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Nukes under concrete?

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EPHRAIM ASCULAI , THE JERUSALEM POST

In some old gangster films, as well as probably in real life, there is the scene where the victim is thrown into a building construction mold and drowned in a thick layer of cement. A tell-tale shoe that fell off in the old movies - and more recently the hidden security camera - provides the clues that bring the culprit to justice, even though the body has not been found. The case of Syria's bombed Al-Kibar site holds many similarities to these gangster movie scenarios.

The photographic evidence of the existence of a nuclear reactor under construction at the site was overwhelming: pictures of the reactor under construction, with great similarities to a North Korean plutonium production reactor, and its later camouflage by the construction of a surrounding building that completely enclosed the structure; the intake of water from the Euphrates River and the outlet of returning water from the building back into the downstream of the river, which indicated the existence of a strong energy source at the site. The most damning piece of evidence probably is the way the Syrians razed the site, poured concrete over it and claimed that it was some sort of a military site and not a nuclear reactor.

THIS SHOULD have been enough for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to indict Syria for its violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, the IAEA requested an inspection of the bombed site in the hope that it would be able to collect evidence that would clinch the matter. A four-day inspection trip was made in June 2008, months after the Syrians finished their clean-up of the site, but was probably limited by the Syrians to "classical" IAEA inspection methods of visual observations and collection of samples. It is doubtful whether these would uncover much, given the Syrian efforts at a cleanup. The "corpse" still lies buried in the huge amount of poured concrete. It is possible, however, that the IAEA inspectors were getting too close for comfort, since Syria recently announced that it would not permit the inspectors to return to the site.

In addition, the Syrians made an important diplomatic move, seeking a seat on the IAEA Board of Governors, a 35-member forum that could decide that Syria violated its obligations. Since most of the decisions in this body are made by consensus, Syria would thus insure itself against condemnation. Thus, by refusing inspections and gaining the seat of governor, which it has a good chance of doing, Syria is taking out double insurance.

THE TIME has come for the IAEA to take a strong stance on the Syrian issue and state that the burden is now upon Syria to prove that there was no reactor under construction at the

site. Syria would have to permit the most intrusive inspections, using advanced technologies, such as thus called for in on-site inspections of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty. If Syria is unwilling to do this, it should be censured and, at the very least, banned from becoming a member of the IAEA Board of Governors. Given the attitude of the present Director General of the IAEA, it is doubtful that this will happen.

The United States is also an important actor in the Syrian affair, since it provided the evidence on Syria's misdeeds, and the connection to North Korea. The US is acting against the proposal to let Syria become a member of the Board. If it can persuade North Korea to disclose its connection to the Syrian nuclear reactor, it will put an end to Syria's lies and denials.

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS).

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