

Measuring progress

Less than meets the eye so far.

An invitation to inspectors to look around a previously secret uranium-enrichment plant being built inside a mountain on a heavily guarded military compound near the city of Qom. An agreement in principle to ship some of Iran's mounting stocks of low-enriched uranium abroad for further processing, to supply a research reactor in Tehran. These are the first results of resumed talks between Iran and six countries, including America, Germany, Britain, France, Russia and China, that for several years have been trying to talk its clerical regime out of its most dangerous nuclear work. But are they steps in the right direction, or a feint by Iran to dodge curbs on its suspect ambitions?

America's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, and its defence secretary, Robert Gates, have welcomed the talks with Iran. But experience suggests that an apparently co-operative Iran can be trickier to cope with than an obviously unco-operative one. American and European officials caution that the new talks cannot be open-ended. Without more progress by the turn of the year, tougher sanctions will follow.

Yet balancing sanctions and talks will be difficult. Neither the next meeting on the uranium-shipment idea, on October 19th, nor the Qom inspection which is set for October 25th are without pitfalls.

Mohamed ElBaradei, outgoing head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear guardian, claims to detect a shift to "transparency and co-operation" in nuclear matters. That will be news to IAEA inspectors. Whatever their boss says, it will take a great deal more transparency than Iran has offered so far to persuade them of its claimed peaceful intent.

For two years Iran has blocked their access to key people, places and documents that could provide answers about work with seemingly little civilian purpose. This includes tests of high-explosive triggers useful for nuclear weapons, and the redesign of a missile nose-cone to take what looks like a nuclear warhead. Letting inspectors into the Qom site is hardly a concession either. Iran was caught radioactive-handed. America, Britain and France revealed the location and purpose of the plant at last month's G20 summit. In the intervening weeks Iran will have had time, if needed, to cover up any military links.

Iran's plans for Qom include installing faster-spinning centrifuge machines than those now enriching uranium at its other known plant, at Natanz. Unless it suspends this and other nuclear work, as the UN Security Council has repeatedly demanded, any deal to ship some of its already accumulated low-enriched uranium abroad for further processing will look less of a breakthrough than first hoped.

Iran says its small research reactor in Tehran, originally supplied by America in the friendlier 1960s, needs new fuel to keep it in operation for the production of medical isotopes. The fuel needs enriching to just under 20% (power reactors run on only 3.5%). Before Qom, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had said Iran wanted to buy this from abroad. Yet Iran is under UN-led sanctions and many worried that Mr Ahmadinejad was preparing an excuse for Iran to do the 20% enriching itself—another step to a nuclear break-out capacity. In the way enrichment works, getting from 20% to bomb-usable 90% enrichment takes a lot less effort even than churning out the initial 3.5% reactor-grade stuff still piling up at Natanz.

After Qom, Iran appeared to back off a bit by agreeing in principle to ship abroad much of its uranium stock (a bomb's worth or thereabouts if sufficiently re-enriched) for reworking to

provide the needed reactor fuel. The stock is anyway under safeguards, so grabbing it itself for further enrichment would be a clear breach that would be widely taken as a signal of bad intent. Letting it go abroad means Iran has no excuse to enrich beyond 3.5% at its known plants. But Qom also raises the possibility of other secret sites, something Iranian officials flatly deny.

Iran may well be calculating that it has done enough to fend off further sanctions. If the centrifuge machines at Natanz spin on, despite UN injunctions to stop, it will anyway be able to replenish its stocks there in a matter of months at most. Once Qom is on line, it will be able to produce ever more enriched uranium, ever faster. And unless it accepts sharply intrusive inspections, the IAEA will have no better chance of getting to the bottom of its nuclear intentions. If Iran wants to show the world that it is not seeking a nuclear bomb, it will have to give a lot more ground yet.

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