

An Iranian nuclear bomb, or the bombing of Iran?

After years of fruitless diplomacy, Iran is on the threshold of becoming a nuclear power. The options are grim.



AFP

A secret uranium-enrichment plant is discovered, built in a mountainside on a well-defended military compound outside the city of Qom. It is a clear breach of nuclear safeguards agreements and promises made when Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran brazenly declares its “nuclear rights” to this “civilian” effort with a purpose, it says, that is nothing more sinister than providing electricity to Iranians.

To diplomats from America, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China, it is a depressingly familiar tale. Iran’s belligerent shrug at the discovery of the Fordow plant—reported by inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN’s nuclear guardian, to be in an “advanced state of construction”, with everything but the centrifuges installed—is exactly the one played out after the unmasking of its other formerly secret enrichment plant, at Natanz, in 2002.

Russia and China, hitherto most reluctant to contemplate stiffer sanctions on Iran for its nuclear defiance, are now wondering what to do next. “We will not stand aside” if others agree on sanctions, said a senior Russian diplomat this week. Diplomats from the six are to meet in mid-December to start taking stock.

What has changed in the intervening seven years is far from reassuring. Iran is much further on with its enrichment plans. Natanz has some 8,000 centrifuge enrichment machines (out of a planned 54,000), though only about half are spinning with uranium gas. It has accumulated a stock of 5% enriched uranium which, if Iran breaks out and enriches it further to bomb-usable 90% (easy compared with achieving the first 5%), would be enough for a bomb, and will soon be enough for two. Inspectors, meanwhile, suspect that Iran may have other secret sites. They have plenty of evidence to suggest that Iran has done warhead development, besides other experiments whose purpose can only be to build a nuclear weapon, or enable one to be assembled at speed.

But Iran refuses to answer their questions, and now threatens to increase its enrichment effort tenfold. An exaggerated boast, perhaps: it appears to be running short of uranium ore, as well as high-strength steel for the planned expansion at Natanz. But it is moving ahead fast.

Some in Tehran are even hinting that the country could pull out of the NPT altogether. Being in or out “makes no difference”, said Ali Larijani, the speaker of parliament and a former nuclear negotiator. But he was immediately contradicted by the head of Iran’s atomic agency, who said that the only reason to pull out of the treaty would be to develop nuclear weapons, and that would be a “sin”. The very threat of it brings the world a step closer to the catastrophic choice that France’s president, Nicolas Sarkozy, laid out in 2007: an Iranian nuclear bomb, or the bombing of Iran.

The outstretched hand

This year, it was hoped, would be different. With a new American president ready to be conciliatory, diplomats had tried even harder to draw Iran into talks. When Iran recently announced that it needed 20% enriched uranium to replace the fuel rods in a research reactor that produces medical isotopes (and was built by America in Tehran in the 1960s, when times were better), a deal was proposed involving America, Russia, France and the IAEA. Most of Iran’s own low-enriched uranium (LEU), for which it has no practical civilian use because it has no working nuclear-power reactors that could burn it, would be taken out of the country, enriched in Russia, made into fuel rods in France and then returned to Iran, all under the auspices of the IAEA. Removing most of Iran’s uranium stock would create a breathing space, if only of a few months, for more talks.

This was the first step to seeing whether a broader deal could be struck. Under such an agreement, Iran would end the part of its nuclear work with military potential until confidence was restored. In return it would get various benefits, including improved political and trade ties, discussions about regional security and even co-operation on advanced civilian nuclear technologies.

Iran’s provocative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at first seemed tempted. He saw the deal as a means of legitimising Iran’s own enrichment programme. But it fell foul of Iran’s opaque and unstable politics, all the more volatile since Mr Ahmadinejad’s rigged re-election in June. The president found himself outflanked by both reformers and hardliners, all denouncing his readiness to export Iran’s hard-won enriched uranium. The deal collapsed. On December 2nd Mr Ahmadinejad announced that Iran would obtain 20% enriched uranium all by itself, by producing it inside the country.

The failure of the fuel deal and the revelations at Qom have particularly disappointed the outgoing head of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei. Mr ElBaradei points out that the Qom site is not only illegal, but also “reduces confidence” in Iran’s claim not to have other secret facilities. For Fordow raises new questions, including where the uranium for such a secret operation would come from. There are two possible answers. It could come through the diversion of stocks of low-enriched uranium from Natanz, which could then be quickly spun into the bomb-grade sort. Or another secret plant could prepare uranium hexafluoride (UF₆), the compound that is spun and enriched as a gas in the centrifuges, from Iran’s uranium ore. This can be mined or imported without the inspectors knowing, because Iran has refused to give them the powers they need. Iran says Fordow was only an attempt to hedge its bets in case Natanz was destroyed. But it increases suspicions that Iran was seeking a break-out option.

Talking sanctions

The IAEA’s board voted 25-3—crucially, with the support of both Russia and China—to censure Iran for its latest safeguards breaches and to refer the matter, yet again, to the UN Security Council. Even before the Qom revelations, the six had agreed to give Iran until the end of the year before deciding what to do next. Perhaps it was always hopeless to think that Iran, with its long record of cheating and playing for time, was ever going to be serious about reaching a

deal. The question is whether America's year of attempted engagement will now make it easier to convince Russia, China and other sceptics of the need for stiffer sanctions.

Both Russia and China have already signed up for a string of limited UN-imposed sanctions on Iran. These have so far mostly targeted members of the Revolutionary Guard and its offshoots and the companies they control, which are thought to be involved in nuclear-related trade. But both countries have been careful to exempt the things they most value in their trade with Iran—items which, if included, would make Tehran take notice.

For Russia, that has included the sale of conventional weapons—although reports that it has refused to supply Iran with advanced S-300 air defences, despite an earlier agreement to do so, would seem to be born out by Iranian complaints. Since 1995 Russia has also been helping Iran to complete a nuclear-power reactor at Bushehr. America had at first opposed the project. It changed tack when Russia agreed not only to supply the necessary fuel rods, but also to take back the spent fuel. This project has since been cited as proof that outsiders are not trying to deprive Iran of civilian nuclear power. Yet there have been repeated delays, and the reactor will now not start up until March. With Iran in repeated violation of nuclear safeguards, a ban on nuclear trade looks attractive to some.

China, too, has big commercial interests in Iran, with investment contracts estimated at some \$120 billion. Iran is already one of China's biggest suppliers of oil. The government in Beijing will be loth to put those supplies at risk—though Saudi Arabia and some of the smaller Gulf states, quietly keen to keep up pressure on Iran, could help China find alternative supplies.

Some European countries still trade heavily with Iran, too, although many companies have started to draw back. Government-backed credits are harder to come by, and ties to Iranian banks have been cut. But this has mostly been done under pressure from America. Faced with the choice of continuing to deal with their Iranian counterparts, or retaining entry to the much more lucrative American financial markets, most banks have backed away. Yet in the Gulf itself, as well as in Asia, Iran has found circuitous routes to get the imports it needs, including petrol.

It is not just commercial interests that give Russia and China pause when it comes to devising tough new sanctions. Neither has much truck with sanctions anyway, since both have suffered from them in the past. Both resented America's unilateral intervention in Iraq in 2003. And Russia has no particular wish to help America and Iran end their confrontation, since their difficult relations ever since the shah's overthrow in 1979 have opened a door to Russian influence in the region.

Both Russia and China have insisted until now that there has been no hard evidence that Iran is doing anything wrong. Neither thinks Iran's missiles are aimed at them. Instead Russia has been keen to maintain good relations with a potentially awkward neighbour that could stir up trouble, but mostly hasn't, in Russia's own unstable border regions.

Yet Iran's own actions make this hands-off strategy increasingly untenable. The closer Iran seems to get to the nuclear ambition it claims not to have, the more nervous its other neighbours have become. Indeed, Arab states seem far more anxious about a Persian bomb than they have been for the past 40 years about Israel's presumed nuclear arsenal. It was the threat of wider proliferation in the Middle East, and potentially beyond, as well as the risk that Israel could act alone if nothing was done to rein in Iran, that was cited recently by two senior American officials in Beijing to try to persuade China to shift on sanctions.

Time for a strike?

A bipartisan American report, by two ex-senators and a former air-force general, says the United States must now plan overtly for military action, if only to strengthen diplomacy. Charles Wald, the general, says the Iranians “frankly don’t believe that we would do anything against them”. America is trying to woo the Muslim world, draw down in Iraq and build up in Afghanistan. As Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of America’s joint chiefs of staff, said on November 4th: “The last thing in the world that I need right now is a third conflict—as we’re trying to work our way through these other two.”

Israel’s threats of military action might be more credible than America’s. In 1981 it bombed Saddam Hussein’s Osirak reactor, and in 2007 it bombed a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor under construction. As a result, Israel likes to argue, the world owes the Jewish state a huge debt of gratitude. (By the same token, perhaps Saddam should be thanked for bombing Iran’s reactor at Bushehr in the 1980s.) Last year Israel carried out a long-distance military air exercise over Greece that looked like a rehearsal for action in Iran. In June a missile-carrying Israeli submarine ostentatiously sailed through the Suez Canal. And recently Israel and America conducted large-scale missile-defence exercises to demonstrate their ability to fend off possible retaliation by Iran.

What could provoke military action, whether by America or by Israel? There are several possibilities. One might be an Iranian decision to expel nuclear inspectors or withdraw from the NPT, as North Korea did in 2003 before making and testing atomic bombs. Another cause might be the growth of Iran’s stockpile of LEU to the point where it has enough fissile material to break out of the NPT and test more than one bomb. Yet another factor might be the delivery of those Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, which would make bombing much more difficult. Arguably the biggest trigger would be the conviction that diplomacy has reached an impasse.

Acquiring nuclear weapons requires three elements: fissile material (such as highly enriched uranium, HEU, or plutonium), a delivery system and a warhead. The enrichment plants at Natanz, Qom and perhaps elsewhere give Iran an early route to HEU. A planned heavy-water reactor at Arak will produce large quantities of plutonium as a by-product, but will not be completed for some years.

Iran has been working on a range of ballistic missiles. Its liquid-fuel Shahab-3, with a range of 1,300km (810 miles) or more, can already reach Israel. In May it tested the 2,000-km Sejil missile. As a solid-fuel rocket, this could be fired at short notice from mobile launchers. Atomic bombs can be put on aircraft or even smuggled in ships. But missiles are the quickest and most reliable way to deliver them.

Finally, Iran has also worked on fitting a bomb inside a missile cone. IAEA inspectors have found evidence that Iran had designs to make uranium hemispheres (used in warheads) and had experimented with ultra-fast triggers that would be needed to “implode” these and set off a nuclear explosion. A contentious American intelligence assessment in 2007 said Iran’s work on warheads had stopped in 2003, although Israel, Britain and France dispute this. A secret annex to an IAEA report earlier this year reckoned that Iran “has sufficient information to be able to design and produce a workable implosion nuclear device based on HEU”. It had also worked on fitting a bomb on a missile warhead.

So the main constraint on Iran going nuclear is the availability of fissile material. If it decides to break out of the NPT it might need a few months to build a bomb, but would risk military action; if it decides to sneak out clandestinely it might take years. Iran may yet choose to stop “one turn of the screwdriver” short of a bomb.

Iran has learned from Israel’s previous actions. It has dispersed and buried its nuclear facilities to make them harder to strike. In contrast with the “Two Minutes over Baghdad” of Israel’s

raid on Osiraq, there is no easy shot. If anything, it has become harder to hobble Iran as time has passed. The discovery of Qom, as well as Iran's plan to build ten more enrichment plants, suggests there may be more hidden sites.

Two months over Iran?

Perhaps the best opportunity to halt Iran's programme by military means would have been an early strike on the Isfahan conversion plant. This turns uranium ore into UF₆, the essential preliminary step before enrichment. It is above ground, and thus more vulnerable to attack. It was the first part of the nuclear programme to be restarted by Iran in 2005, and has since produced enough UF₆ for scores of bombs.

A report last month by the Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank in New York, suggests that Israel could limit itself to three targets: Isfahan, Arak and Natanz. But to strike the centrifuges at Natanz, buried under 23 metres of soil and cement, it would have to use several bunker-busting bombs in "burrowing" mode: dropping bombs repeatedly on the same crater to dig down to the protected centrifuges. The report reckons that three bombs per "aim point" would give a 70% chance of success.



Still, the repeated sorties and loitering time needed to achieve this would probably require suppressing Iran's air defences, which in turn requires more sorties, perhaps hundreds. Israel would be operating at the limit of its range, even with air-to-air refuelling, and would probably have to cross the air space of other countries. It might not be able to sustain such an operation. And would attacking a few sites really crimp Iran's nuclear programme, or merely drive it entirely out of sight?

General Wald, for one, suggests that Israeli action may be little more than a "pinprick". This may be galling for Israelis, but few would contest that the American air force, with planes deployed closer to Iran and the ability to bring in aircraft carriers, could do a much more thorough job. America is unlikely to escape blame for Israeli military action, so it might as well join in, say some. A bigger American operation could go after more nuclear sites and take out some of Iran's means of retaliation: missile sites and naval bases. It might even want to strike a blow against the Revolutionary Guards. This scenario starts to look like a major air war; closer to two months over Iran than two minutes.

Iran could do much damage to the West in return. It could fire missiles, perhaps tipped with chemical or biological weapons, at American bases or Israel. It could attack oil installations in the Gulf, and try to choke off the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. The American navy thinks any such disruption would be temporary. But fighting in the confined waters of the Gulf makes warships more vulnerable to surprise attacks and anti-shipping missiles.

Many Muslims would regard a military strike on Iran as another war against Islam. Iran could stoke anti-American insurgencies across its borders in Iraq and Afghanistan. It could also prod its Lebanese proxy, Hizbullah, and the Palestinian Hamas movement to resume their missile war against Israel. Israel periodically intercepts Iranian weapons shipments to Lebanon and Gaza; the latest, containing hundreds of tonnes of rockets, missiles, mortars, grenades and anti-tank weapons allegedly destined for Hizbullah, was seized last month off Cyprus. Iran, perhaps through Hizbullah, could also resort to terrorist tactics around the world.

So which will it be: a war with Iran, or a nuclear-armed Iran? Short of a revolution that sweeps away the Iranian regime—ushering in one that agrees, like post-apartheid South Africa, to give up its nuclear technology—sanctions may offer the only hope of avoiding the awful choice.

AN Iranian nuclear bomb, or the bombing of Iran? **The Economist**, New York, Dec. 3rd 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 4 dez. 2009.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais