made this CIA-centric to restrict those who were aware and it worked.

The entire community participated. The entire community contributed. And you know who is in the community. You know we take pictures; you know we listen, and so on. So I'll just leave it at that. We had very rich, rich information. So when we worked through the data, in large part what you saw here, we concluded with high confidence it is a nuclear reactor of the design that was described for plutonium. We had, at that time, medium confidence that the North Koreans were and are participating.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: At the reactor, not in generalized nuclear cooperation.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: To go with the question you're asking – weapons – we said, we believe it. There's no other reason for it. But our confidence level that it's weapons is low at this point. We believe it, but it's low based on the physical evidence.

Q: Even at the time of the destruction of the reactor?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Even at the time. So now, what that asks is, in a nuclear program, it's complex. There are a series of steps and stages. So was that something evidence that would be uncovered at a point in time? And I'll just leave it right there as to where it is at the moment, other than to say we have reasonable confidence that we have – that the Israelis have destroyed a capability. And we are monitoring everything to see if there's anything subsequent to that.

Q: Do we have any reason to believe that the Syrians now have or are building a reprocessing capability?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Just let me leave it with what I described.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: And as you say, this makes no sense without that.

Q: This does make no sense without that. And that's my hardest part with the evidence that you've shown. And I think it's interesting that you have a low-confidence level that they –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: But be very specific about what I'm saying is – if you are going to make a clinical judgment that the evidence supports all the way through, you have to have the clinical evidence in hand.

Q: Did you tell the Israelis you have low confidence it was for weapons?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: No, you need to understand. I'm sorry to dwell on the point. This is very, very important.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: This is very important.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: We told our President four things: This is a reactor; the North Koreans and the Syrians are cooperating on nuclear activities; the North Koreans and Syrians are cooperating on the construction of this reactor; and this reactor – its purpose – is to create fuel for a nuclear weapons program. Those are the things we concluded.

Now, when you look at the body of evidence of those four sentences and begin to sort out how much of that is based on an overwhelming body of evidence as opposed to a more limited body of evidence and therefore more reliant on assessment, the fact that it was a nuclear reactor – absolutely high confidence; the fact of Syrian-Korean nuclear cooperation spanning a decade at an intense level, high confidence. At the time of the strike, fact of North Korean-Syrian cooperation in the building of that reactor, medium confidence that then got higher because of events, some of which we have alluded to in the briefing, okay. The fact that that material was

going to be used for a weapons program – we believe that to be true, but because we did not have, as [Senior Intelligence Official 1] points out, additional clinical evidence of other activities, we could only give it a low confidence level. But you need to – and I think you understand what I’m trying to say. That’s not more or less sure; it’s just that it’s a way of communicating that for which you have a large body of evidence and that for which you may not.

Q: Where is that confidence level now?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: In terms of –

Q: On the last one – you said a low confidence level that this was for weapons or has that changed in the aftermath of –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: No. No, that has not changed. However – however – actually, David, we haven’t addressed it, but I would suggest to you that the Syrian behavior after the strike – keeping it secret, destroying it, not allowing the IAEA – if anything, it certainly doesn’t weaken that there were nefarious purposes for the reactor.

Q: Three questions. Did the United States military aid in any way this Israeli strike through reconnaissance or through targeting help? Did the U.S. obtain these photos or were they from another country’s intelligence agency? And what is the intention of North Korea’s cooperation here? Is it cash-motivated? Are they looking to get plutonium themselves for their own reprocessing?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: What was one?

Q: One was did the U.S. military aid in any way the ISR with targeting or some other –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Let me talk a little bit obliquely here, okay. There is a rich intelligence exchange with a body of partners around the world that included an exchange on this information here. There is difference between a rich exchange of intelligence and providing information that would actually enable the targeting and strike of this kind of target.

Q: So you shared information. You didn’t give them targeting information.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: We were in A, not B on this. The second one?

Q: And the second one is did the U.S. intelligence agencies obtain these photos or did they come through another nation’s intelligence?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: I’m only free to say that we acquired the photos, and we have – and I tried to communicate to you under whatever guise we acquired them the confidence level we have in them.

Q: And North Korean intentions? Cash?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Cash.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: It's cash.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Cash.

Q: So they weren't going to be taking this –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: We don't –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: We examined –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: We examined that. We examined that hypothesis. This just wasn't –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Probably not.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: – you know, a reactor in Syria for Syria, that it may be outsourcing. And our judgment based on the overwhelming body of evidence is it was A, not B. That it was in Syria for Syria.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: I'm sorry. Yeah, you're right. [The Senior Administration Official] is correcting me. Option A was in Syria for North Korea; option B was in Syria for Syria. We think it was in Syria for Syria, although we examined both options and held it up to the light with the available evidence.

Q: How much money is it in for North Korea?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Not at liberty to say.

Q: I believe a Calder Hall reactor is fueled with naturally occurring uranium. Is there such deposits in Syria? Have you looked to see whether or not the Syrians were actually mining their own uranium, and if so, again, have you located that site? And if not, where were they going to get the uranium from?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: [Senior Intelligence Official 3], is there anything that you know that we can share?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 3: No, sir.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Okay.

Q: Can I just ask to be clear what you mean – when you're talking about low confidence present how that compares to, in the talking points here that you lay out, the nearing operational capability? Can you just walk me through what exactly that means?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: That's right. Sure.

Q: And was that weeks and possibly months, as some officials have suggested?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: It is weeks and possibly months, and we were at high confidence that – well, to put it another way, anything we could see about this reactor we had already seen in terms of getting it ready to throw the switch. And once they breached the wall down there in the Euphrates and filled the cooling pond and gave those pumps access to the water, as far as things we could see externally, this thing was good to go, and therefore we had to assume they could throw the switch at any time, although we know they did not know throw the switch prior to the strike. And I'm sorry, the other question?

Q: So I'm trying understand, then, okay, so they were nearing operational capability but then can you compare what that means –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Okay, I got it.

Q: – the low confidence. I want to be clear on that.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Yeah. Again, this is a bit arcane, and I'm trying to be very precise with our language here, okay. We were certain, okay, this was a reactor and that it was going to produce plutonium. We saw no other logical use for that plutonium based upon – no other use for the reactor other than creating plutonium. And then our judgment was that the Syrians would only have done this – with the great expense and perhaps political risk involved – for a weapons program, although we had not yet detected the detailed and constituent elements of such a weapons program. That is – and therefore, we said, we believe, Mr. President, that is what this is for.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: It may be –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: But the body of evidence on which we're basing that is more limited than some of the other things we're telling you.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: It may be useful, too, to separate it in pieces. Go to the question that was asked about natural uranium. You can take natural uranium, get access to it, build a plant like this, and cause a reactor to operate, which would produce plutonium. So natural uranium in one place, a reactor to produce plutonium, and now you have to reprocess it to turn it into the kinds of material that would be used for weapon – so what we're describing to you with regard to our confidence level, plus with the regard to the reactor in the middle piece.

Q: And then what have the North Koreans said to you? Have they denied any of this? Have they admitted any of this? And for you [Senior Administration Official], what then do you do moving forward with the Six-Party talks. You suggested this will strengthen your hand, your negotiators. But what are the North Koreans telling you privately about all of this? Are they

going to come forward and admit anything? And what do you think – what effect will it have on the Six-Party talks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We'll have to see. We would of course like it if they would publicly admit this program and the truth of what has been laid out here. We hope as a minimum that they will not try to deny it. We hope that the fact that we have had such detailed understanding of this activity, which they tried so – that this – of this activity, which obviously they and Syria very much tried to hide, will convince them that there is no point in trying to cover up not only proliferation activity but enrichment activity and plutonium activity, and it will therefore incentivize them to make the kind of full accounting of their various activities and programs that they have undertaken to do. We will obviously have to see.

One of the reasons we think now is a good time to do this is because of those ongoing conversations – those conversations on their declaration, as you know, are ongoing. And we will hope this will give North Korea and incentive to do a full accounting and will strengthen our hands of our negotiators in insisting on it.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Can I just make a comment on Iran because I know that's eventually – if we stayed long enough, you're eventually going to get there. And I think it's useful to talk about nuclear weapons and Iran in this context because this all is potentially interrelated.

There are a couple of ways to get to nuclear weapons. One, we're describing how North Korea did it. The path that Iran is choosing to pursue is different. You enrich natural uranium to some level. If you're going to enrich it to the point that you run a nuclear power plant, you're about at the 3.8, 3.9 level. That is what they claim they are doing.

The difference between fissile material – this nuclear grade or weapons grade versus running a plant is you just keep spinning it until it gets to be 90 percent highly enriched uranium. When we did our NIE, what we announced in our unclassified key judgments, that the Iranians had a secret program, secret program to produce highly enriched uranium, and they had a program designed to – working on the design of a nuclear device; meaning, think of it as an implosion device that would result in a nuclear warhead.

When we published our NIE, we had not planned to make unclassified key judgments available to the public; therefore we wrote our estimate for a very sophisticated audience believing or understanding that they understood that in the program, it's basically three large pieces: There is pursuit of fissile material; there is a delivery system – ballistic missiles or some other; and then there is weapons design. The only thing that the Iranians halted that we had awareness of was design of the warhead. They continue with ballistic missiles and they continue with fissile material pursuit. It was a secret program that they halted. They have never admitted that. So one of our concerns is, is there a connection with North Korea? If there is, we don't know it. But is there something going on there that resembles this program that we we're talking about in Syrian in Iran.

That is a very large concern of ours, a major problem that we're attempting to address. But our unfortunate choice of words in our NIE caused you all in the press to misrepresent what we were trying to explain. Three parts of the program; they halted one narrow piece of it, which was a secret program – weapons-head design. They continue with fissile material; they continue with ballistic missile systems for delivery. So we don't know where it is at the moment.

Q: No Iran-North Korea connection?

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: None.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: On nuclear issues.

Q: On nuclear issues.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: Robust connection on –

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 1: Other places, yes.

SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL 2: – missile issues.

Q: Just to follow up on the Six-Party talks. The assumption now or what is being said is that the negotiators are really focusing on plutonium equation and the ATU, and the Syrian assistance is kind of being pushed down the road a little bit. Does this briefing and this information that is coming out now shift that equation? Is that no longer what the White House wants?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we have said that North Korea needs to do a full accounting of its plutonium activities, its enrichment activities and its proliferation activities. And that's what we are pursuing now. In addition, one of the things that this has done – and I think we'll encourage – is to supplement, in some sense, the Six-Party framework by building in a capacity to verify the disclosures that North Korea is hopefully going to make so that if, down the road, there is evidence that suggests that disclosures are inaccurate or not full and complete that there will be a verification mechanism available in the framework of the Six-Party talks to pursue that issue. So we think we have constructed a framework in the Six-Party talks for dealing with this issue. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody, for coming.