

How to React to a Reactor

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Articles & Testimony

In his confirmation hearing in March, Robert S. Ford, the U.S. ambassador-designate to Syria, listed five issues that will be at the core of the Obama administration's engagement with Damascus. Four were familiar: the United States wants Syria to prevent jihadi fighters from entering Iraq, end its support for Hezbollah, return to peace talks with Israel, and respect human rights at home.

But the fifth issue was a new one: Ford argued that Washington should insist that Syria end its foot-dragging on the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigation into its nuclear activities. For nearly two years, Syria has refused to cooperate with the IAEA's probe of a suspected nuclear reactor that was destroyed by Israel in September 2007. Now the IAEA may request a rare "special inspection" of Syrian sites, making the country's nuclear defiance the international community's main point of contention with Damascus -- eclipsing even the investigation into Syrian officials' involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri.

Indeed, the international community cannot afford to let Syria's proliferation attempts go unaddressed, since the violations threaten the global nonproliferation regime and may be evidence of a wider nuclear program. Even more, the IAEA's investigation could provide Washington much needed leverage in its increasingly trying diplomatic engagement with Damascus.

The story of Syria's nuclear program has been quietly building for more than two and a half years. On September 6, 2007, Israeli jets took part in Operation Orchard, bombing a nondescript building at a site in eastern Syria called Al-Kibar, near the city of Deir ez-Zor. In April 2008, U.S. intelligence authorities released a video showing that the building had hid construction of a graphite-cooled nuclear reactor similar to North Korea's reactor at Yongbyon, which produces plutonium for the country's nuclear weapons. The video contained satellite photographs of the site, still shots of the reactor under construction, and a photograph of the directors of North Korea's and Syria's nuclear programs standing arm in arm.

In June 2008, Syria allowed the IAEA to access the Al Kibar site, but inspectors were unable to examine the reactor ruins because Syria had cleared the site of wreckage, buried what remained, and constructed a new building on top. Nevertheless, they found particles of chemically processed uranium of a type Syria had not declared to the IAEA. Satellite photos of the site and the list of parts Syria had procured for its construction posed additional questions. Syria soon cut off cooperation with the IAEA investigation, denying further visits to Al Kibar and three associated sites.

Separately, IAEA inspectors found other unexplained uranium particles during a routine inspection of Syria's miniature neutron source reactor, a research reactor outside Damascus that had been declared to the IAEA. Syrian authorities twice tried to explain the presence of these particles, but IAEA inspectors found their explanations inadequate, believing instead that they raised concerns about possible links to the particles found at Al Kibar. Although Syria allowed IAEA inspectors to return to the research reactor this month, it continues to spurn IAEA requests to visit Al Kibar, citing national "sovereignty." (A [report \(http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=24651\)](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=24651) written by Gregory L. Schulte, who was U.S. Ambassador to the IAEA from 2005 to 2009, lays out the IAEA's investigation, Syria's defiance, and the resulting policy recommendations. Schulte also contributed to this article.)

The IAEA's latest report on the Syria investigation was the first released by the new IAEA director-general, Yukiya Amano, who took office in July 2009. It was blunt and forthright, clearly restating that the destroyed facility had all the characteristics of a nuclear reactor and openly questioning whether Syria's declarations were correct and complete.

The Syrian government denies that the Al Kibar facility housed a nuclear reactor. At first, it claimed that the uranium particles found at the site came from the bombs Israel had used to destroy it, an explanation the IAEA dismissed as having a "low probability." Then, at a recent IAEA Board of Governors' meeting, Syrian Ambassador Bassam Sabbagh claimed that Israeli planes sprinkled the particles over the site -- an equally specious explanation that cannot account for the particles found at the research reactor outside Damascus. Glyn Davies, the current U.S. ambassador to the IAEA, described Syria's latest assertion as "desperate." Other ambassadors have shared his disdain: in a three-page statement, the European Union -- Syria's largest Western donor -- said it was "essential" that Syria clarify its response and provide "access to all locations and documentation."

Even though Syria's covert reactor no longer exists, there are a number of reasons why the country's nuclear program should remain at the top of the U.S. policy agenda in Syria. First, a strong IAEA is important at a time when the international community is confronting the nuclear ambitions of Syria's ally, Iran. Allowing Syria to rebuff IAEA inspectors would undermine the global proliferation regime -- a particularly dangerous possibility given that Iran's nuclear violations risk sparking a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. By getting to the bottom of Syria's clandestine program, the world's nuclear watchdog can show that it has regained its clout.

Second, the particles found at the research reactor, plus Syria's refusal to allow the IAEA access to three other suspect sites, suggest the existence of a larger program. Particularly troubling is the apparent involvement of North Korea, a notorious nuclear violator and weapons proliferator. Reports of Iran's involvement are equally worrisome. The IAEA has an obligation to ensure that there are no other undeclared activities in Syria, and the world has an interest in breaking up further multinational proliferation ventures, whether they traffic in missiles or nuclear weapons technology.

Third, although the precise motives behind Syria's nuclear activities are unknown, a primary impetus was likely the Assad regime's obsession with obtaining a deterrent against Israel. Syria's nuclear program was the capstone of one of the Middle East's most active chemical and biological weapons programs. This program, together with Syria's extensive surface-to-surface missile capabilities, is a major source of potential contention and conflict between Syria and Israel. Any future U.S.-negotiated peace treaty between Syria and Israel may need to include a deal -- similar to the one that convinced Libya to end its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions -- for Syria to divulge its nuclear pursuits. Indeed, only a peace treaty with Israel may persuade Damascus that coming clean is in its strategic interest.

U.S. engagement with Syria has already been fraught with difficulty. After a February 25 meeting with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, President Bashar al-Assad mocked the United States' goals of creating tension between Tehran and Damascus -- just days after U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns visited Damascus to pursue that agenda. To make matters worse, new reports suggest that Syria has been supplying sophisticated weapons -- including missiles capable of carrying nuclear and chemical payloads -- to Hezbollah. And last but not least, U.S. efforts to foster even indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel have yet to yield results.

Regardless of whether talks between Syria and Israel resume any time soon, if Damascus were to come clean on its nuclear program, the revelation would be a major confidence-building measure that would significantly improve strained U.S.-Syrian relations. The IAEA investigation provides an opportunity for the United States and its Western and regional allies to gain some leverage in getting Syria to make concessions on central issues. To date, the engagement strategies of the United States, France, and the Arab Gulf states have been uncoordinated and conflicting, but all these countries have an interest in convincing Syria to admit its nuclear activities and to lure Damascus to the peace table and away from Tehran. Windows of opportunity to apply pressure -- as well as a way out for Syria -- will arise with every regular IAEA report.

Realistically, Assad is unlikely to move unless the IAEA orders a special inspection of Al Kibar and other sites. Syria's safeguards agreement with the IAEA, which outlines the country's obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, allows special inspections "if the Agency considers that information made available by Syria . . . is not adequate for the Agency to fulfill its responsibilities." As its latest report documented, the IAEA has now reached that point. If Syria refuses to allow inspections, the IAEA Board of Governors can decide that the action is "essential and urgent." If Syria refuses again, it can find Syria in noncompliance and report the country to the UN Security Council.

There is no doubt that Assad wants the IAEA investigation -- like the Hariri tribunal -- to fall off the international agenda. If the IAEA refers the matter to the UN Security Council, it would be an embarrassment that would set back Assad's desire for closer trade and commercial ties with the West. It could even lead to sanctions.

Meanwhile, quiet engagement by the United States, coordinated with permanent members of the Security Council could show Assad a way out through full cooperation with the IAEA. Should Syria seize that opportunity, two major benefits would result: the role of North Korea and any involvement by Iran would be exposed, and the IAEA would prove that it cannot be stymied by uncooperative countries. If Syria balks, referring this issue to the Security Council would maintain the integrity of the nonproliferation regime while providing a source of leverage for the broader agenda of fostering Syrian-Israeli peace. Whatever the outcome, one thing will be clear: Syria's nuclear aspirations will not go unnoticed.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the [Program on Arab Politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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