**Nuclear agency set to focus on Israel**

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May 8, 2010

The Associated Press

Original Source:

*http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hN1gG2FKiM6vZJsY\_qF2lYN2R7qQD9FI8FPG0*

VIENNA — Israel's secretive nuclear activities may undergo unprecedented scrutiny next month, with a key meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency tentatively set to focus on the topic for the first time, according to documents shared Friday with The Associated Press.

A copy of the restricted provisional agenda of the IAEA's June 7 board meeting lists "Israeli nuclear capabilities" as the eighth item — the first time that that the agency's decision-making body is being asked to deal with the issue in its 52 years of existence.

The agenda can still undergo changes in the month before the start of the meeting and a senior diplomat from a board member nation said the item, included on Arab request, could be struck if the U.S. and other Israeli allies mount strong opposition. He asked for anonymity for discussing a confidential matter.

Even if dropped from the final agenda, however, its inclusion in the May 7 draft made available to The AP is significant, reflecting the success of Islamic nations in giving concerns about Israel's unacknowledged nuclear arsenal increased prominence.

The 35-nation IAEA board is the agency's decision making body and can refer proliferation concerns to the U.N. Security Council — as it did with Iran in 2006 after Tehran resumed uranium enrichment, a potential pathway to nuclear weapons.

A decision to keep the item would be a slap in the face not only for Israel but also for Washington and its Western allies, which support the Jewish state and view Iran as the greatest nuclear threat to the Middle East.

Iran — and more recently Syria — have been the focus of past board meetings; Tehran for its refusal to freeze enrichment and for stonewalling IAEA efforts to probe alleged nuclear weapons experiments, and Damascus for blocking agency experts from revisiting a site struck by Israeli jets on suspicion it was a nearly finished plutonium producing reactor.

Iran and Syria are regular agenda items at board meetings. Elevating Israel to that status would detract from Western attempts to keep the heat on Tehran and Damascus and split the board even further — developing nations at board meetings are generally supportive of Iran and Syria and hostile to Israel.

That in turn could stifle recent resolve by the world's five recognized nuclear-weapons powers — the U.S., Russia, Britain, France and China — to take a more active role in reaching the goal of a nuclear-free Middle East.

Inclusion of the item appeared to be the result of a push by the 18-nation Arab group of IAEA member nations, which last year successfully lobbied another agency meeting — its annual conference — to pass a resolution directly criticizing Israel and its atomic program.

Unlike the board, the conference cannot make policy. Still, the result was a setback not only for Israel but also for Washington and other backers of the Jewish state, which had lobbied for 18 years of past practice — debate on the issue without a vote.

A letter to IAEA chief Yukiya Amano by the Arab group that was also shared with the AP urged Amano to report to the board what was known about Israel's nuclear program "by including a list of the information available to the Agency and the information which it can gather from open sources."

The April 23 Arab letter urged Amano to enforce the conference resolution calling on Israel to allow IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities.

Israel has never said it nuclear weapons but is universally believed to possess them.

The latest pressure is putting the Jewish state in an uncomfortable position. It wants the international community to take stern action to prevent Iran from getting atomic weapons but at the same time brushes off calls to come clean about its own nuclear capabilities.

Additionally, Amano, in a letter obtained Wednesday by the AP, has asked foreign ministers of the agency's 151 member states for proposals on how to persuade Israel to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Egypt has proposed that a Nonproliferation Treaty conference now meeting at U.N. headquarters in New York back a plan calling for the start of negotiations next year on a Mideast free of nuclear arms.

The U.S. has cautiously supported the idea while saying that implementing it must wait for progress in the Middle East peace process. Israel also says a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement must come first.

Still, Washington and the four other nuclear weapons countries recognized as such under the Nonproliferation Treaty appear to be ready to move from passive support to a more active role.

In her speech to the U.N. nuclear conference on Monday, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Washington would support "practical measures for moving toward that objective."

Washington also has been discussing it with the Israelis, said a Western diplomatic source, who asked for anonymity since he was discussing other countries' contacts.

Russian arms negotiator Anatoly I. Antonov, speaking on behalf of the five Nonproliferation Treaty nuclear powers, said these nations were "committed to full implementation" of a Middle East nuclear free zone.