



Well begun, not nearly done

An encouraging interim deal with Iran makes a permanent check on its nuclear ambitions easier to imagine. It will still be hard to achieve

THE interim deal concluded on November 24th between six world powers and Iran is much better than its many critics allow. In return for six months of “limited, temporary...and reversible” relief from some international sanctions, Iran has said it will not just freeze its progress towards a possible nuclear bomb, but actually take a few steps back. This, too, is limited, temporary and reversible; nothing is being decommissioned, and six months is a short time. But if further negotiations can cement the gains in place, they would mark a turning point in efforts to stop nuclear proliferation—and perhaps in regional politics more broadly (see next story).

The agreement was brought about by a multilateral process in Geneva and secret parallel discussions between the Obama administration and Iran which began in August, when Iran’s new president, Hassan Rohani, took office. Both sets of negotiations were conducted in an atmosphere of constructive endeavour, a far cry from the sterile declarations and mutual suspicion of the past.

A nuclear-weapons programme needs either uranium which has been highly enriched—something achieved by passing the stuff repeatedly through cascades of whirling centrifuges—or plutonium. At present the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reckons that Iran has almost 200kg of 20%-enriched uranium in a form that could easily be enriched up to

the 90% or so needed for a bomb. Under the terms of the deal (see table on next page) Iran will get rid of this stock, either by putting it in a form that is hard to enrich further or by mixing it with unenriched uranium, thus diluting it to less than 5%. At the same time it will freeze its enrichment capabilities at their current capacity, undertake no further enrichment beyond the 5% level, and do nothing to increase the 7,200kg stockpile of low-enriched uranium that is currently in a form that can easily be further enriched.

Speed bumps for breakouts

Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think-tank in London, believes that the effect of the deal is to double the “breakout time” it would take Iran to produce enough material for a few nuclear weapons. Before the deal this was estimated at perhaps six weeks, and was steadily shortening.

The deal addresses the other possible route to the bomb by stopping most work on a reactor at Arak which was to have been ready for commissioning late next year. The Arak reactor is of a design particularly well suited to producing plutonium, and needs no enriched uranium in order to do so. Once the reactor is fuelled up, any attack on it would release a plume of radioactivity; this makes its commissioning something of a point of no return as far as military action against Iran is concerned.

The deal also stops all work on facilities that might be used to extract plutonium from its spent fuel. These constraints are in large measure *thanks* to the French, whose objections to insufficient action on Arak prevented an agreement from being reached two weeks earlier.

Iran has also said it will co-operate with a far more intrusive inspection regime; this makes the deal very different from the one reached with North Korea in 2005, which the Koreans then broke. Iran has promised to answer all the questions posed by the IAEA about what the agency refers to as the “possible military dimensions” of its nuclear programme. It will provide access to nuclear sites hitherto off-limits, possibly including the Parchin military base where Western intelligence agencies think it tested a detonation system for a bomb.

In return for taking these steps, Iran gets access to about \$4.2 billion held in currently frozen bank accounts and some easing of restrictions on trade in petrochemical products, precious metals and parts for aircraft and cars, a package thought to be worth \$7 billion to its economy over the six months. Sanctions on oil which will cost Iran \$30 billion over the same period remain firmly in place, providing a lot of leverage as negotiators start work on a final deal. Critics, though, argue that the psychological impact of relaxing these lesser sanctions will weaken the greater ones, particularly when it comes to some coun- ▶▶

Also in this section

24 The effects on the region

► tries that have only toed the line with reluctance.

A stronger criticism is that the deal says nothing about Iran's "right" to enrich uranium, which the country sees as "inalienable". The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) gives signatories such as Iran a right to the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy. That can be construed as a right to enrich if the enrichment is for peaceful purposes, though other interpretations are available. Given that Russia, which built Iran's only large reactor, at Bushehr, has a ten-year contract both to provide its fuel and to remove its waste, it is very hard to see Iran's large and growing enrichment programme as entirely for peaceful purposes; the country's record of cheating when it comes to inspections makes it hard to trust. Yet the deal implicitly recognises that Iran will stay in the enrichment game.

Not there yet

But those insisting that Iran must forswear any *enrichment* in the future are demanding something that almost certainly cannot be negotiated. Whatever the pressure of sanctions, *Iran* will not consent to an agreement it regards as a national humiliation. Given the promise of the interim deal, ratcheting up sanctions now, as some in America's Congress urge, is more likely to weaken international support for America's position—and for the existing sanctions—than to draw concessions Iran would never otherwise make.

The objective of the negotiations' next stage will not be to make it impossible for Iran ever to acquire nuclear weapons. Instead, its aim should be to make it unfeasibly difficult for Iran to get a bomb by stealth and to stretch the period it would need for a nuclear breakout to a year or so, thus giving time to mount a response.

David Albright, a former weapons inspector and founder of the Institute for Science and International Security, a think-tank in Washington, D.C., says a final deal will have to require Iran to abandon the Arak reactor—perhaps replacing it with one of a different design that has safeguards built in—and close its Fordow enrichment site, which is buried deep beneath a mountain and thus very hard to bomb. Iran would also have to adhere to the Additional Protocol of the NPT, giving IAEA inspectors enhanced rights of access to ensure that it is not cheating.

There is room for manoeuvre on the *number and quality* of the centrifuges that Iran could retain at Natanz (its other main enrichment site) the size of its low-enriched-uranium stockpile, and an Arak replacement. Also unanswered is the question of how quickly sanctions relief should be granted in return, and how long the agreement should last. American negotiators would be unhappy with anything less than about ten years. They think it will

The interim deal

Stocks of enriched uranium

All uranium enriched above 5% to be diluted back to <5% or converted to oxide
No increase in 3.5% enriched stock



Enrichment capabilities and fuel production

No new centrifuges to be installed; no centrifuges to be produced for stockpiling to install later
No next-generation centrifuges to be used for enrichment
50% of centrifuges at Natanz, 75% at Fordow, to be left inoperable
No new enrichment facilities to open
No fuel for Arak reactor to be produced, tested or transferred to the site
No reprocessing facilities to be developed

Reactor development

Work towards commissioning Arak reactor to stop
Design details of Arak to be shared

IAEA inspection

Daily access to Natanz and Fordow enrichment facilities
24-hour camera surveillance of key sites
Access to centrifuge manufacture and assembly sites
Access to uranium mines and mills
More frequent access to Arak
Commission established to answer questions concerning possible military dimensions of programme
Provide all data called for in Additional Protocol

Source: *The Economist*

take that long for a culture of compliance and transparency to build up.

Getting a long-term deal that meets all those requirements will not be easy. Iranian negotiators may well be under pressure from factions at home to get tougher. Mr Rohani continues to enjoy the backing of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all matters of state. But conservatives, including the ubiquitous and powerful Revolutionary Guard, will not just be loth to accept a plan that would stymie their ambition to acquire a nuclear bomb, as any final comprehensive deal must seek to do. They will also hate the idea of any deal that seems to point towards a "normalisation" of rela-

tions with America and the West.

Mr Rohani has been careful, so far, to give no hint that he would dilute the theocratic essence of the regime. Some of Iran's conservatives, though, fear that he could become an Iranian Gorbachev, a man whose attempts to reform the system and make peace with a long-standing enemy could lead to its downfall.

The Revolutionary Guard could, by obstructing the inspections the deal requires, do a lot to derail a more durable follow-up agreement. And the approach taken in the next stage of the negotiations could be less constructive than what has been seen so far. But enough has already been agreed to suggest that success is possible. ■

Regional responses

Shifting sands

A deal between America and Iran would have big repercussions

EVEN in a stable region, the prospect of an enmity as deep and long-standing as that of Iran and America coming to an end would herald wider change. In the Middle East, which has been in turmoil for the past two years, it seems bound to have an impact on almost every nation in the region, and on almost all the conflicts within and between those nations. If a rapprochement is really on the cards, a period of un-

certainty heaped on uncertainty is in the offing—one that could conceivably lead to better relations all round, but might well provoke further vicious competition for hegemony.

A satisfactory final deal on Iran's nuclear capabilities—no foregone conclusion (see previous story)—should remove the possibility of widespread conflict triggered by Israeli or American attacks on ►►

► Iran. While Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, has railed against the interim deal, some in Israel have welcomed it on that basis. But if America has gone some way to sorting out one of its problems in the region, it may find the others looking more urgent than ever.

Like many in Israel, most Arab countries are worried that a deal would lead to a broader rapprochement between America and Iran. And they are alarmed by the risk that such a rapprochement could see Shia Iran, with a population larger than any country in the Arab world save Egypt, re-emerging as a regional hegemon.

The biggest regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey—are all concerned. Of the three, Saudi Arabia stands out as particularly cross. America, in its eyes, has let it down repeatedly of late; relations between the two countries have probably never been worse. The Saudis hated the way America tried to befriend the Muslim Brotherhood, which they loathe, when it recently ruled Egypt. As leaders of the Arab campaign to bring down the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria, which Iran supports, they were enraged when Mr Obama turned to Congress before responding to the use of chemical weapons in rebel-held districts of southern Damascus in August. They would rather have seen Mr Assad quickly clobbered.

With regards to the interim deal, the Saudis resent the fact that they were kept out of the back-channel negotiations that helped procure it, partly because America believed their presence would have made a deal less likely. They fear that an Iran no longer at loggerheads with America over the nuclear issue would be better placed to try and dominate the Gulf. They have long felt that Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia who has been running Iraq on increasingly sectarian lines since becoming prime minister in 2006, has become far too cosy with Iran. And they worry that Iran will intensify its suspected efforts to stir up its Shia co-religionists in the Saudis' eastern province, as well as in Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen.

The deal comes at a time of awkward relations between America and Egypt, too. The secular-minded generals who overthrew the Brotherhood in July castigate America for sucking up to the Brothers during their time in power, as does the anti-Islamist part of the population. The Islamists, for their part, think America condoned—or even orchestrated, at Israel's behest—the coup against them. If America wants friendly voices to welcome the interim deal, it will not find them here.

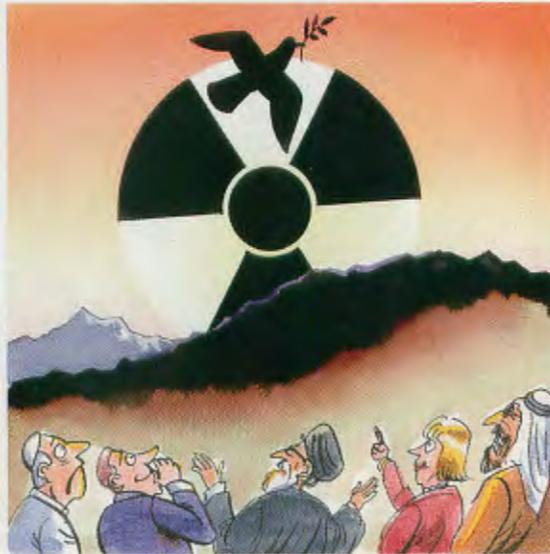
It has found a few more of them in Turkey, where the government has applauded the deal. This, though, comes at a time

when Turkey itself has lost ground with Arab regimes, having failed to navigate the shifting of the sands in Egypt and Syria.

Just three years ago its forceful prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was widely hailed as an exemplarily democratic and economically canny Islamist. He was valued as a mediator by the Israelis and Mr Assad's Syrian regime, among others. His cheerleading at the onset of the Arab awakening in 2011 put him starkly at odds with the Saudis and more secular types. But the Islamists in the revolutions' vanguard loved him. Turkey was the rising new regional power.

Threats and opportunities

Now it is at loggerheads not just with Saudi Arabia, but also with the regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The Syrian civil war, which risks spilling over into Turkey, is denting Mr Erdogan's popularity at home. The West is fretting over Turkey's inability to prevent an influx of jihadists from its territory into



Syria. Mr Erdogan has been accused of letting his country's policy of "zero problems with its neighbours" degenerate into one of "problems with all its neighbours".

Seen through this kaleidoscope of shifting alliances, rivalries and resentments, Mr Obama looks rattled. In the past, America has had several linked aims in the Middle East. One was to secure its oil supplies at steady prices. Another was to ensure the safety of its allies, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. A third was to stop anyone other than Israel from having nuclear weapons. A fourth was to contain if not squash jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda. And a fifth, at least in President George W. Bush's era, was to promote democracy.

But the big powers—and America is still easily the biggest in the Middle East—will never have the ability, as they did half a century ago, to pick and control their allies and proxies. Though Saudi Arabia, Egypt

and Turkey still need American arms, which neither Russia nor China are likely to displace in a serious way, they want to flex their own muscles. If Iran comes back out of isolation into the regional arena, the configuration of rivalries and power will be still more complicated.

It is conceivable, however, that Mr Obama may yet achieve what he set out to do in the area. His fundamental aim has been to get out of two wars—in Iraq and, on the region's edge, Afghanistan—and not to get sucked into a third one in Syria, where he does not believe there is any chance of imposing a solution militarily. This distinguishes it from Libya, where, though "leading from behind", his administration ensured the downfall of Muammar Qaddafi. Over Iran, he has been determined neither to go to war to stop it getting a bomb, nor to let Israel risk doing the same. That looks more likely now than it has before.

If a rapprochement with Iran were to follow from a conclusive nuclear deal, new possibilities might open up in other conflicts. The former enemies might find, if not common cause, at least mutual interests. Hitherto a sturdy ally of Mr Assad, Iran might help broker an end to the Syrian civil war rather than see the conflict breed ever more of the Sunni fanatics it fears. Likewise, it is possible that Iran might lessen its backing for Hamas, the most intransigent Palestinian group, if offered the right diplomatic inducements. That could be useful.

No Israeli leader has ever excoriated an American president's policy as virulently as Mr Netanyahu, who called the interim deal an "historic mistake". To what extent his rejection comes from genuine fear that the deal is weak, and to what extent from the fear that a demonstrably non-nuclear Iran would have a new legitimacy in the region, is hard to say. If the deal sticks, the Israelis may over time come to accept it as the least bad option even if Iran increases its clout. But in the short run, it marks a new low in American-Israeli government relations.

Mr Obama and his secretary of state, John Kerry, have been striving to get Israel to negotiate a two-state solution with the Palestinians under Mahmoud Abbas. An Israeli government enraged by what it sees as Mr Obama's feebleness over Iran may be less keen than ever to oblige. Yet the prize that would underline America's role as still the most necessary of outside powers remains a permanent peace between Israel and Palestine. If Mr Obama achieves the makings of one between America and Iran, it could be a remarkable harbinger. But no one, in that tumultuous part of the world, should expect one success necessarily to feed another. ■