

Q&A: Iran and the nuclear issue

Iran is defying a demand from the Security Council that it stop the enrichment of uranium.

As a result, the Council approved a third round of sanctions against Iran on 3 March 2008.

A US intelligence assessment claimed on 3 December 2007 that Iran had a nuclear weapons programme until 2003 but that it had stopped this programme and had probably not restarted it.

What new sanctions have been imposed on Iran?

Resolution 1803 extends asset restrictions and travel bans on more Iranian individuals said to be involved in nuclear work and on more Iranian companies. It bans the sale to Iran of so-called dual-use items - items which can have either a military or civilian purpose - as well as calling on governments to withdraw financial backing from companies trading with Iran, to inspect cargo going into and out of the country, and to monitor the activities of two Iranian banks.

What sanctions were imposed earlier?

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.

What does the US intelligence 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 until 2003, but this was discovered and Iran stopped it.

The NIE adds: "We do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons." The 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.

Does everyone accept the NIE report?

No. Israel does not. The Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said on 12 February 2008 that Israel thought Iran was aiming to create "a capacity for non-conventional weapons."

And in London on 5 March, a senior British diplomat said: "Many of us were surprised by how emphatic the writers [of the NIE] were... I haven't seen any intelligence that gives me even medium confidence that these programmes haven't resumed."

Even the Director of US National Intelligence, Mike McConnell, appeared to backtrack on 28 February 2008, in evidence to the Senate Armed Forces Committee.

In this evidence, he said that Iran had probably halted warhead design and weaponisation, but pointed out that Iran's continued enrichment of uranium meant that it was continuing with "the most difficult challenge in nuclear production." He said: "We remain concerned about Iran's intentions... Tehran at a minimum is keeping the option open to develop nuclear weapons."

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: "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 other pressure has there been?

While the sanctions were being negotiated, the US was also 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 2007, 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.

What is the role of the IAEA?

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.

On 15 November, an IAEA report indicated that Iran had made "substantial progress" in answering these questions.

On 22 February 2008, the IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei circulated his latest report. He said there were two outstanding issues - Iran had not cleared up all the questions about its alleged studies into weaponisation and it had not put into law an Additional Protocol that allows extra inspections. However, it has allowed more visits and the extent of its uranium enrichment activities had been clarified.

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

Iran thinks so and has said so. Its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has called this a "great victory".

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, though it has allowed more visits.

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.

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.