

Syria Disassembling Nuke Site as IAEA Investigates Photos

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Syrians Disassembling Ruins at Site Bombed by Israel, Officials Say. UN Nuclear Agency Examines Syria Images.

Syrians Disassembling Ruins at Site Bombed by Israel, Officials Say
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Washington Post Staff Writers
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Syria has begun dismantling the remains of a site Israel bombed Sept. 6 in what may be an attempt to prevent the location from coming under international scrutiny, said U.S. and foreign officials familiar with the aftermath of the attack.

Based on overhead photography, the officials say the site in Syria's eastern desert near the Euphrates River had a "signature" or characteristics of a small but substantial nuclear reactor, one similar in structure to North Korea's facilities.

The dismantling of the damaged site, which appears to be still underway, could make it difficult for weapons inspectors to determine the precise nature of the facility and how Syria planned to use it. Syria, which possesses a small reactor used for scientific research, has denied seeking to expand its nuclear program. But U.S. officials knowledgeable about the Israeli raid have described the target as a nuclear facility being constructed with North Korean assistance.

The bombed facility is different from the one Syria displayed to journalists last week to back its allegations that Israel had bombed an essentially an empty building, said the officials, who insisted on anonymity because details of the Israeli attack are classified.

While U.S. officials express increasing confidence that the Syrian facility was nuclear-related, divisions persist within the government and among weapons experts over the significance of the threat. If the facility was a nuclear reactor, U.S. weapons experts said it would almost certainly have taken Syria several years to complete the structure, and much longer to produce significant quantities of plutonium for potential use in nuclear weapons. Nuclear reactors also are used to generate electricity.

"This isn't like a Road Runner cartoon where you call up Acme Reactors and they deliver a functioning reactor to your back yard. It takes years to build," said Joseph Cirincione, director for nuclear policy at the Center for American Progress. "This is an extremely demanding technology, and I don't think Syria has the technical, engineering or financial base to really support such a reactor."

While expressing concern over the prospect that Syria may have decided to launch a nuclear program in secret, some weapons experts question why neither Israel nor the United States made any effort before the secret attack -- or in the six weeks since -- to offer evidence to the International Atomic Energy Agency, a move that would trigger an inspection of Syria by the nuclear watchdog.

"The reason we have an IAEA and a safeguard system is that, if there is evidence of wrongdoing, it can be presented by a neutral body to the international community so that a collective response can be pursued," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association. "It seems to me highly risky and premature for another country to bomb such a facility."

But John R. Bolton, the Bush administration's former ambassador to the United Nations, said Syria's secrecy -- including its apparent move to clean up the site after the bombing -- suggests that Damascus is pursuing a strategy similar to that of Iran, which the Bush administration believes is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability. Bolton said Iran once attempted to conceal nuclear activity from IAEA inspectors by bulldozing nuclear-related buildings and even digging up nearby topsoil to remove all traces of nuclear material.

"The common practice for people with legitimate civilian nuclear power programs is to be transparent, because they have nothing to hide," Bolton said.

The IAEA has not been provided any evidence about the Syrian facility and has been unable to obtain any reliable details about the Sept. 6 strike, said a European diplomat familiar with the agency's internal discussions.

Syria is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has cooperated with IAEA inspections of the small, 27-kilowatt research facility it has run for decades, IAEA sources said.

Some experts speculate that Israeli and U.S. officials may have calculated that reporting their intelligence to the IAEA would have produced only limited repercussions, the equivalent of a diplomatic slap on the wrist to Syria, which might have decided to build the facility anyway.

Foreign sources familiar with the attack say Israel wanted to send a strong message to Iran about the price of developing a secret nuclear program. Israel is increasingly alarmed about Iran's intentions and frustrated that the international community has not persuaded Tehran to suspend its uranium enrichment program.

If North Korea is shown to have helped with the construction of a Syrian reactor, it would suggest that the Pyongyang government has been secretly hawking its nuclear know-how to the Syrians for years, several experts said. But even if North Korea's involvement is proved, it is unlikely that the Bush administration would halt negotiations with Pyongyang over dismantling its nuclear program, the experts said.

"The Bush administration has clearly decided not to let this incident deter them from trying to limit North Korea's nuclear activity," said Gary Samore, a National Security Council member under President Bill Clinton who is now with the Council on Foreign Relations.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/18/AR2007101802549_pf.html

UN Nuclear Agency Examines Syria Images

By GEORGE JAHN

The Associated Press, WashingtonPost

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VIENNA, Austria -- U.N. experts have begun analyzing satellite imagery of the Syrian site struck last month by Israeli warplanes, looking for any signs it was a secret nuclear facility, diplomats said Friday.

It was unclear where the material was obtained or what exactly it showed. One of the diplomats, who is linked to the International Atomic Energy Agency, said the experts were studying commercial images, contrary to earlier suggestions they came from U.S. intelligence.

Separately, a senior diplomat familiar with the issue indicated the experts were looking at several possible locations for the Israeli strike. Two other diplomats said initial examination of the material found no evidence the target was a nuclear installation, but emphasized it was too early to draw definitive conclusions.

All of those who spoke to The Associated Press were briefed on the agency's receipt of the images but demanded anonymity because their information was confidential.

The IAEA investigation is significant because it is the first case of an independent and respected organization looking at the evidence and trying to reach a conclusion as to what was hit.

Since the Sept. 6 bombing, news media have quoted unidentified U.S. officials as saying the airstrike hit a nuclear facility linked to North Korea, which is now in the process of dismantling its nuclear weapons program. On Friday, The Washington Post cited American officials as saying the site, in Syria's eastern desert near the Euphrates River, had characteristics of a small but substantial nuclear reactor similar to North Korea's facility.

Officials of the Vienna-based U.N. nuclear watchdog and the U.S. diplomatic mission to the IAEA had no comment Friday. But IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming indirectly rebuked Washington earlier this week, saying the agency "expects any country having information about nuclear-related activities in another country to provide that information to the IAEA."

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, cautioned that without full U.S. cooperation, the IAEA's probe might be hampered because commercial satellite imagery "may not be of sufficient quality to figure out difficult questions."

Still, he welcomed IAEA involvement as an opportunity for a neutral organization to "provide an assessment and give the international community some guidance about what has or has not happened."

Syria denies it has an undeclared nuclear program and North Korea has said it was not involved in any nuclear program in the Mideast nation. Damascus has said the Israelis targeted an empty building, and the agency has said it has no evidence to the contrary.

The diplomats said Vienna-based Syrian diplomats have met with senior IAEA representatives since the bombing and have provided no substantive information that would indicate their country had nuclear secrets.

Syria has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and allowed agency experts to inspect its only known nuclear facility _ a small, 27-kilowatt reactor, according to diplomats linked to the IAEA.

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