

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

What are the issues?

- Iran's nuclear programme is fast advancing to the point at which they would be able to produce nuclear weapons, despite numerous UN Security Council resolutions requiring them to cease uranium enrichment and extensive international sanctions.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General has stated that Iran is not cooperating with investigations into suspected secret work on nuclear weapons, and repeated talks between Iran and the IAEA to give the agency access have been fruitless.
- Between April 2012 and February 2013, four rounds of high-level talks between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) have achieved little. At the last round in Almaty in February, the P5+1 put a more generous confidence building proposal on the table, which Iran is considering. Behind the scenes, technical level talks continue with a fifth round of political talks scheduled for 5 April, but expectations for a significant outcome remain low.

What is Israel's position?

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu considers the Iranian nuclear programme his number one priority, believing it poses a threat to the very existence of the State of Israel.
- In a speech to the UN last September, Netanyahu publicly defined a red line as the amount of 20% enriched uranium required for a single bomb, reckoned by experts to be 225-240kg. By February Iran had stockpiled 167kg and was accumulating more at a rate of around 15kg a month.
- Israel would rather the international community stop Iran through diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and military action if necessary, but Netanyahu appears ready to take unilateral military action if required.
- Israeli officials have repeatedly expressed concerns that Iran is deliberately protracting talks with the P5+1 in order to buy time for its nuclear activities.

What is the US position?

- President Barack Obama has said that his policy is to prevent Iran getting nuclear weapons, rather than containment. In his State of the Union Address in January Obama said his administration would do what is 'necessary' to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.
- With such pronouncements the US has tried to reassure Israel and to dissuade it from taking unilateral military action. The US and other world powers have grave concerns that should Israel strike militarily it could trigger Iranian retaliation in the Gulf and a wider regional conflict with damaging economic consequences.
- The US has been opposed to setting strictly defined red lines, and has chosen a more ambiguous and flexible posture. The US believes it has more time before the window closes for a military option, partly because it has a greater military capacity than Israel.

What to look out for

- Behind closed doors the two sides will likely try to narrow the gaps and establish an agreed position on red lines and timetables. Israel will want to know what the US time frame is for diplomacy and what would constitute a justifiable trigger for military action if diplomacy fails.
- Publicly Obama will also likely expand on and reaffirm America's determination to prevent Iran from ever acquiring nuclear weapons by 'keeping all options on the table'. Obama will also seek to reassure Israel of his commitment to Israel's security overall. Underlining this point, when Obama arrives on Wednesday his first visit will be to a battery of Israel's 'Iron Dome' anti-missile defence system.