**IAEA presses nuke-free Mideast**

Assad and Medvedev urge Israel to sign NPT, accept nuke oversight.

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NEW YORK – Against the backdrop of a UN conference designed to strengthen nuclear nonproliferation, increasing attention is being paid to Israel’s presumed nuclear arsenal, including a focus on the Jewish state by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Even as diplomats huddle at the United Nations during the second week of a month-long conference, IAEA officials are focusing on Israel amid growing calls for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East.

Indeed, an Arab-backed proposal at the conference, to strengthen the 1970 Nonproliferation Treaty, calls on Israel to sign the NPT as a non-weapon state as part of an initiative to achieve a nuclear-free Middle East. Yet the initiative goes against what Israel has been saying, that Iranian nuclear ambitions pose the biggest regional threat. The head of the UN agency, Yukiya Amano, reportedly sent a letter to 151 nations seeking input on an effort to push Israel to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty.

As first reported by AP, Amano asked foreign ministers of IAEA member states to share “views” on an Arab-backed resolution calling for Israel to sign the NPT and open its nuclear facilities to the IAEA.

“It would be helpful to me if Your Excellency could inform me of any views that your government might have with respect to meeting the objectives of the resolution,” he wrote.

The IAEA board of governors is set to consider Israel’s nuclear capabilities at its June 7 meeting. In a statement, the IAEA said contrary to reports, it would not be the first time Israel’s program would face scrutiny by the board. But the agency does not intend to link Israel’s program with the Iranian program, as some Arab states have suggested.

Following a meeting in Damascus on Tuesday, the Russian and Syrian presidents issued a joint statement calling for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East, and specifically urged Israel to sign the NPT and open its arsenal to IAEA oversight.

Syrian President Bashar Assad had been expected to use the visit by Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev to turn Moscow against any UN Security Council sanctions against Iran. Sanctions would be “useless and would complicate chances of reaching a solution,” Assad said.

Last week, Russia, along with the other permanent members of the Security Council expressed support for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Without mentioning Israel by name, the countries voiced support in a unanimous statement for the “full implementation” of a 1995 resolution intended to free the Middle East from nuclear arms.

Ahead of the NPT Review Conference, Egypt – with the backing of non-aligned members and Arab states – proposed the implementation of the 1995 resolution; an Egyptian working paper also called for jump-starting talks next year on establishing such a nuclear-free zone.

US officials say they have been working with Cairo for months on the concept. But while the US supports a Mideast free of nuclear weapons, officials say implementing a nuclear-free zone would first require regional peace.

“Given the lack of a comprehensive regional peace and concerns about some countries’ compliance with NPT safeguards, the conditions for such a zone do not yet exist,” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters in New York last week.

“But we are prepared to support practical measures for moving toward that objective.”

On Tuesday, a US lawmaker voiced concern over the IAEA’s focus on Israel, calling it “deeply troubling” and saying it would divert attention from Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

“The IAEA cannot allow itself to be hijacked by those who seek Israel’s destruction,” US Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen wrote in a letter to the IAEA’s Amano.

“Rather than fixating on Israel, the IAEA should take immediate action to suspend all membership privileges for Iran. It must cease all technical assistance programs to Iran until the regime comes into full compliance with UNSC resolutions and its nonproliferation obligations.”