

Iran nuclear talks: The 5 options for what happens if they fail

The West should grab a deal while it can, says a former Iranian nuclear negotiator. The alternatives will be much, much worse



Photo: AFP/GETTY

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As Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, prepares to criticise President Obama's nuclear talks with Iran in a controversial address to Congress on Tuesday, those negotiations have been making unprecedented progress.

It is realistic that an agreement will be reached by the end of March deadline: Iran has been willing to accept restrictions on its nuclear programme which ensure that it is verifiably transparent and which cut off all potential pathways to developing a nuclear weapon.



If, however, political pressure, whether from Israel or Congress, leads to a failure to reach any kind of nuclear agreement by the end of March, then negotiators will be faced with five options.

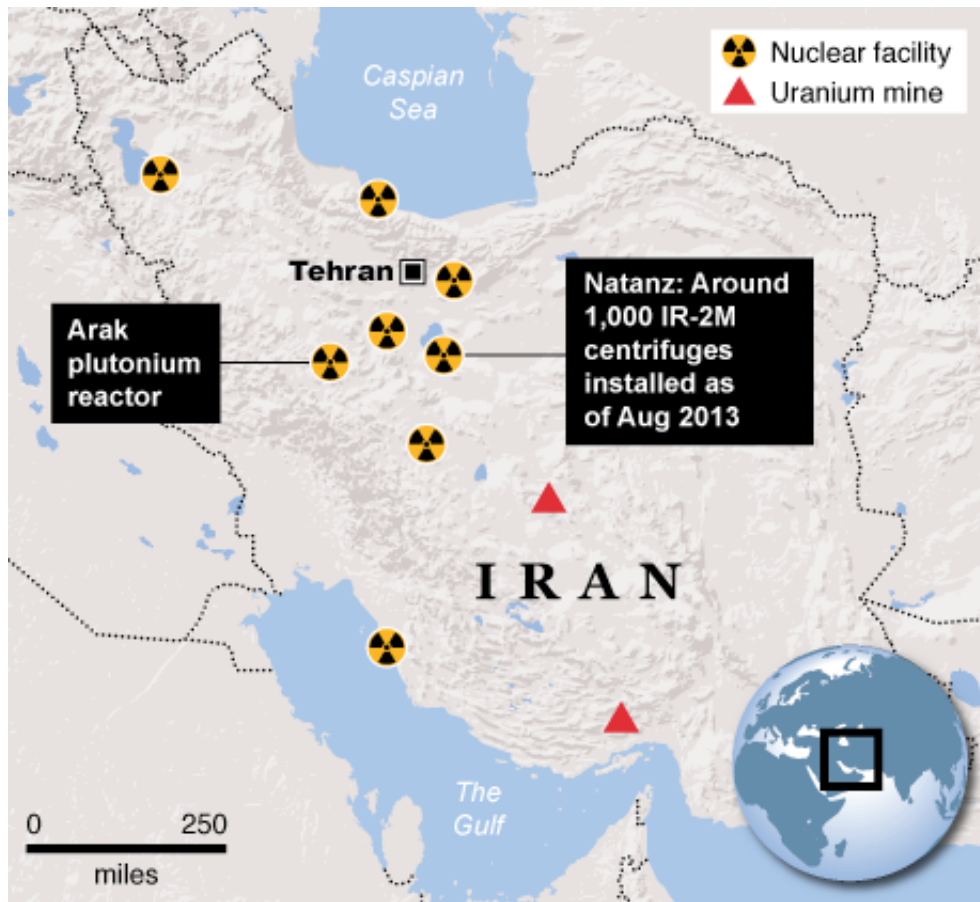
The first would be for another renewal of the interim deal signed in Geneva in 2013, which has already been renewed twice. This is unlikely to be accepted, especially by Iran, as renewal would keep the substantive sanctions in place while freezing the development of Iran's nuclear programme and hurting president Hassan Rouhani's ability to deliver on his promises of economic improvement.

Another possibility would be a second interim deal. This would not be the comprehensive agreement that many are hoping for, but would none the less elicit commitments from Iran on its nuclear programme and result in some broader sanctions relief. This could take the form of Iran agreeing to cap its enrichment of uranium at the 5 per cent level needed for nuclear power stations, in return for at least the European Union agreeing to lift its sanctions on Iranian oil exports and the central bank – and the readmission of Iran to the SWIFT money transfer system.

But the other possibilities are far more serious. During the period when sanctions on Iran were steadily increased, the only tangible result was that Iran's possession of centrifuges grew from 164 machines to 20,000. If Congress, pushed by Mr Netanyahu, succeeds in blocking a comprehensive nuclear deal, then it is a distinct possibility that there will be a return to the process of mutual escalation.

In this case, America may not be able to rally other partners to impose more sanctions on Iran. The European Union and China are eager to lift them. Amid the standoff with the West over Ukraine,

Russia would be unlikely to support any more at the UN Security Council.



In all likelihood America's only option would be new unilateral sanctions. Meanwhile, Iran would expand its nuclear programme as these increased. Eventually Iran would pass a "breakout" point – a level where it could enrich enough weapons-grade uranium for one nuclear bomb in a relatively short period. This would trigger negotiations to restart. But this time, the US would have to negotiate with Iran after breakout – and therefore give more concessions.

The other option would be for America to go to war. But in the instance of a military strike against its nuclear facilities, Iran would aggressively develop nuclear weapons - and do so spurred by the knowledge that the West only accepted its right to have a civilian nuclear programme and access to the international fuel market when it went beyond the red lines drawn for it and mastered the uranium enrichment cycle.

Such a war would have important consequences: Iran, the United States, and Israel would be significantly harmed; the Middle East would move towards unimaginable instability; and ultimately, the United States would have to seek a negotiated settlement to dismantle Iran's nuclear weapons.

But Iran would demand significant concessions: the threat of “all options on the table” would have to be dropped; regime-change policies would have to end; Iran would have to be treated just like any other member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); sanctions would need to go immediately; and Israel, a nuclear power, would have to join the NPT and accept a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East.

A war that leads Iran to develop nuclear bombs would, in effect, gain Iran the leverage it needs to secure these goals.

The fifth and final possibility if these talks fail would be Iran’s withdrawal from the NPT and all other conventions restricting weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In 2005, Mohamed ElBaradei, formerly the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), explained in his book *The Age of Deception* that the agency had found Egypt, South Korea and Iran in breach of the NPT.

However, only Iran’s file was referred to the Security Council and only Iran was punished with sanctions. Therefore, the NPT had effectively become a political instrument used by America to impose penalties on Iran, while Israel can have nuclear bombs with no sanctions, simply because it never signed the NPT.

The nuclear talks prove that Iran is ready to comply with the NPT in full – and even go beyond it. But if the United States avoids a deal with Iran, the clear message would be that the NPT and other WMD conventions have merely been used to advance political agendas against Iran – that it is held to a different standard. Therefore, Iran may reconsider its membership of these conventions, which have been used to impose further sanctions.

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