

# Russia Wants Syria Taken Off the Agenda at UN Nuclear Meetings

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International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Yukiya Amano addresses a news conference during a board of governors meeting at the IAEA headquarters in Vienna, Austria.

VIENNA — Russia is pushing for the issue of Syria's alleged past nuclear activities to be removed from the agenda of the UN atomic agency's board, diplomats said Wednesday.

Western members of the 35-nation board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are against the Russian initiative as they believe Damascus should be kept under pressure to cooperate with the IAEA's long-stalled inquiry, the diplomats said.

As in previous meetings over the last six years, Syria will be debated by the IAEA board later this week during a quarterly meeting of the governing body, even though there has been little movement on the file since 2011.

The IAEA has long sought to visit a Syrian desert site that U.S. intelligence reports say was a nascent, North Korean-designed reactor geared to making plutonium for nuclear bombs, before Israel bombed it in 2007.

Syria has said the site at Deir al-Zor in its east was a conventional military base but the IAEA concluded in 2011 that it was "very likely" to have been a reactor that should have been declared to its anti-proliferation inspectors.

IAEA inspectors examined the site in mid-2008, but Syrian authorities have barred them access since. In February last year, opposition sources in eastern Syria said rebels had captured the destroyed site near the Euphrates River.

The IAEA has also been requesting information about three other sites that may have been linked to Deir al-Zor.

IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano said Monday that his agency remained "unable to provide any assessment concerning the nature, or operational status" of those locations.

"I urge Syria to cooperate fully with the agency in connection with all unresolved issues," he told the board.

Diplomats said Russia had circulated a proposed decision by the board — whose members also include the U.S., China, Britain and others — asking Amano not to include the issue in the agenda of future meetings, without elaborating.

It was unclear whether Russia would request a vote on the matter. Russian diplomats were not available for comment.

Russia, a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, has given President Bashar Assad crucial backing in Syria's civil war, which has killed more than 200,000 people.

One Western diplomat said Syria still had questions to answer and that it was not yet time to take it off the agenda.

Western and Israeli security experts in early 2013 said they suspected that Syria may have tonnes of unenriched uranium in storage and that any such stockpile could potentially be of interest to its ally Iran, which denies Western allegations that it is seeking a nuclear weapons capability.

Even if Syria did have such a stockpile, it would not be usable for nuclear weapons in its present form.

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