

Engineer: Suspected Syrian Nuke Site Is Textiles

DESMOND BUTLER & GEORGE JAHN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A German engineer says a Syrian industrial complex suspected of being part of a secret nuclear weapons program was not built for anything other than producing textiles.

In an interview, Jurgen Grobe detailed his work in the early 1980s as chief engineer on the facility in the Syrian city of Al-Hasakah, which he said was completed in 1981. The Associated Press reported last week that investigators at the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency had asked Syria for information about the facility.

Officials said the complex closely matches plans that the father of Pakistan's nuclear program, A.Q. Khan, sold to Libya. But Grobe's information suggests that the facility was completed before Khan is believed to have been involved in the nuclear black market.

Details from an interview with Grobe by a German journalist were first published on the blog Arms Control Wonk.

The blog report included analysis of satellite imagery by researchers from the Monterey Institute of International Studies early in 1984 that appear to confirm that the complex was already built by that time.

A senior diplomat familiar with IAEA investigations, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, says that investigators remain interested in visiting the facility because of the similarities with Khan's plans. The IAEA declined to comment.

The IAEA did request a visit to the facility but Syria did not respond and the IAEA has not pressed the issue. The IAEA has focused its reports on a separate Syrian site bombed by Israeli warplanes in 2007 that the agency says was a plutonium production reactor. In June the agency reported Syria to the U.N. Security Council over the issue and said that Syria had not cooperated with investigators.

The AP also reported that U.N. investigators are interested in interviewing a former Syrian government official who they believe corresponded with Khan and suggested scientific cooperation.

In an interview with a Pakistani newspaper, Khan called suggestions that he had helped Syria with a weapons program baseless. Though he later recanted, Khan had publicly confessed to selling nuclear technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya.

According to the IAEA, Khan is believed to have made his first approach to a government other than Pakistan, in a 1984 meeting with Libyan government

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officials.

The complex in Al-Hasakah is run by the Hasakah Spinning Co., a cotton manufacturing company. Grobe, now the chief executive of a German engineering company, said that the blueprints were drawn by a state-run East Germany company according to Syrian government plans in the mid-1970s.

Jahn reported from Vienna.

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