

Alleged Site of Israeli Attack on Syria Cleared

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A mysterious Syrian military facility that was reportedly the target of an attack by Israeli jets last month has been razed, according to a new satellite image that shows only a vacant lot in the place where Syria was recently constructing what some U.S. officials believe was a nuclear reactor.

The new photograph, taken by a commercial satellite yesterday, suggests that Syrian officials moved quickly to remove evidence of the project after it was damaged by Israeli bombs on Sept. 6, said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, a nonprofit research group.

"They are clearly trying to hide the evidence," Albright said in an interview. "It is a trick that has been tried in the past and it hasn't worked."

The construction site is located in Syria's eastern desert near the village of At Tibnah, about 90 miles from the Iraqi border. Commercial satellite photos of the site in early August, before the Israeli attack, showed a tall, box-like building under construction a few hundred yards from the Euphrates River.

Some U.S. officials and nuclear experts said the building appeared to be a nuclear reactor, one that closely resembled a North Korean reactor capable of producing enough nuclear material for one bomb per year.

Syria has denied that it was attempting to build a nuclear reactor, but acknowledged that Israel had bombed what it called a military target inside its borders. The Israeli government and the White House have maintained a policy of strict secrecy regarding the nature of the facility struck by the Israeli jets.

The new satellite photo clearly depicts the same site visible in the earlier images, but the tall building has vanished, replaced by a dirt lot. Trucks and construction equipment seen in earlier photos are also gone.

The only structure still visible is a small adjunct building on the river bank about 800 yards from the main site. Nuclear experts say the small building apparently was a pumping station of the type that could be used to supply water to nuclear reactors.

Albright said the photo suggests the Syrians were abandoning the site, though he expressed surprise at the speed with which the main structure had been dismantled and cleared away.

"It's quicker than you'd expect, given that the IAEA would like to visit the site," he said. The International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, has repeatedly requested information about the facility from the Syrian government in the weeks since news of the Israeli raid emerged.

Previously, Syria was known to have only one small research reactor, which was subject to regular IAEA inspections. The Damascus government has denied any intention to develop nuclear weapons.

Under IAEA guidelines, construction of any part of a nuclear reactor without formal, advance notice would violate the nation's obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Officials of the watchdog agency have declined comment on the new photos. The IAEA has acquired its own commercial satellite photographs of the Syrian site but has not completed its analysis, an IAEA official said.

Some U.S. officials familiar with the Israeli raid say North Korea is believed to have assisted Syria with the project, although the extent of North Korea's involvement remains unclear. North Korea has denied playing a role.

North Korea's principal nuclear reactor, located near the village of Yongbyon, is a 1950s era gas-graphite reactor that is primarily associated with the production of plutonium for nuclear weapons.

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