**Arabs lobby US on anti-Israel vote**

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VIENNA — Ignoring a U.S. warning, Arab nations are urging Washington and other powers to end support of Israel's nuclear secrecy and to push the Jewish state to allow international inspections of its program, diplomats told The Associated Press Sunday.

Islamic nations have long called for Israel — which is widely believed to have nuclear arms — to open its program. But the fact that the Arab League has directly approached Washington and other Israeli allies for support at the September meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency is significant, considering that President Barack Obama last month warned against using that forum to single out Israel.

Obama then suggested that such a move would likely kill hopes of breakthrough talks on a Mideast nuclear-free zone, as proposed by the U.N.'s 189-nation Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty conference three months ago.

Over Israeli objections, the planned 2012 talks were backed by the U.S. and other nuclear powers for the first time since Arab nations pushed for such a gathering 15 years ago.

The Arab appeal to pressure Israel to open its nuclear program to inspectors also threatens to deflect attention from Iran, which Washington and its allies now consider a grave nuclear proliferation threat, even though Tehran insists it is not developing nuclear weapons.

The Arab appeal is contained in an Aug. 8 letter signed by Arab League chief Amr Moussa that was shared with The Associated Press. It asks for backing of a resolution that Arab nations will submit to the September assembly of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

An attached draft of the resolution expresses "concern" about Israel's nuclear program and urges it to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and to open its atomic activities to outside inspection.

A cover note also seen by the AP asks the Belgian Embassy in Cairo to transmit the letter and the draft to Belgian Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere, who now holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Diplomats accredited to the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency and familiar with the issue told the AP that the letter also was sent to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the foreign ministers of Russia, China, Britain and France — the four other permanent U.N. Security Council members.

All the diplomats who agreed to discuss the issue with the AP asked for anonymity because of the confidentiality of their information.

Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed in a statement last month to "work together to oppose efforts to single out Israel" at the 150-nation International Atomic Energy Agency conference.

On the proposed Mideast nuclear-free zone talks, their statement warned that "any efforts to single out Israel will make the prospects of convening such a conference unlikely."

But the Arab letter says the notion of singling out Israel "is not the case."

"Singling out a state assumes that there are a number of states in the same position and only one state was singled out," the letter says. Referring to the Nonproliferation Treaty, it says: "The fact is that all the states in the region have acceded to the NPT except Israel."

Israel is commonly assumed to have nuclear weapons but refuses to discuss the issue.

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

Passions have grown since September when the International Atomic Energy Agency assembly overrode Western objections to pass a resolution directly criticizing Israel and its atomic program for the first time in 18 years.

The result was a setback not only for Israel but also for the United States and other supporters of the Jewish state.

Because the resolution passed by only a four-vote margin, lobbying by both sides has intensified ahead of next month's meeting.

Three diplomats from International Atomic Energy Agency member nations said the EU and the U.S. were meeting or planning to meet with possible undecided nations to seek their support of Israel, even as the Arab bloc continues pushing for support for its resolution, entitled "Israeli nuclear capabilities."

The U.S. and its allies consider Iran the region's greatest proliferation threat, fearing that Tehran is trying to achieve the capacity to make nuclear weapons despite its assertion that it is only building a civilian program to generate power.

They also say Syria — which, like Iran is under International Atomic Energy Agency investigation — ran a clandestine nuclear program, at least until Israeli warplanes destroyed what they describe as a nearly finished plutonium-producing reactor two years ago. Syria denies that.

But Islamic nations insist that Israel is the true danger in the Middle East, saying they fear its nuclear weapons capacity. Israel has never said it has such arms, but is widely believed to possess them.

Even ahead of the General Conference, key International Atomic Energy Agency nations are expected to disagree about Israel's nuclear activities. The item is to be discussed at the agency's decision-making board of 35 nations, according to a copy of the restricted provisional agenda of that gathering shared with The AP.

*(This version CORRECTS Adds date of the Arab letter, background about Israel, Iran and Syria, corrects Moussa's first name to Amr, not Amre, and links the AP photo.)*