

Deal or no deal?

And still no end to Iran's nuclear story.

Iran doesn't usually do deadlines. It has been evading them in the seven years since an opposition group first outed its extensive covert nuclear programme, despite five UN Security Council resolutions that have told it to halt its suspect nuclear work. Yet after talks that ended in Vienna on October 21st, Iran and the three countries trying to strike a side-deal over new fuel for a Tehran-based nuclear reactor were told by Mohamed ElBaradei, outgoing chief of the UN's nuclear guardian, that they had just two days to take his draft agreement or leave it.

As *The Economist* went to press it was unclear whether Iran would accept or haggle over the deal, which would keep in operation a research reactor that makes medical isotopes. Meanwhile, after a three-week delay at Iran's insistence, UN nuclear inspectors were due to visit a uranium-enrichment plant which until recently had been concealed. It is built deep in a mountainside on a military compound near the city of Qom.

The reactor-fuel plan, originally an American idea, would involve putting 1,200kg of Iran's low-enriched uranium from the stockpile it has been accumulating at its main enrichment plant at Natanz into the custody of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's watchdog, by the end of the year. The agency would get it to Russia by mid-January for further enrichment; reactors like the one in Tehran run on uranium fuel that is enriched to 19.75%, rather than under 5%, the level needed for civilian power reactors that Iran has mastered thus far. From there the uranium would go to France for fabrication into fuel rods, then eventually back to Iran, starting in December 2010, in time to keep the Tehran reactor going.

France's foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, had insisted the uranium, about 75% of Iran's production so far, be got out of the country by the end of the year in a single batch, rather than in dribs over months. While the enrichment machines at Natanz keep spinning, that would still only temporarily deplete Iran's reserves. These are by now sufficient to produce about one bomb's-worth of uranium, though only if re-enriched to about 90%. But the deal would deprive Iran of any justification for enriching to higher levels itself.

Iran had wanted to exclude France from the deal. That was "either clueless or malign", suggested a Western official. Apart from America, which supplied the Tehran reactor in the 1960s, only France and Argentina can make the right fuel rods. Argentina refuses to be involved, as Iran has appointed as defence minister an official it holds responsible for an atrocity in 1994, when a Jewish community centre in Argentina was blown up, killing more than 80 people.

If the deal comes off, it could yet prove one small confidence-building step in the much bigger row over Iran's ultimate nuclear ambitions. But Iran has shown little interest in taking the right steps at Qom or elsewhere needed to build confidence in its intentions and end that stand-off.

Inspectors need more than a look at Qom's machinery. They require access to documents and people too. But Iran has refused such co-operation elsewhere. Nor will it answer questions about activities that have little rationale except for bomb-building. And it is dragging its feet over a next date for wider talks with America, three European governments, Russia and China, who are trying to divine its real nuclear intent.

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