Al Qaeda Building Atomic Bombs in Syria: Joint Chiefs Say U.S. Nuclear Options Only Provide Small Increase in Chances of Destroying Nuke Lab

The Associated Press

A report from General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the President concludes that nuclear weapons would be “moderately more effective” than conventional strikes in destroying an Al Qaeda nuclear weapons facility in Syria.

The suspects in the smuggling operation were employed at a Russian nuclear lab. The smugglers confirmed under questioning that other shipments of centrifuges and low-enriched uranium had already been delivered to the Al Qaeda base, where the centrifuges are being used to make fuel for a nuclear bomb. The smugglers stated that there will be enough bomb grade material produced for at least one weapon within two weeks. Syria has refused to allow international inspectors access to the facility.

The report compares two American military options, a conventional strike using nearly one hundred conventionally-armed cruise missiles and an attack using two small, nuclear-armed cruise missiles. The report estimates that the conventional strike has a 70 percent chance of successfully destroying the Al Qaeda facility, where the centrifuges and nuclear materials are too large to be moved without detection. A US intelligence official stated that he has high confidence that Al Qaeda is within two weeks of producing an operational bomb. After that, the official said, “all bets are off.”

According to Dr. David Wright, a nuclear weapons expert at the Union of Concerned Scientists, an independent think-tank based in Washington, D.C., “If a bomb of this size exploded in New York City, it could easily kill 50,000 to 70,000 people.”

The report was leaked to the Associated Press by a high-ranking administration official involved in planning the strike. According to the official, the centrifuges and nuclear materials are too large to be moved without detection. A US intelligence official stated that he has high confidence that Al Qaeda is within two weeks of producing an operational bomb. After that, the official said, “all bets are off.”

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The report states that the remote location of the Al Qaeda facility should limit Syrian civilian fatalities. Because many conventional weapons would be required to destroy the Al Qaeda base, the Joint Chiefs estimate that “the nuclear and conventional options would kill approximately the same number of Syrian civilians” – about 1,000, including immediate deaths and long term consequences of the conventional or nuclear strike.

As both options will rely on cruise missiles launched from U.S. naval vessels, the report concludes that “no U.S. military personnel are at risk in either operation.”

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<tr>
<th>TARGET: AL QAEDA NUCLEAR WEAPONS LAB</th>
<th>U.S. NUCLEAR STRIKE</th>
<th>U.S. CONVENTIONAL STRIKE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESTIMATED SYRIAN CIVILIAN DEATHS</td>
<td>1,000</td>
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Chart from Joint Chiefs’ report describing nuclear and conventional options for strike on Al Qaeda nuclear lab.