

Q&A: Iran and the nuclear issue

Contributed by BBC
Wednesday, 05 December 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 05 December 2007

Iran is defying a demand by the UN Security Council to stop the enrichment of uranium. It announced on 2 September 2007 that it had installed 3,000 centrifuges, the machines that do the enrichment.

A US intelligence assessment stated on 3 December that Iran had probably not restarted a nuclear weapons programme it allegedly had until 2003.

What does the assessment say?

The National Intelligence Estimate plays down any early threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon. It assesses "with high confidence" that Iran did have a nuclear weapons programme but that it stopped this in 2003 after it had been discovered and had probably not started it up again.

It adds: "We do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons." The NIE assessment admits that Iran appears "less determined" to develop nuclear weapons than US intelligence had previously thought.

It says that the earliest date by which Iran could make a nuclear weapon would be late 2009 but that this is "very unlikely".

Does the report lessen the chances of an attack on Iran?

Yes. It does not provide much evidence to support those who want to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. It indicates that pressure from sanctions has been effective.

Why is Iran refusing to stop enrichment?

Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a country has the right to enrich its own fuel for civil nuclear power, under inspection from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran says it is simply doing what it is allowed to do. It argues that it needs nuclear power and wants to control the whole process itself. It says it will not break its obligations under the NPT and will not use the technology to make a nuclear bomb.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly stressed that Iran will not yield to international pressure, and he has denounced the US as "tyrannical".

"The Iranian nation will not succumb to bullying, invasion and the violation of its rights," he has said.

Why is the Security Council ordering Iran to stop enrichment?

The Council is concerned because the technology used for producing fuel for nuclear power can be used to enrich the uranium to a much higher level to produce a nuclear explosion.

Iran hid an enrichment programme for 18 years, so the Council says that until Iran's peaceful intentions can be fully established, it should stop enrichment and certain other nuclear activities. The Council's order is obligatory and supersedes other rights.

What precisely does the Security Council and the IAEA want Iran to do?

It wants Iran to stop all enrichment activities, including the preparation of uranium ore, the installation of the centrifuges in which a gas from the ore is spun to separate the richer parts and the insertion of the gas into the centrifuges. It also has to suspend its work on heavy water projects, notably the construction of a heavy water reactor. Such a reactor could produce plutonium, an alternative to uranium for a nuclear device.

The IAEA reported in August 2007 that Iran had not suspended enrichment and was continuing to construct the heavy water plant.

What if Iran does stop?

Iran is being offered help to develop a civilian nuclear power programme including light-water reactors. Crucially, Iran would not be allowed to make the fuel itself. This would be done in Russia in a partnership with Iran. However, as a condition for any substantive talks, Iran has to suspend enrichment. It does not accept such a pre-condition.

There are other parts to the offer, including help for Iran to join the World Trade Organisation and the possible lifting of some US sanctions in the aircraft, telecommunications and agricultural machinery sectors.

What is the IAEA doing?

Apart from carrying out its inspections (see below) it has been asking Iran for answers to questions about past Iranian activities. These had raised suspicions about its intentions.

Specifically, the IAEA said in a report in September 2007 that questions over Iranian experiments with plutonium and the presence of high-enriched uranium particles were resolved. Outstanding issues included Iran's acquisition of centrifuge technology, contamination by highly-enriched uranium of samples taken at a university in Tehran, Iran's possession of a document describing procedures for using uranium metal in hemispheres for a nuclear device and Iran's activities concerning polonium.

On 15 November, an IAEA report indicated that Iran had made "substantial progress" in answering these questions. It has, for example provided the uranium metal document requested. It had previously allowed the IAEA only to see it. It says it was given this unasked by "intermediaries" (believed to be from the Pakistani A Q Khan network) when it secretly acquired enrichment technology some years ago.

What sanctions have been imposed on Iran?

The Security Council has imposed two rounds of sanctions. They were written under Chapter VII of the UN Charter which obliges states to implement them and under Article 41, which allows for economic measures, but not the use of military force.

Resolution 1737 was passed in December 2006. It mandates all UN member states "to prevent the supply, sale or transfer... of all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to Iran's enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems".

In March 2007, the Council passed resolution 1747. This seeks to tighten the squeeze on Iran's nuclear and missile programmes by preventing dealings with the state Bank Sepah and 28 named people and organisations, many connected to the elite Revolutionary Guard. Member states have been told to exercise restraint in and to report the travel of individuals connected to these programmes.

Imports of arms from Iran are banned and member states are told to exercise restraint in selling major arms systems to Iran. Loans are supposed to be limited to humanitarian and development purposes.

Will more sanctions be imposed?

The US and its closest allies on this issue - Britain, France and Germany - are pressing for further measures in the Security Council. The US wants these to include restrictions on export credits to Iran. So far, Russia and China have not agreed in practice though they agreed in principle in September that there would be a new resolution if talks remained deadlocked by the end of November.

In the meantime the US is applying pressure on its international partners to restrict their trade with Iran. The US has banned most trade with Iran itself since its diplomats were seized in Tehran in 1979.

On 17 October, the US designated part of the Revolutionary Guard as a "supporter of terrorism" and the Guard as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction for its alleged work on ballistic missiles. The US imposed further sanctions on the Guards' commercial activities and on several Iranian banks.

Is it not too late now to stop Iran from acquiring enrichment technology?

According to Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, events have overtaken the current strategy and he thinks that

Iran should now be allowed to undertake limited enrichment but under strict supervision. This approach has been rejected by the US and its supporters.

Is Iran under inspection by the IAEA?

The IAEA has access to Iranian nuclear facilities under a safeguards agreement, and in February 2007 it verified that Iran had not diverted to illegal use any material it had declared. However, Iran has not implemented a more intrusive Additional Protocol it signed in 2003, so the IAEA said in its February report that it could not verify the absence of undeclared nuclear material.

In its August report, the IAEA repeated that it was able to verify the "non-diversion of declared nuclear material".

However, in view of the agreement by Iran to clarify outstanding questions, the wording on undeclared nuclear material was amended in August to state that the building of confidence about the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme requires that the agency is able to give "assurances regarding the absence of undeclared nuclear material".

An Additional Protocol is a voluntary agreement that allows for more intensive and unannounced inspections. Iran began to implement such a protocol but its parliament refused to ratify it and ordered a suspension when the IAEA declared that Iran was in non-compliance with its obligations in 2005. The IAEA has called on Iran to ratify and implement the protocol as a way of establishing confidence.

What is the background to this confrontation?

The IAEA reported in 2003 that Iran had hidden a uranium enrichment programme for 18 years, and the current dispute dates back to then.

Iran says its nuclear regime is peaceful

Western members of the IAEA called on Iran to commit itself to stopping all enrichment activities permanently, but it has refused to do so and later abandoned a temporary halt as well.

The clash with Iran escalated in February 2006, when the IAEA as a whole reported Iran to the Security Council.

A month later, the Security Council decided to take up the issue after receiving a copy of an IAEA report on Iran which said that it could not "conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran".

Could Iran leave the NPT?

Yes. Article X gives a member state the right to declare that "extraordinary events" have "jeopardised the supreme interests of the state". It can then give three months notice to quit. That would leave it free to do what it wanted.

And, in fact, on 7 May, its parliament threatened to force the government to withdraw if the stand-off was not resolved "peacefully".

What about fears for regional conflict?

There are fears of a broader, possibly military, crisis. The US has said publicly that it will not permit Iran to develop nuclear weapons. President George W Bush has said that he wants diplomacy to solve this, but that nothing is ruled out.

There have been press reports that Israel, which bombed an Iraqi reactor in 1981, has begun planning for a possible raid. But like the US, Israel says that diplomacy is the priority.

Don't existing nuclear powers have obligations to get rid of their weapons under the NPT?

Article VI commits them to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament". The nuclear powers claim they have done this by reducing their warheads, but critics say they have not really moved towards nuclear disarmament.

Critics also argue that the US and UK have broken the treaty by transferring nuclear technology from one to another. The US and UK say that this is not affected by the NPT.

Doesn't Israel have a nuclear bomb?

Yes. Israel, however, is not a party to the NPT, so is not obliged to report to it. Neither are India or Pakistan, both of which have developed nuclear weapons. North Korea has left the treaty and has announced that it has acquired a nuclear weapons capacity.