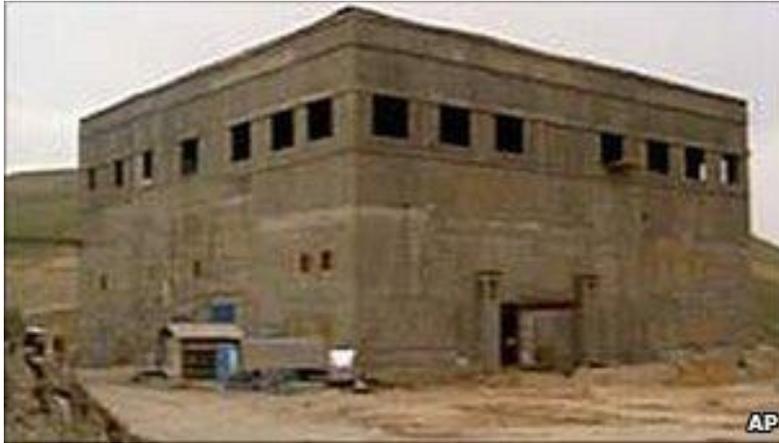


UN nuclear watchdog refers Syria to Security Council

9 June 2011



Israel bombed the remote desert site of the alleged reactor in September 2007

The UN nuclear watchdog is to report Syria to the Security Council over its alleged covert nuclear programme.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) voted to rebuke Syria on claims of an undeclared nuclear reactor.

The structure, which Syria has maintained was a non-nuclear military site, was destroyed by Israel in 2007.

The IAEA's move comes as international pressure mounts on the UN Security Council to censure Syria over its lethal crackdown on protests.

European nations on Wednesday presented a separate draft resolution to the Council condemning Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

Desert site

At the IAEA meeting at its headquarters in Vienna, 17 countries voted for and six against, including Russia and China.

Diplomats said that overall 11 countries of the 35-member board of governors abstained and one country was absent from the vote.

Israel bombed the desert site of the alleged reactor - near Deir Alzour in the country's remote north-east - in September 2007.

The reactor there was built for the express purpose of producing plutonium for possible use in nuclear weapons"

End Quote Glyn Davies US Ambassador to IAEA

The IAEA began investigating the allegations in June 2008, but Syria has refused to co-operate and, with the exception of a one-off visit, has not allowed UN inspectors to Deir Alzour or related sites to verify the US claims.

Thursday's motion was proposed by the US and its Western allies who had asked the IAEA's governing body to find Syria in "non-compliance" with its international obligations.

"Syria's apparent attempt at constructing a covert, undeclared plutonium production reactor, a reactor with no credible peaceful purpose, represents one of the most serious safeguards violations possible," said US Ambassador Glyn Davies.

He said the intentions of the structure at Deir Alzour were clear and that a resolution was the only responsible course of action.

"The reactor there was built for the express purpose of producing plutonium for possible use in nuclear weapons."

'Regrettable'

Syria's ambassador to the IAEA called the agency's move "regrettable" but pledged that the country would honour its obligations.

"I think Syria has always been committed to its obligations and to its duties and I think we will continue to do so," Bassam Al-Sabbagh said after the meeting.

Syria is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which gives it the right to enrich its own fuel for civil nuclear power, under inspection from the IAEA.

But it has also signed a safeguards agreement with the IAEA under which it is obliged to notify the UN's nuclear watchdog of any plans to construct a new nuclear facility.

The last country the IAEA referred to the Security Council was Iran, in February 2006.

The Security Council has the power to impose sanctions, a move it has taken in the case of Iran no less than four times.

However, diplomats are not convinced that this will happen in Syria's case due to opposition from both Russia and China.

The diplomatic move at the IAEA came a day after Britain, France, Germany and Portugal proposed a draft resolution condemning Syria's crackdown on protesters to the Security Council, despite the risk of a Russian veto.

Syria's long path to the Security Council

By Jonathan Marcus BBC diplomatic correspondent , 9 June 2011



The US led the push within the IAEA for a referral to the UN Security Council

The majority decision to refer Syria to the UN Security Council in New York reflects deep divisions within the IAEA's board of governors.

The 14 countries - mainly European and North American - who had co-sponsored the resolution were joined by only three more of the 35-strong board.

Six countries voted against, including China and Russia; 11 abstained and one was absent - so it was hardly a resounding condemnation.

Israel's air strike - on what the IAEA now accepts was a Syrian nuclear reactor still under construction near Deir Alzour in the country's remote north-east - took place in 2007.

The matter was referred to the IAEA the following year.

Syria consistently refused to answer the agency's questions or to provide the level of access to this - and other sites - that its inspectors required.

So why has it taken until now to come to a vote at the IAEA board?

Washington has long been eager to refer Syria to the UN.

But many of its European allies were more cautious, still eager to see if Syria's young president could be won over and weaned from his alliance with Iran.

Flashpoint issue

In any case the IAEA's board remained deeply divided. Many developing countries were suspicious of Washington's intentions. And western powers had their hands full persuading Moscow and Beijing to back tougher measures against Iran.

So what has changed to bring the Syrian issue to a vote? When the new IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano was elected to office he was determined to resolve the Syrian issue one way or another.

But he had won office after a divided vote where, as nuclear expert Mark Hibbs told me, the Syrian issue risked becoming "a flashpoint".

So, he explained, Mr Amano set out on "a cautious but deliberate twin-track strategy".

One track, when he was appointed director general at the end of 2009, was to avoid a rush to judgement, to keep asking questions.

He wanted to work with the Syrians and to give them sufficient time to cooperate with the agency.

However, at the same time, he sought to get more intelligence information from member states.

The US, says Mr Hibbs, eventually provided a large body of material to underpin the US/Israeli allegations - a lot of it highly sensitive intelligence.

Mindful of past problems between the agency and Washington - they disagreed fundamentally over their assessment of Iraq's nuclear programme in 2003 - Mr Amano sought as far as possible to verify this material from the IAEA's own sources.

Polarising

Mr Amano was desperate to avoid polarising the IAEA board further. But his eventual conclusion inevitably prompted the board to line up on familiar lines.

It is not a coincidence that the resolution that passed today did so when there is a very different atmosphere in the West towards the Syrian regime"

End Quote Mark Hibbs Nuclear analyst

For the US and many of its allies this has been a largely technical matter - Syria has broken the rules and needs to be held to account. This was, according to US Ambassador to the IAEA Glyn Davies, "one of the most serious safeguards violations possible".

The Russians were not so much countering that case but arguing, instead, that a referral to the Security Council was not necessary.

"The site at Deir Alzour no longer exists and therefore poses no threat to international peace and security," said a Russian statement.

But, of course, there is a huge dose of politics in this as well.

Mr Hibbs notes that over the past three years - and especially since the Syrian government's clamp-down on demonstrations, the attitude to Damascus - especially in Europe, has changed significantly.

"It is not a coincidence that the resolution that passed today did so when there is a very different atmosphere in the West towards the Syrian regime," he said on the phone from Vienna.

So the matter now goes to the Security Council in New York.

But, according to Mr Hibbs, the world should not hold its breath for UN sanctions against Syria.

With two of the five permanent Security Council members voting against the IAEA resolution, any sanctions attempt would be voted down.

Of course, there is already another battle over Syria being waged at the UN with several western countries pushing for a resolution condemning President Bashar Assad's repression against his own people.