



# In Brief: The IAEA report and action against Iran

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## 1 IAEA report

The United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency is due to release a report on 8 or 9 November that is alleged to show that the Iranian government has mastered the technology to build a nuclear weapon, according to western diplomats and others briefed on the findings of the report.

The report will also say that Iran received assistance from Russian, Pakistani and North Korean sources to overcome certain technical difficulties, and that evidence shows that Iranian scientists have been working on computer models of a nuclear warhead and have built a steel chamber for testing detonators.

Evidence about the potential military aspects of the Iranian programme will be in an unpublished annex to the report. Details of the annex have been extensively leaked, however. One ex-IAEA official claimed that the IAEA has concluded that Iran "has sufficient information to design and produce a workable implosion nuclear device". However, the report is not thought to prove definitively that Iran is working on a nuclear weapon.

The report undermines the assertion by the US intelligence community that Iran stopped weapons-related research in 2003. It concludes that Iran probably wants to master the technology and have enough fissile material in stock to be able to move quickly to produce a nuclear weapon, should it decide to do so. It is not reported that Iran has made the decision to produce a weapon and, if it did, it is thought that it would take at least a year to produce a bomb.

## 2 Israel

In May 2011, the former chief of Israel's external intelligence service, Mossad, said that an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear programme would be "stupid". This unusually public intervention led to speculation that a political battle was going on inside Israel. During the week of 31 October, Israel test launched a Jericho 3 missile, which is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and can reach Iran. The Israeli air force also carried out exercises in Italy, fuelling speculation that prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and defence minister Ehud Barak have decided in favour of military action against Iran and are making preparations.

Israeli president Shimon Peres said on 5 November that military action was now more likely than the diplomatic option. Ehud Barak, on the other hand, also suggested recently that Israel has not yet given up hope on international sanctions to persuade Iran to change course.

The Israeli public is not convinced of the wisdom of a strike against Iran, with 41% in favour, 39% against and 20% undecided, according to a recent poll.

### **3 US**

The official position of the US is that all options are on the table. Washington is leaving the verdict on the purpose and progress of the programme to the IAEA. The US military is reported to be against an attack, but there has been speculation in some quarters that Barack Obama might use an attack to bolster his chances of re-election.

### **4 UK**

It was reported on 2 November that the UK military is working on contingency plans for contributing to a US military action, assuming that the US would seek British cooperation if a decision is made to attack Iran and would want to use the British base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The UK could also deploy submarines and warships armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles, according to the report.

### **5 Iran**

Iran dismissed the IAEA report as a fabrication. With increasing signs of a power struggle within the Iranian government and recent escalations of tension such as the alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in the US, analysts say Iran's true intentions are difficult to gauge at present. However, there are no signs of imminent compromise with the international community on the programme.

### **6 Other comments**

Nato secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said on 3 October that the organisation has no intention whatsoever to intervene in Iran and is not engaged in the Iran question. Russian foreign minister Lavrov warned against any military action, saying that it would undermine negotiations. French foreign minister Alain Juppé has also cautioned against a strike.

### **7 Timing**

The Obama administration is thought to be unlikely to start any military action too close to the US presidential election, due in November 2012. Increasing evidence has emerged of Iran hiding uranium enrichment centrifuges near the city of Qom. Chambers deep underneath a mountain protect the facilities from missile strikes. According to Whitehall sources, any attack will have to take place within the next 12 months. Some reports suggest that an attack would be more difficult in the winter months.

### **8 Conclusion**

While Netanyahu and Barak may indeed be convinced, they may not be able to push a decision to strike Iran through in the Israeli government. But raising the threat of military action also has the effect of maximising the impact of the IAEA report in order at least to boost the prospect of a new round of sanctions, for which it will be necessary to convince Russia and China. Focussing on Iran may also help to distract attention from other problems.

Some commentators warn that raising the temperature in this way risks making military action a self-fulfilling prophecy and remind that military action has huge risks and would only offer perhaps a four-year delay in the Iranian nuclear programme.