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There is an alternative to the Iran impasse

By Hossein Mousavian

If the west insists on suspension of all enrichment, talks will end in failure, writes Hossein Mousavian

In early 2005 Dr Hassan Rowhani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, told me of the Iranian supreme leader's position on nuclear enrichment. Ali Khamenei had told him: "I would never abandon the rights of the country as long as I am alive. I would resign if for any reason Iran is deprived of its rights to enrichment, otherwise this may happen after my death."

If the west's position at Wednesday's talks in Baghdad is focused once again on suspension of enrichment, I am confident the discussion will go nowhere. Iran's negotiating team is optimistic and public opinion for the first time during Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad's presidency is hopeful of a deal. The Iranian delegation needs to return from Baghdad with something it can sell to society after years of sanctions and pressure.

With the International Atomic Energy Agency saying it has reached a deal with Tehran on inspections, hopes of a positive outcome to the talks are growing. But if the west insists on suspension of enrichment activities, they will end in failure.

Hopes were raised. US officials reportedly said the US might agree to enrichment up to 5 per cent if Tehran agreed to intrusive inspections and halted 20 per cent enrichment. In reply an Iranian foreign ministry official said that this "would be a good start" and that "20 per cent enrichment is open to negotiation".

However, subsequent statements checked optimism in Tehran. The US state department said its position was unchanged, "including the suspension of uranium enrichment". The EU has followed suit with the same demand.

Wednesday's talks should focus on transparency measures to build confidence, not on suspension. Iran, which does not have a nuclear bomb, is subject to tougher sanctions than any other country in the world. The real question is whether, in an election year and with discontent growing in Washington, Barack Obama can muster the courage to act on his policy of engagement.

If the will and capability is there, a broad, face-saving deal on the nuclear issue with Iran is

possible. This would ultimately see the P5+1 assuring Iran that it will remove the country's nuclear dossier from the agendas of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council, recognising Iran's right to nuclear technology and enrichment, lifting international sanctions and co-operating with Iran in development of peaceful nuclear technology to the same extent as with other non-weapon states.

In return, Iran would need to guarantee a permanent ban on the development, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons based on the fatwa of Iran's supreme leader (the ban on production and use of weapons of mass destruction issued in 2010 and later reaffirmed) and on the non-proliferation treaty; establish a consortium with other countries to manage fuel-cycle activities within Iran, based on Mr Ahmadi-Nejad's offer in September 2005; ratify the Additional Protocol; and commit to co-operate with the IAEA on the removal of all remaining questions about its past nuclear activities.

I am afraid there will be no resolution of Iran's nuclear programme as long as the bilateral relationship between Washington and Tehran is dominated by hostility, threats and mutual distrust, however. This means that, in parallel with the nuclear issue, both sides need to negotiate a bilateral agreement normalising relations and enhancing co-operation on issues including Afghanistan, the drugs trade, al-Qaeda and the Taliban – where the two share common interests.

The west's distrust of Iran runs deeper than the nuclear issue, to include terrorism, the peace process and human rights. The Iranian side, on the other hand, fears the west is looking for regime change in Tehran and making Iran vulnerable to invasion by its Arab neighbours.

There is a way out of the dilemma and both sides need to move things forward. Broader co-operation would be instrumental in building international peace and security.

The writer is a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiating team. His forthcoming book is titled 'The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: a Memoir'

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