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UN nuclear chief 'positive' over Iran talks



It is Yukiya Amano's first visit to Iran as head of the IAEA

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog has arrived in Tehran, voicing optimism about reaching agreement on Iran's controversial nuclear programme.

Yukiya Amano, of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), is due to hold talks with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili.

His visit comes ahead of a meeting in Baghdad between six world powers and Iran on Wednesday.

Iran denies claims by Western nations that it is developing a nuclear weapon.

Tehran has refused to provide the IAEA access to relevant sites, officials and documents for more than four years.

"I really think this is the right time to reach agreement. Nothing is certain but I stay positive and I go there with constructive spirit," Mr Amano said at Vienna airport.

"There has been good progress during the recent rounds of discussions between Iran and IAEA. So I thought that now is the right time... to visit Iran and have direct talks with high officials," he added.

Western diplomats quoted by Reuters say Mr Amano would only visit Tehran if he believed a framework agreement to grant inspectors greater access was close.

By promising co-operation with the IAEA, Iran might be looking for leverage ahead of Wednesday's talks, they say.

'Gesture of goodwill'

However, previous negotiations have ended in failure. In February Iran refused the IAEA's request to let inspectors visit its nuclear facility at Parchin, south of Tehran.

"We regard the visit... as a gesture of goodwill," Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi was quoted as saying by the Iranian student news agency.

The UK, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany are all due to take part in the Baghdad talks.

They are concerned that Iran is using its civilian nuclear programme to mask efforts to obtain nuclear weapons.

The UN, US, European Union, Canada, Japan and Australia are among those who have imposed sanctions on Iran to try to persuade the country to co-operate with the IAEA.

Those measures target areas such as the sale of oil, arms deals, financial transactions and trade in technology that could be used for uranium enrichment.



17 May 2012 Last updated at 21:25 GMT

US ready to attack Iran, says envoy to Israel



Iran says it is enriching uranium to make medical isotopes and fuel for nuclear reactors

The US has plans in place to attack Iran if other measures fail to stop it developing nuclear weapons, Washington's envoy to Israel says.

Dan Shapiro said the US hoped diplomacy and sanctions would persuade Iran to alter its nuclear programme, but a military option was "ready".

US President Obama has previously said military action has not been ruled out.

The US and its allies say Iran is developing a nuclear bomb, an accusation Tehran denies.

Talks between Iran and six world powers are due to resume in Baghdad on 23 May.

'The right thing'

Mr Shapiro made his comments to the Israel Bar Association on Tuesday, a recording of which was later obtained by the Associated Press news agency.

"It would be preferable to resolve this diplomatically through the use of pressure than to use military force," Mr Shapiro said.

"But that doesn't mean that option is not fully available. Not just available, but it's ready. The necessary planning has been done to ensure that it's ready."

Pentagon spokesman George Little on Thursday stressed that Washington's policy on the issue "has not changed at all".

"The ambassador's comments are perfectly in line with what we have been saying for a while with respect to Iran. Our focus in the US is on using diplomatic and economic instruments... to bring pressure to bear on the Iranians to do the right thing," he said.

Mr Little added that Mr Shapiro "was absolutely correct to say that no options are off the table but those options are not something that are being contemplated at this time".

Both Israel and the US have said they consider military force a last resort to stop Iran using its uranium enrichment programme to make a weapon.

Israel, which feels threatened by the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, has hinted it could launch a pre-emptive strike.

The BBC's Tehran correspondent, James Reynolds, says Mr Shapiro's remarks go further than previous comments by President Barack Obama that all options are on the table, including military action.

Although aimed at an Israeli audience, the ambassador's comments will not go unnoticed in other capitals, including Tehran, our correspondent says.

Sanctions

Six world powers - the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany - are trying to persuade Tehran to reduce uranium enrichment and open up its nuclear facilities to inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Fresh talks opened in Istanbul in April - the first for 15 months - and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton described them as "constructive and useful".

The EU, the US and the UN have all imposed sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme.

In the past, US officials have stressed the regional instability that would result from any attack on Iran.

In March, Mr Obama said there was "still a window that allows for a diplomatic resolution".

He warned there was "too much loose talk of war" and that it was playing into Iran's hands. However, he stressed that all options remained open.

Tehran insists it is enriching uranium to produce medical isotopes and fuel for nuclear reactors.

7 March 2012 Last updated at 12:49 GMT

Hamas denies it will attack Israel in any war with Iran

By Jon Donnison BBC News, Gaza City



The Israeli media has speculated that Hamas would fire rockets from Gaza in any war with Iran

Leaders of the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, say they will not help Iran militarily in any conflict between Israel and the Islamic Republic.

There is speculation in Israel that if it attacked Iran's nuclear facilities, it could face rocket fire from Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Both are long-time allies of Iran.

But Mahmoud Zahhar, a senior leader of Hamas in Gaza, denied the group would get involved and told the BBC: "We are not part of any political axis."

"If Israel attacks us we will respond. If they don't, we will not get involved in any other regional conflict," he added.

Mr Zahhar questioned Hamas's ability to offer support from the Palestinian territory to the south of Israel, even if it wanted to.

"Don't exaggerate our power. We are still suffering from the occupation, the siege and two wars in recent years," he said.

Israel tightened its blockade of Gaza in 2007 after Hamas seized control of the territory from forces loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement.

Ideological differences

Another senior Hamas official in Gaza, who did not want to be named, also insisted that Hamas would stay out of any conflict between Israel and Iran.

"What could we realistically do anyway? If we were to attack Israel, the response would be much stronger," he said.

"I don't like the Iranians and the way they try to use their influence in the Arab world"

Unnamed Hamas official

Hamas has long relied on Iran for funding. It is estimated that tens of millions of dollars are transferred to Gaza every year.

However, the same Hamas official suggested they were not strongly aligned in their beliefs.

"Iran has been very generous with its money, but ideologically we have little in common," he said.

Although both Hamas and Iran are hostile towards Israel, which regards the Palestinian group as a terrorist organisation, Hamas supporters are Sunni Muslims while Iran has Shia Muslim majority.

This makes it much closer to Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist movement which operates in southern Lebanon.

"I don't like the Iranians and the way they try to use their influence in the Arab world," commented the Hamas official to whom I spoke.

Syria backlash

In recent months, the uprising in Syria has created tensions between Hamas and the Iranian leadership.



Hamas and its political leader, Khaled Meshaal, were based in Syria until recently

While Iran continues to back the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, last month for the first time, Hamas publicly criticised the government in Damascus.

Speaking in Cairo, Hamas's Prime Minister in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, also commended "the brave Syrian people that are moving toward democracy and reform".

Hamas has pulled all its leadership out of Damascus, including the head of its political bureau, Khaled Meshaal.

The movement is looking for a new base.

Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Turkey are all possibilities.

Signs of spring

"Hamas's relationship with Iran has always been one of necessity not choice," says Nasser Abdul Karim, a political economist at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

He believes the Arab Spring and the recent tremendous upheaval in the Middle East have led Hamas to rethink.

It has close links to the Muslim Brotherhood, which has become a powerful political force in post-revolutionary Egypt, controlling almost half of the seats in parliament.

Mr Abdul Karim suggests that Hamas will now look to consolidate its relationships with Egypt, Turkey and Qatar.

Qatar, one of the richest countries in the Arab world, could be a main source of revenue.

The Gulf nation has recently been pushing for a reconciliation deal between Hamas and its long-time rival faction, Fatah,

which dominates the Palestinian Authority and is in power in the West Bank.

Although the figures have not been confirmed, Mr Abdul Karim claims Qatar offered up to \$2bn (£1.27bn) in aid to Hamas and the PA in order to try and push the deal through.

7 March 2012 Last updated at 00:06 GMT

How Iran might respond to Israeli attack

By Jonathan Marcus BBC Diplomatic Correspondent



Iran has the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East

Iran has made it clear that if it is attacked either by Israel or the United States it will respond in kind. But just what could Iran do to strike back?

What would be the consequences, both in the region and inside Iran itself?

Indeed, could the potential consequences of an Israeli strike be so serious as to make military action the least preferable option in terms of constraining Iran's nuclear programme?

Long-distance missiles

"Iran's ability to strike back directly against Israel is limited," says Mark Fitzpatrick, director of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Programme at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

"Its antiquated air force is totally outclassed by the Israelis and it has only a limited number of ballistic missiles that could reach Israel."



Iran's air force, which includes Mig-29s, is not seen as a match for its Israeli or US counterparts

Mr Fitzpatrick says Iran's missile arsenal includes "a modified version of the Shahab-3, the Ghadr-1, which has a range of 1,600km (995 miles), but Iran only has about six transporter-erector launchers for the missile".

"Iran's new solid-fuelled missile, the Sajjil-2, can also reach Israel, but it is not yet fully operational," he adds.

But, Mr Fitzpatrick argues that "both of these missiles are too inaccurate to have any effect against military targets when armed with conventional weapons".

"Nor are they a very effective way to deliver chemical or biological weapons, and Iran does not have nuclear weapons."

In summary, he believes that "an Iranian missile strike would be only a symbolic gesture".

Enlisting allies



Hezbollah is said to have thousands of rocket launchers in Lebanon. Mr Fitzpatrick believes Iran is more likely to respond against Israel "asymmetrically, and through proxies". Its ally, the Shia Islamist group Hezbollah, has more than 10,000 rocket launchers in southern Lebanon, many of them supplied by Iran.

"These are mostly 25km-range (16-mile) Katyushas, but also Fahr-3 (45km; 28 miles), Fajr-5 (75km; 47 miles), Zelzal-2 (200km; 124 miles) and potentially Fateh-110 (200km) plus about 10 Scud-D missiles that can pack a 750kg (1,653lb) payload and hit all of Israel."

He says that the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, could also attack Israel with shorter-range rockets.

The great danger here is of a more extensive conflict breaking out either between Israel and Hezbollah, or Israel and Hamas.

With so much instability in the Middle East - not least because of the Syria crisis - there is a very real risk of an Israeli strike sparking a much broader regional conflagration.

Naval action in the Gulf

The Iranian Navy, and especially the naval arm of its Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), are well-equipped with small, fast craft capable of laying mines or swarming attacks against larger vessels.

Iran also deploys capable land-based anti-shipping missiles.



These could all be used to close off the vital oil artery - the Strait of Hormuz.

The US Navy is confident that it could re-open the Strait. But this risks an extended naval conflict between the US and Iran, and in the short term, there could be a significant impact upon oil prices.

Covert action

Daniel Byman, a counter-terrorism expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, says there is also "considerable concern that Iran and groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah might engage in terror attacks in the wake of an Israeli air strike".

"Iran has at times used such attacks to strike out at enemies, particularly those it cannot hit by other means," he adds.

There is already, he points out, a kind of clandestine war underway.

"Israel and Iran are already striking at each other (Israel with more success and doing so in a way that is more targeted)," Mr Byman explains, referring to the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

"I'm not sure Israel would increase attacks in the wake of a strike," he notes, "but Iran would."

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Iran's ballistic missile arsenal

Shahab-1 - Based on the Scud-B. Has a range of about 300km (185 miles) and uses liquid fuel, which involves a time-consuming launch

Shahab-2 - Based on the Scud-C. Has a range of about 500km (310 miles)

Shahab-3 - Based on the North Korean Nodong missile. Has a range of about 900km (560 miles) and a nominal payload of 1,000kg (2,205lb)

Ghadr-1 - Modified version of the Shahab-3, with a range of about 1,600km (1,000 miles). Carries a smaller, 750kg

(1,654lb) warhead

Sajjil-2 - Surface-to-surface missile with a range of 2,200km (1,375 miles). Uses solid fuel, which offers strategic advantages, and carries a 750kg warhead

Mr Byman is uncertain about how effective such Iranian operations might be.

"Iran's reported attempted attacks in India and Thailand show it remains determined to strike at Israel, presumably in retaliation for Israeli killings of Hezbollah figures like Imad Mughniyeh and the suspected attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists."

"However, these recent attacks were not well executed, suggesting that Iran's services' professionalism is uneven," he argues.

Overall, experts believe that the Iranian government is going to have to calibrate its response to any attack carefully.

Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me: "If they respond too little, they could lose face, and if they respond too much, they could lose their heads."

"Iran will want to respond enough to inflame the regional security environment and negatively impact the global economy - in order to bring down international condemnation of the US or Israel - but stop short of doing anything that could invite massive reprisals from the United States."

"Frankly," Mr Sadjadpour says, "I'm not sure how they do that. If Iran tries to destabilise world energy supplies - whether launching missiles into Saudi Arabia's oil-rich eastern province or attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz - the US isn't going to stand aside idly."

In the wake of any attack on its facilities, Iran might well, of course, go to the UN to seek some kind of diplomatic redress. This highlights a crucial set of legal questions relating to any military operation.

International law

For all the uncertainties as to whether Israel would attack Iran and indeed how Iran might respond, one thing is clear - in terms of international law, such a strike would be illegal.



The US-led invasion of Iraq resulted in a conflict that cost thousands of lives and cost billions of dollars

Professor Mary Ellen O'Connell, professor of international law at the University of Notre Dame, says for it to be considered legal, "the UN Security Council would need to authorise such a strike, because Iran has not launched an armed attack on either Israel or the United States".

"The UN Charter," she says, "makes clear that the use of force is generally prohibited unless a state is acting in self-defence to an armed attack occurring, or has Security Council authorisation."

Israel, of course, would probably claim to be acting in some pre-emptive sense to forestall a future nuclear attack from Iran (though nobody yet believes Iran has a nuclear bomb). But Professor O'Connell says that an Israeli strike would still not be legitimate.

"There is a lively debate among international lawyers as to the point at which a state may respond to an armed attack: must it be underway or merely imminent?"

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“Start Quote

As some senior American military officials have said, bombing Iran is the fastest way to ensure an Iranian bomb”

End Quote Trita Parsi President, National Iranian American Council

"There is virtually no support among experts for attacking to 'pre-empt' a hypothetical future attack."

But surely countries do what they believe they have to do when vital interests are seen to be at stake?

For example, Nato attacked Serbia and Serbian forces in Kosovo, and the US and its allies invaded Iraq - both examples lacked UN Security Council approval.

Professor O'Connell says that in both cases, the illegal use of force came with costly penalties.

"Compare those two conflicts," she notes, "to the lawful use of force to liberate Kuwait after Iraq's invasion. The United States came out of that conflict with a financial and moral gain."

Casualties

Many will also raise the question of the potential casualties that any Israeli strike might cause, especially since the operation would not be sanctioned by international law.



There is widespread support inside Iran for the country's controversial nuclear programme

Without knowing the targets to be hit, the timing of any strikes, and the likelihood of them being hit again, it is hard to determine potential casualty figures.

Experts say that the functioning nuclear reactor at Bushehr is unlikely to be a target due to the fact that it has nothing to do with a potential military programme and radiation leakage could cause widespread civilian casualties. But, of course, aircraft can be downed and bombs and other air-launched weapons can go astray.

There are, in addition, another set of Iranian reactions to any strike that matter.

How would Iranians themselves respond to any attack? What would be the impact upon Iran's nuclear programme? And what would be the implications for the Islamic regime in Iran itself?

For now, it seems unclear that Iran has actually yet taken any decision to press ahead with a nuclear weapons programme.

Domestic factor

But Trita Parsi, author of the recently published, *A Single Roll of the Dice - Obama's Diplomacy With Iran*, says that if Israel attacks, Iran's position will change considerably.

"I have not come across any observer who does not believe that the Iranian government's determination and desire for a nuclear deterrent would increase several-fold if Iran is attacked."

The US assessment, he says, is that in the wake of an Israeli attack "the Iranians will push their program further underground, exit (or threaten to exit) the Non-Proliferation Treaty, kick out the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and dash for a bomb".

"As some senior American military officials have said, bombing Iran is the fastest way to ensure an Iranian bomb," he adds.



A military strike might rally Iranians around Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Mr Parsi, who is president of the National Iranian American Council, also says that an Israeli attack would have political implications inside Iran too.

"The Iranian regime is deeply unpopular and the wounds from their massive human rights abuses since the 2009 election are still open and bleeding."

The regime, he adds, "has thus far failed to overcome this division with the people".

"However, an attack on Iran, particularly if the bombing campaign also results in high civilian casualties, will likely unite warring factions in Iran against the external aggressor."

"This is what happened in 1980 with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran."

"The attack helped consolidate Ayatollah Khomeini's grip on power, fuel nationalism and revolutionary zeal, and suspend the internal power struggles. The Iranian regime didn't survive in spite of Saddam's attack, but because of it."

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“Start Quote

How do you reach a rapprochement with a regime that needs you as an adversary for its own ideological legitimacy?"

End Quote Karim Sadjadpour Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

That should be a sobering thought for Western and Israeli policy-makers, who from time to time flirt with the idea of regime change in Iran.

It all suggests a stark conclusion - even a militarily successful attack from Israel's point of view will only delay Iran's nuclear programme for a few years.

It might indeed confirm Iran in its desire to obtain a nuclear weapon. It might rally the Iranian population around the regime. And the regional consequences of any air strikes could be considerable; at worst precipitating conflict in the Gulf and on Israel's own borders.

Diplomacy

No wonder, then, that the Obama administration seems to be trying to dissuade Israel from any attack - at least for now.

Many experts believe that there is still mileage in allowing sanctions to take their course but also - even now - in reaching out diplomatically to Tehran.

"Diplomacy has certainly not been exhausted," Trita Parsi told me. "The diplomatic efforts in the past few years have been few and short-lived," he notes.

"Political space for the type of sustained talks that are needed to generate a breakthrough has not existed in Washington or in Tehran. Rather than real negotiations, we have seen an exchange of ultimatums."

Karim Sadjadpour also thinks it may be worth another diplomatic push. But he feels the potential results will inevitably be limited.

"How do you reach a rapprochement with a regime that needs you as an adversary for its own ideological legitimacy?" he

asks.

"Realistically," he concludes, "I think dialogue with Tehran can at best contain our differences with Iran, but it won't resolve them."

6 March 2012 Last updated at 19:03 GMT

Fresh Iran nuclear talks agreed with world powers - EU



Iran insists its nuclear programme is for purely peaceful purposes

Six major world powers and Iran are to hold fresh talks on Tehran's nuclear programme, the EU has said.

EU foreign policy head Catherine Ashton said she had replied to a letter from Iran on behalf of the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany.

Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili sent the letter last month proposing talks. No date or venue has been set.

The move comes amid fresh speculation of a pre-emptive military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Iran insists there is no military element to its programme but Western powers fear it is constructing nuclear weapons.

US President Barack Obama told a news conference in Washington DC that he believed there was still a "window of opportunity" to use diplomacy to resolve the standoff with Tehran.

He said there was no need to make a choice in the next few weeks or months on whether to use military means to stop Iran building nuclear weapons.

Parchin access

The statement from Baroness Ashton said the EU hoped that Iran would "now enter into a sustained process of constructive dialogue which will deliver real progress in resolving the international community's long-standing concerns on its nuclear programme."

It added: "Our overall goal remains a comprehensive negotiated, long-term solution which restores international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme."

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Analysis



James Reynolds BBC Iran correspondent

Since 2003, Iran has held intermittent talks about its nuclear programme with foreign powers. To begin with, France, Germany, and the UK (or the E3) negotiated on their own. In June 2006 the remaining permanent members of the UN Security Council - the US, China and Russia - joined the group (now known as either the E3+3 or P5+1.)

Previous rounds of talks achieved tentative breakthroughs which collapsed soon afterwards. In October 2009, Iran agreed to export more than a tonne of low-enriched uranium in exchange for reactor fuel - a deal that was never implemented.

The most recent rounds of talks - in Geneva in December 2010, and Istanbul in January 2011 - can barely be described as negotiations. They were essentially parallel monologues. Diplomats suggested there was little actual engagement, merely an exchange of prepared speeches. They say that Iran consistently refused to discuss the details of its nuclear programme. The talks broke off.

Over the next year Baroness Ashton exchanged several letters with Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief negotiator. On 14 February, Dr Jalili wrote that Iran was ready for dialogue on what he called a spectrum of issues. Western diplomats say his one, brief reference to the nuclear issue might be a signal Iran is finally willing to engage on the subject.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said in a statement that Iran had to "convince the international community that its nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful".

"Until those actions are taken we will not ease the international pressure on Iran."

Iran had earlier said it was prepared under certain conditions to grant inspectors from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to the key military site of Parchin.

The complex, south of Tehran, is dedicated to the research, and the development and production of ammunition, rockets and explosives.

IAEA inspectors wanted to visit last month to clarify the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear programme, but were denied entry.

But on Monday, Iran's mission to the IAEA said if the UN agency "combined all related issues" then "once more, access would be granted".

Talks between the EU and Iran on the nuclear issue have been off and on for a number of years, with the last round ending in failure in January last year.

Baroness Ashton had written to Mr Jalili last October with an offer of new talks.

In February, Mr Jalili wrote back that Iran was ready for dialogue on what he called a spectrum of issues. He said he welcomed the P5+1's affirmation that it would respect Iran's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

"No doubt that by committing to this approach, our talks for cooperation based on step-by-step principles and reciprocity on Iran's nuclear issues could be commenced," he wrote.

On Monday, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, on a visit to the US, said time was running out to put a stop to Iran's nuclear programme, warning Israel would "not live in the shadow of annihilation".

He stressed that all options were on the table, but that containment - leaving Iran to develop its programme under monitoring - was "not an option".

On Tuesday, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said: "Military action is the last alternative when all else fails. But make no mistake, we will act if we have to."

27 February 2012 Last updated at 08:15 GMT

How Israel might strike at Iran

By Jonathan Marcus BBC Diplomatic Correspondent



An Israeli attack would have to cope with a variety of problems

For all the myriad challenges facing Israel over the past decade it is the potential threat from a nuclear-armed Iran that has pre-occupied the country's military planners.

It is this that in large part has guided the development of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) over recent years.

The IAF has purchased 125 advanced F-15I and F-16I warplanes, equipped with Israeli avionics and additional fuel tanks - tailor-made for long-range strike missions.

In addition, Israel has bought specialised bunker-busting munitions; developed large, long-endurance, unmanned aircraft; and much of its training has focused on long-range missions.

Israel has a track-record of pre-emptive strikes against nuclear targets in the region.



Israel has a track-record of pre-emptive strikes against nuclear targets
In June 1981, [Israeli jets bombed the Osirak reactor](#) near the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

More recently, in September 2007, Israeli warplanes attacked a facility in Syria that [Israel, the US and many experts believed was a nuclear reactor under construction](#).

However, a potential strike against Iran would be nothing like the attacks in Iraq and Syria. These were both against single targets, located above ground, and came literally out of the blue.

An Israeli attempt to severely damage Iran's nuclear programme would have to cope with a variety of problems, including range, the multiplicity of targets, and the nature of those targets.

Many of these problems are daunting in themselves, but when put together, they only compound the difficulties facing Israeli military planners.

How to get there?

For a start it is a very long way from Israel to Iran. As a rough estimate many of the potential targets are some 1,500km (930 miles) to 1,800km (1,120 miles) from Israeli bases. Israeli warplanes have to get to Iran and, equally important, get back.

At least three routes are possible.

- There is the northern one where Israeli jets would fly north and then east along the borders between Turkey and Syria, and then Turkey and Iraq
- The central, more likely route would take Israeli warplanes over Iraq. With the US military gone, the Iraqi authorities are far less able to monitor and control their air space, effectively opening a door to an Israeli incursion
- The third, southern route would take Israeli jets over Saudi air space. Would the Saudis turn a blind eye to such a move given their own concerns about Iran's nuclear programme? Could this route be used by Israeli aircraft on the return leg of their journey? We just do not know



What we do know, given the range, is that Israeli aircraft will have to be topped up with fuel en route.

Douglas Barrie, senior fellow for military aerospace at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, says that "air-to-air refuelling will be critical".



Israel is believed to have between eight to 10 large tankers based on the Boeing 707 airframe

"Israeli aircraft," he says, "need not just to get in and out of Iranian air space; they need to have enough fuel to provide time over their targets and they need sufficient fuel to cover any contingencies that might arise during the mission."

The initial tanking, Mr Barrie says, might be done over the Mediterranean or even in Israeli airspace. "One option," he notes, "would be to take off with a full bomb load and drop tanks containing additional fuel; to climb to cruising altitude and then at this point to replenish their tanks, before setting course for their targets in Iran."

Israel is believed to have between eight to 10 large tankers based on the commercial Boeing 707 airframe, but experts believe that tanking capacity will prove one of the limiting factors in the scope of any operation.

What targets to hit?

The problems of range, the nature of some of the targets, and the availability of tanker aircraft will determine the nature and scope of any Israeli operation.

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Iran nuclear sites



Natanz - Uranium enrichment plant

Fordo, near Qom - Uranium enrichment plant

Arak (pictured) - Heavy water plant

Isfahan - Uranium conversion plant

Parchin - Military site

Douglas Barrie, of the IISS, says that "Israeli planners will be looking for where they can do most damage with the limited number of platforms at their disposal".

"They'll be asking where the main choke points are in the Iranian programme. Clearly, striking enrichment facilities makes a lot of sense from a military point of view," he adds.

So the uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz, south of Tehran, and Fordo, near the holy city of Qom, would almost certainly be prominent on the target list.

The heavy-water production plant and heavy-water reactor under construction at Arak, in the west, might also figure, as would the uranium conversion facility at Isfahan.

It is unclear whether Israel would have the capacity to strike a range of other targets associated with Iran's missile programmes and explosives testing.

But this target list raises another set of problems. The enrichment facilities at Natanz are underground and the new plant at Fordo is buried deeply into the side of a mountain.

Can Israel destroy buried targets?

For an attack like this, says Douglas Barrie, you need good intelligence information. "You need to know", he says, "about the geography of the target site; its geology; the nature of the earth; and the details of the design and construction of any buried reinforced concrete chambers."

"You can assume," he asserts, "that the Americans and the Israelis have been watching these sites closely over time."

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“Start Quote

The target would have to be attacked from relatively close range, meaning any attacking force will have to fight its way in and out of heavily-contested airspace”

End Quote Robert Hewson IHS Jane's Air-Launched Weapons

To reach buried targets you need special kinds of munitions. Deeply-buried facilities are not exclusive to the Middle East. There is a kind of race between the diggers and the weapons designers and it is one where the Americans have considerable experience.

The main weapon in Israel's arsenal is the US-supplied GBU-28. This is a 5,000lb (2,268kg) laser-guided weapon with a special penetrating warhead. For an assessment of its capabilities I turned to Robert Hewson, the editor of IHS Jane's Air-Launched Weapons.

"The GBU-28," he told me, "is the largest penetrating weapon available for a tactical aircraft and, since it was first used by the US in 1991, it has been improved with better warheads and more accurate guidance.

"However, Israel's use of this weapon would be hindered by several key operational factors. Realistically, the F-15I - the only delivery platform - can carry only one bomb, so a sizeable attack force would be required - demanding tanker and other support assets that Israel does not have in large numbers.

"The target would have to be attacked from relatively close range, meaning any attacking force will have to fight its way in

and out of heavily-contested airspace."

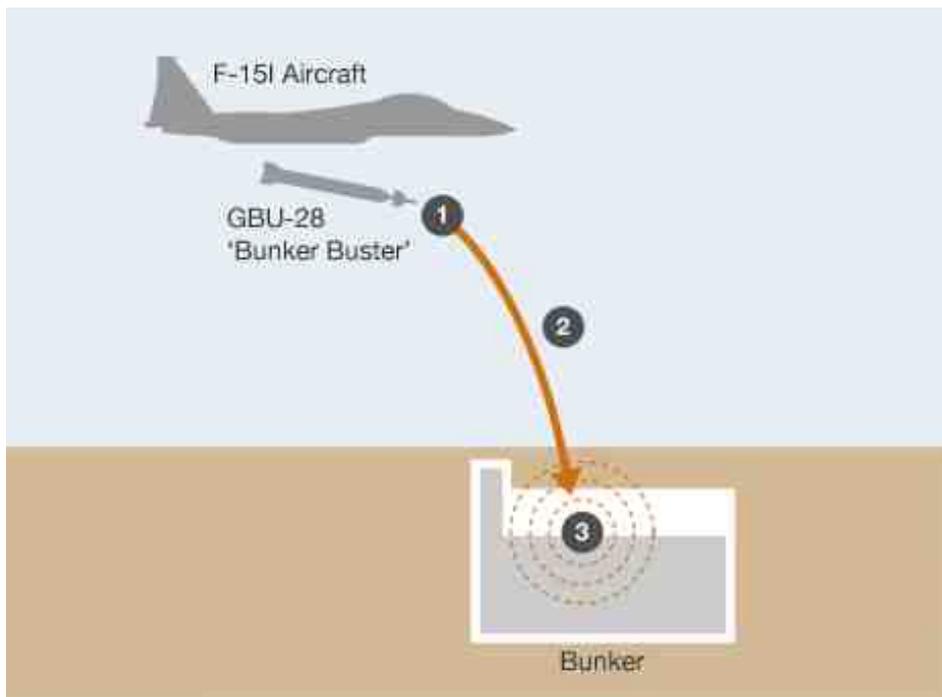
Furthermore, he says that "very accurate targeting data is required to use a weapon like GBU-28 to best effect".

"The potential for success of a GBU-28 attack is not determined by the 'book' performance of the weapon alone."

Of course, the great unknown question is how capable these weapons would be against buried Iranian enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordo.

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Israel's 'Bunker Buster' bomb



1. The missiles are carried by Israeli F-15Is - but only one per aircraft, which would mean a large attack force for multiple attempts on numerous targets

2. Missile is released almost vertically over the target, and guided by lasers

3. The missiles can penetrate up to 6m of concrete or about 30.5m of earth before detonating the 4,400lb warhead

Mr Hewson says that the GBU-28 is "effective against any hardened or deeply buried target - up to a point".

"For a weapon like the GBU-28, velocity and angle of impact determine the penetrating effect, so the ideal drop is made from high altitude at maximum speed and hits the target at a near vertical angle," he explains.

"This is less easy to do against a cave or mountainside, so the weapon will be less effective - but still more effective than pretty much any other available munitions."

Indeed, as Douglas Barrie notes, one weapon might be insufficient.

"You could", he says, "attempt to 'dig your way in' using several weapons on the same impact area to try to get through the soil, rock and concrete. Or you could try to block access to the facility by destroying tunnel entrances.

"In addition," he says, "all of these facilities are power hungry, so you could attempt to destroy power supplies and any buried cabling.

"The aim would be to present the Iranians with a compound problem of blocked entrances, no power and collapsed underground chambers."

Does Israel have other military options?

So far we have discussed only the known elements of Israel's capabilities, mainly US-supplied aircraft and munitions. But Israel has a hugely advanced aerospace and electronics industry of its own and this may well have produced systems

relevant for an attack against Iran.



The Eitan, the Israeli Air Force's latest generation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle

Douglas Barrie says that there is much about Israel's capabilities, especially its home-grown technology, that we do not know.

"Israel's long-range Heron or Eitan drone could be used to gather an assessment of the damage done by any strikes, but perhaps could also be put to use helping to spoof air defences," he adds.

"Indeed, this kind of deception or cyber-operation will likely be an integral part of the mission with the aim of blinding radars or generating a false picture of what was going on."

What about Iran's air defences?

Iran's air defences are largely Russian-supplied systems familiar to Israeli pilots, though Iran also deploys the US-built Hawk system dating back to the days of the Shah.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

Iran's defences



Surface-to-air missiles - Hawk system (pictured)

For high altitude targets - SA-5 or S-200

For low level targets - Tor-M1/SA-15 Gauntlet

Long-range systems - S-300

Iranian Air Force - Russian-built Mig-29s, US-built F-14 Tomcats

Some of its most capable defences are Russian SA-5 missiles intended to target high-altitude threats, while it also deploys the mobile Tor-M1/SA-15 Gauntlet system optimised to engage targets at lower level.

Russia has consistently refused to supply Iran with the much more capable S-300 long-range system, though the Iranians claim to have procured some batteries elsewhere.

Iran's surface-to-air missile force may be old but still represents a threat. Look at how much effort Nato and the US put into taking down Libya's similar vintage air defences last year.

Israel will not have the time or the resources to embark upon this kind of protracted air campaign and thus the electronic element of any strike to suppress Iranian defences is likely to be as important as the actual dropping of weapons.

Israel's small submarine force could potentially play a role here too. Douglas Barrie says that "there must be a reasonable assumption that Israel has an operational sea-launched cruise missile capability based upon their German-built Dolphin submarines".



Israel's small submarine force could play a role
"These could be used to go after older but capable SA-5 air defence sites and big search and surveillance radars."

But, he notes: "Adding a naval dimension complicates the co-ordination of any attack."

Iran's air force is seen by experts as being totally outclassed by its Israeli counterpart.

It has a small number of US-built F-14 Tomcat fighters and a significant number of relatively more modern Russian-supplied MiG-29s.

But the potential threat from Iranian aircraft again complicates Israeli planning and any air-to-air combat might place additional strains on the limited fuel supplies carried by the attacking aircraft.

Would an Israeli strike succeed?

Most experts agree that Israel could hit multiple targets in Iran and do considerable damage to its nuclear programme. They would, however, do much less damage than a full-scale US attack using all of the resources at Washington's disposal.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

“Start Quote

Even if successful, it would only delay Iran's nuclear programme”

End Quote Douglas Barrie International Institute for Strategic Studies

The Israelis would be operating at the very limits of their capabilities. "If they pulled it off," says Douglas Barrie, "it would be an impressive display of power projection against a difficult and dispersed set of targets."

Only a small number of air forces in the world, he notes, could mount such an operation. But, Mr Barrie stresses: "Even if successful, it would only delay Iran's nuclear programme."

It is a point echoed by IHS Jane's Robert Hewson.

"Israel does not have the mass of forces and will not be given the operational freedom [by Iran] required to destroy Iran's nuclear complex," he says. "If you bury enough stuff deep enough, enough of it will survive. Any Israeli attack can only damage and possibly not even slow the Iranian effort."

"The consequences of such an attack would be dire and global. It is impossible to see any up-side to this venture."

That's a view shared for now by Israel's most important ally.

Only a few days ago, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of staff, Gen Martin Dempsey, said that an Israeli attack would not be prudent.

Such a strike, he said, "would be destabilising and would not achieve their long-term objectives".

However Israel's calculus is very different. Knowing all their operational limitations, might they launch such an operation anyway?

UN atomic agency: Iran rapidly expands nuke work

1:22 PM Saturday Feb 25, 2012

Iran has rapidly ramped up production of higher-grade enriched uranium over the last few months, the UN nuclear agency said in a confidential report that feeds concerns about how quickly the Islamic republic could produce an atomic bomb.

The International Atomic Energy Agency report Friday also said Iran failed to give a convincing explanation about a quantity of missing uranium metal. Diplomats say the amount unaccounted for is large enough to be used for experiments

in arming a nuclear missile.

Iran insists it is not interested in nuclear weapons and says its activities are meant either to generate energy or to be used for research.

But the report contained little assurance that the country's activities are purely peaceful. Instead, it also confirmed that two IAEA missions to Tehran within less than a month had failed to dent Iran's refusal to assist an IAEA probe of suspicions the country has been secretly working on aspects of a nuclear weapons program.

The IAEA team had hoped to speak with key Iranian scientists suspected of working on the alleged weapons program, break down opposition to their plans to inspect documents related to nuclear work and secure commitments from Iranian authorities to allow future visits.

But the confidential report said that during those two sets of talks "no agreement was reached between Iran and the agency, as major differences existed with respect to approach."



The report obtained by The Associated Press said the agency continues to have "serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program."

The issue of suspected weapons-related experiments has been stalled for close to four years, with Iran insisting the allegations are based on doctored intelligence from the U.S., Israel and elsewhere.

Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's chief delegate to the IAEA, insisted progress was made.

"Iran has started real action and cooperation with the agency regarding ... the allegations," he told the AP. "We are determined to work hard with the agency in a professional manner to resolve the issues."

Senior international officials familiar with the talks painted a different picture. One said that during the last talks, which ended Tuesday, the IAEA team gave the Iranians a 15-page document outlining their concerns, and they "went through item and item and said they were false and fabricated."

"Sixty-five paragraphs, 65 'no's," said the official, when asked how the Iranian side responded to each item of concern presented by the agency. He asked for anonymity because his information was privileged.

The IAEA team was comprised of senior officials, but the international sources described the Iranian negotiating team as "go-betweens," with no authority to commit to cooperating with the agency's probe.

In a 13-page summary late last year, the IAEA listed clandestine activities that he said can either be used in civilian or

military nuclear programs, or "are specific to nuclear weapons."

Among these were indications that Iran has conducted high-explosives testing to set off a nuclear charge at Parchin a military site that the IAEA team was refused access to on both recent visits to Iran.

Other suspicions include computer modelling of a core of a nuclear warhead and alleged preparatory work for a nuclear weapons test and development of a nuclear payload for Iran's Shahab 3 intermediate range missile a weapon that could reach Israel.

The report said Iran appeared to have a structured weapons-development program up to 2003; that some work continued past that date, "and that some may still be ongoing," adding that the agency believes its information on which its suspicions are based is "overall, credible."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner declined to comment on the details of the report, which he said officials were still studying, but added it contained "nothing that has allayed our concerns about Iran's nuclear program."

White House National Security Council spokesman Thomas Vietor said Iran's continued uranium enrichment, "combined with its continued stonewalling of international inspectors, ... demonstrate why Iran has failed to convince the international community that its nuclear program is peaceful."

The report was issued to the IAEA's 35-nation board and the UN Security Council as the latest update on what the agency knows or suspects about Iran's nuclear program.

It comes amid heightened tensions caused by Iran's refusal to rein in nuclear activities that much of the world fears could be redirected toward a weapons program. A rapid series of sanctions imposed by the U.S., the European Union and others on Tehran has only increased acrimony without any sign that Iran is ready to compromise.

Instead, it has retaliated by imposing oil embargoes on Britain and France and threatening other European nations that act against it with similar punishment, as well as bluntly warning its foes that it is ready to strike pre-emptively.

Such threats are clearly directed at Israel, which, along with the U.S., has not ruled out military attacks if diplomacy fails to halt Iran's nuclear drive. Washington has in recent weeks tamped down the rhetoric as it seeks to defuse tensions, but Israel refuses to follow, saying it alone will decide on what actions to take to protect its security.

In an apparent attempt at damage control before his March trip to the White House, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered his ministers not to speak publicly about Iran, Israeli officials said Friday.

Israel views Iran as an existential threat, citing frequent Iranian calls for Israel's destruction, its support for violent anti-Israel militant groups and its nuclear and long-range missile programs.

Iran's refusal to scrap its uranium enrichment program is a key worry it had already triggered four sets of UN Security Council sanctions even before the recent flurry of penalties imposed separately by countries or groups of countries.

Enrichment at low levels provides reactor fuel but that can be turned into weapons grade material by gradually re-enriching to levels of 90 per cent or more.

Iran has enriched tons of fuel-grade material since its clandestine program was discovered 10 years ago, and worries have been compounded by its decision two years ago to start enriching at a higher level that can be turned into fissile warhead material much more quickly and easily than its low enriched uranium.

Adding up verified figures and Iranian estimates, the report said that Tehran has to date produced about 110 kilograms of higher-level uranium enriched to 20 per cent. That is about half of what it would need to arm a nuclear warhead.

And it has increased its 20-per cent production capability by adding hundreds of centrifuges to a facility dug into a mountain since the last IAEA report in November, the agency said. That structure may be impervious to any bunker-busting bombs Israel has at its disposal.

One of the senior officials noted that Iran produced much of that material in the last three months, saying it had tripled its output over that time.

Beyond that, Iran has added about 2,600 centrifuges producing lower-enriched uranium below 5 per cent since that last IAEA report, so that about 9,000 centrifuges are now churning out the lower-enriched material.

The report said that when verified amounts and Iranian estimates are tallied the Islamic republic has produced nearly 5,500 kilograms of lower enriched material. Although the lower-enriched material takes longer to convert, that would be enough for an additional four nuclear warheads, should Iran decide to make such weapons.

The agency already reported in November that nearly 20 kilograms (almost 45 pounds) of uranium metal were missing

from Iran's inventory at a research laboratory. While that amount is too little to be moulded into a nuclear warhead, diplomats have said it could be used for related experiments.

On Friday, the IAEA report said that it had requested access to records and personnel involved in the experiments that made the metal, but "Iran indicated that it no longer possessed the relevant documentation and that the personnel involved were no longer available."

-AP

24 February 2012 Last updated at 19:15 GMT

UN watchdog expresses serious concern over nuclear Iran



The IAEA believes a large explosives containment vessel has been built at the Parchin military site

The UN's nuclear watchdog says it continues to have serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme.

In its latest report, the International Atomic Energy Agency says talks in Tehran this week failed to clear up questions about Iran's programme.

The report also says Iran has installed 2,000 empty centrifuge casings at its Fordo uranium enrichment facility.

The West suspects Iran is seeking to build a nuclear bomb, which it denies.

The IAEA report was published two days after the Iranian authorities refused a request by inspectors to visit the Parchin military site, south of the capital, Tehran.

In November, [another IAEA report](#) - based on what it called "credible" information - indicated that Iran had built in 2000 a large explosives containment vessel at Parchin to conduct hydrodynamic experiments.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

Analysis

Bethany Bell BBC News, Vienna

The stand-off over Iran's controversial nuclear programme shows no sign of resolution, according to the IAEA's latest report. Western powers will be alarmed at the news that Iran has sharply stepped up its sensitive uranium enrichment work, both at its main plant at Natanz, and at the underground site of Fordo. The Fordo site, which is buried deep under a mountain, is well-protected against any potential military strikes by Israel or the United States.

There will also be concern about the lack of progress in talks between Iran and the IAEA. The IAEA said there were "major differences", with Iran dismissing the agency's concerns as "unfounded".

This report comes at a time of heightened tension over Iran. Despite the tougher sanctions imposed on the country, Iran so far does not appear to be showing any signs of compromise with the West. It insists its nuclear work is purely peaceful.

These experiments, which involve high explosives in conjunction with nuclear material or nuclear material surrogates, were "strong indicators of possible weapon development", the report said.

The use of surrogate material and the confinement provided by a chamber can also be used to prevent contamination.

The IAEA also said it had "strong indications that the development by Iran of the high explosives initiation system, and its

development of the high speed diagnostic configuration used to monitor related experiments, were assisted by the work of a foreign expert" from another nuclear power.

Centrifuge casings

The BBC's Bethany Bell in Vienna says the [report leaked on Friday](#) states that despite intensive discussions, talks in Tehran had produced no agreement with Iran on clearing up the questions about its nuclear programme.

It says Iran gave the agency a declaration dismissing the IAEA's concerns as unfounded, and that "major differences" existed on how to approach the matter.

In addition to refusing access to Parchin, the report says Iran has increased the number of centrifuges used to enrich uranium and has stepped up production of uranium enriched to the higher level of 20%.

It says Iran is also preparing to expand enrichment work both at the Natanz plant and at the underground site at Fordo, near the holy city of Qom. It says more than 2,000 empty centrifuge casings have been placed in position at Fordo and all of the piping has been installed.



Iran has insisted it is enriching uranium purely for peaceful purposes, but the UN Security Council has ratified four rounds of sanctions on the Islamic republic to pressure it to stop, because the technology can be used to enrich uranium to the higher level needed for a nuclear warhead.

The IAEA's Director General, Yukiya Amano, in the report urges Iran to "address the agency's serious concerns about possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme, including... by responding to the agency's questions related to Parchin and the foreign expert".

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said his country was "very concerned" about the latest IAEA report.

"We think Iran should understand the key to ending sanctions is in their own hands, they have a duty to co-operate with the international community," he told reporters in Tunisia.



White House: IAEA visit a 'failure' for Iran



The US has increased sanctions on Iran in the past six months

The White House has said it is disappointed that UN nuclear inspectors were barred from a site in Iran, calling the visit a "failure" for Iran.

"It's another demonstration of Iran's refusal to abide by its international obligations," said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

IAEA inspectors had sought to clarify the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear programme.

Tehran insists its nuclear intentions are purely peaceful.

US state department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters that Tehran's move was "disappointing", but the country wanted to see negotiations move forward.

"There is that diplomatic track," Mr Toner said. "But we're not going to ease up on the sanctions."

In Tehran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei announced on Iranian state television that Iran's nuclear policies would not change in the face of international pressure.

"Pressures, sanctions and assassinations will bear no fruit," Mr Khamenei said. "No obstacles can stop Iran's nuclear work."

Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency had hoped to inspect a site at Parchin.

The IAEA said that after two days of talks, its team was returning from Iran without a deal on a document "facilitating the clarification of unresolved issues".

The first round of discussions in January also failed to produce a result.

'Strong indications'

"It is disappointing that Iran did not accept our request to visit Parchin," IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano [said in a statement](#). "We engaged in a constructive spirit, but no agreement was reached."



The team of IAEA inspectors, led by Herman Nackaerts, has now returned from a two-day visit to Iran

In November, [an IAEA report](#) - based on what it called "credible" information - indicated that Iran had built in 2000 a large explosives containment vessel at Parchin to conduct hydrodynamic experiments.

Hydrodynamic experiments, which involve high explosives in conjunction with nuclear material or nuclear material surrogates, were "strong indicators of possible weapon development", the report said.

In addition, the use of surrogate material and the confinement provided by a chamber could be used to prevent contamination of the site with nuclear material, the report added.

Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said at the time that there were no nuclear-related activities at

Parchin.

Israeli strike speculation

On Tuesday, Mr Soltanieh said Tehran expected to hold further talks with the IAEA. He was quoted by Iran's Isna news agency as saying the latest discussions had been intensive and that talks would continue.

The BBC's Bethany Bell, in Vienna, says the refusal to grant access to Parchin does not come as a major surprise, as there has been little progress in the negotiations between the two sides.

The inspectors' evaluation of their visits may form part of the next report on Iran's nuclear programme, expected later in February.

But last November, the IAEA said it had information suggesting Iran had carried out tests "relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device".

This led to decisions by the US and the European Union to tighten sanctions against Tehran, including measures targeting the country's oil industry.

Tensions have risen further over speculation that Israel may carry out a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

22 February 2012 Last updated at 02:05 GMT

Iran nuclear row: UN inspectors barred from Iran site



The team of IAEA inspectors was led by Herman Nackaerts

The UN nuclear watchdog says Iran has stopped a team of inspectors from visiting a key military site.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) says no deal was reached on inspecting the Parchin site, south of Tehran, despite "intensive efforts".

The inspectors had sought to clarify the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear programme.

Iran says its programme is for peaceful purposes, but the West suspects it is geared towards making weapons.

The IAEA says its team is returning from Iran without a deal after two days of talks. The first round of discussions in January also failed to produce a result.

"It is disappointing that Iran did not accept our request to visit Parchin," IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano said in a statement.

It is suspected that Parchin was the site where explosives related to nuclear weapons may have been tested in recent years.

Tehran has made no public comments of the latest remarks by the Vienna-based IAEA.

The BBC's Bethany Bell in Vienna says the refusal to grant access to Parchin does not come as a major surprise, as there has been so little progress in the negotiations between Iran and the IAEA.

Israeli strike speculation

The inspectors' evaluation of their visits may form part of the next report on Iran's nuclear programme, expected later in February.

But last November, the IAEA said it had information suggesting Iran had carried out tests "relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device".

This led to decisions by the US and the European Union to tighten sanctions against Tehran, including measures targeting

the country's oil industry.

Tensions have risen further over speculation that Israel may carry out a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

21 February 2012 Last updated at 14:11 GMT

Iran says pre-emptive strike on 'enemies' possible



Iran staged military exercises late last year and again this week

An Iranian military commander has said Iran would take pre-emptive action against its enemies if it felt its national interests were endangered.

Mohammad Hejazi, deputy head of Iran's armed forces, made his comments to the Iranian Fars news agency.

Iran is facing mounting international pressure over its controversial nuclear programme.

On Monday it unveiled fresh military exercises in the south that it said was to protect its nuclear sites.

"Our strategy now is that if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran's national interests, and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions," Mr Hejazi told Fars.

The BBC's Iran correspondent James Reynolds says Iran's military and political leaders routinely stress that they are capable of defeating the country's enemies should the need arise.

Their comments are closely scrutinised by those trying to work out Iran's military capability and also its overall intentions, he adds.

Iran insists its uranium enrichment programme is for peaceful purposes but Western powers suspect Tehran intends to make weapons.

Neither Israel nor the US have ruled out military action if sanctions and diplomacy fail to rein in Iran's nuclear activities.

In recent weeks speculation has been increasing that Israel may launch a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Last week, US Defense Intelligence Agency director Lt Gen Ronald Burgess told the US Congress that Iran may launch missiles if it is attacked but was unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict.

On Monday senior inspectors from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began another round of talks in Tehran - their second in three weeks.

They say they want Iranian reassurances about "possible military dimensions" to the nuclear programme.

Late last year Iran conducted 10 days of military exercises near the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf.

Iran has threatened to block the strait, through which 20% of the world's oil exports pass, in retaliation for Western sanctions over its nuclear plans.

20 February 2012 Last updated at 10:01 GMT

Iran nuclear crisis: UN inspectors arrive in Iran



Chief IAEA inspector Herman Nackaerts said he hoped for "some concrete results" from the trip

UN nuclear inspectors have arrived in Tehran for the second time in a month to discuss Iran's nuclear programme.

Chief inspector Herman Nackaerts said his team's "highest priority" was to clarify the "possible military dimensions" of the nuclear programme.

But he cautioned that progress "may take a while".

Iran insists its uranium enrichment work is peaceful in purpose, but Western nations believe the programme is geared towards making weapons.

Tensions have risen over speculation that Israel may carry out a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon arrived in Israel at the weekend for talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior officials.

But the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, warned on Sunday that it was still unclear whether Iran was at a stage to assemble a nuclear bomb.

"On that basis, I think it would be premature to exclusively decide that the time for a military option was upon us," Gen Dempsey said.

'New developments'

Last week Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took part in an elaborate ceremony to unveil new developments in his country's nuclear programme.

Tehran said it had used domestically-made nuclear fuel in a reactor for the first time, as well as developing faster, more efficient uranium enrichment centrifuges.

State TV showed the president inspecting the fuel rods as they were loaded into a reactor.



Iranian media showed President Ahmadinejad (at right) at a ceremony to unveil "new developments" in Tehran's nuclear programme

The IAEA inspectors described their last visit, in January, as positive, and said Iran was "committed" to "resolving all outstanding issues".

Mr Nackaerts said on Sunday that he hoped to have a "couple of good and constructive days in Tehran".

"Importantly we hope for some concrete results from the trip. The highest priority remains of course the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear programme, but we want to tackle all outstanding issues," he said.

"This is of course a very complex issue that may take a while. But we hope it can be constructive".

The inspectors' evaluation of their visits may form part of the next written report on Iran's nuclear programme, expected

later in February.

Tehran says its nuclear activities are simply for electricity generation.

But last November, the IAEA said it had information suggesting Iran had carried out tests "relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device".

That information led to a decision by the US and the European Union to tighten sanctions against Iran, including measures targeting the country's lucrative oil industry.

Iran said on Sunday it had halted oil sales to British and French companies, ahead of a European Union oil embargo set to begin on 1 July. Analysts say this gesture of retaliation is largely symbolic, as neither the UK nor France import a large proportion of their oil from Iran.

19 February 2012 Last updated at 01:53 GMT

Iran 'may boost nuclear programme', diplomat warns



Iran insists its sole focus is peaceful nuclear power generation

Iran may be poised to expand its nuclear programme at an underground site near the city of Qom, a Vienna-based diplomat has told the BBC.

It appears to be ready to install thousands of new-generation centrifuges at the fortified underground plant, the diplomat said.

They could speed up the production of enriched uranium - required for both power generation and nuclear weapons.

The United Nations nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, has not commented.

Its inspectors are due to visit Tehran this week for another round of talks on Iran's nuclear activities, after they were denied access to certain nuclear sites and scientists on a visit last month.

Iran says its nuclear work is for purely peaceful purposes, but Western countries express fears that Iran is secretly trying to develop a nuclear bomb.

Tensions rise

This is another warning that Iran may be stepping up its controversial nuclear work, despite increasing international sanctions, says the BBC's Bethany Bell in Vienna.

Qom enrichment plant

- Sept 2009: Existence of facility revealed
- Iran initially says the plant is designed to enrich uranium up to 5%, commonly used in nuclear power production
- Apr 2011: No enriched uranium found in IAEA samples from the site
- Jan 2012: Iran says it has begun enrichment up to 20% at the site

According to other accounts by diplomats requesting anonymity, the Qom facility now contains the electrical circuitry, piping and supporting equipment required for the new centrifuges - though they add that the centrifuges have not yet been fitted and there is no certainty about if and when they will be.

Three days ago, Iran itself said it had advanced its nuclear know-how, including developing centrifuges able to enrich uranium faster.

The developments come against the backdrop of rising tensions over the issue, following an IAEA report in November which claimed that Iran had "carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear device", including:

- On Saturday, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague warned Iran's nuclear ambitions could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region - where at present the only country believed to possess such weapons is Israel
- Speaking in Tokyo, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak called for sanctions on Iran to be tightened still further, saying only "crippling" measures would force it to give up its nuclear programme. But he reportedly added that Israeli military action against Iran was not on the table for the time being
- Iranian warships entered the Mediterranean Sea for only the second time since the 1979 revolution, in what navy chief Admiral Habibollah Sayari told Irna agency was a show of might and a "message of peace"
- Israel earlier accused Iran of masterminding attacks on its embassies in India, Thailand and Georgia - an accusation denied by Iran.

Several rounds of increasingly punitive UN and Western sanctions - the latest targeting Iran's oil and financial sectors - have failed to force Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions.

Instead, there is increasingly feverish media speculation that Israel is planning a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

On Saturday, Israel's military chief of staff, Lt Gen Benny Gantz told a state TV station the country would ultimately make any decision to strike on its own, reported AFP news agency, saying it was "the central guarantor of its own security".

US national security adviser Tom Donilon has arrived in Israel for talks with officials on a range of issues including Iran.

US officials believe Iran sanctions will fail, making military action likely

- Growing view that strike, by Israel or US, will happen
- 'Sweet spot' for Israeli action identified as September-October
- White House remains determined to give sanctions time

- guardian.co.uk, Friday 17 February 2012 17.27 GMT



Iran president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed this week that Iran had loaded its first domestically made fuel rod into a nuclear reactor. Photograph: AP

Officials in key parts of the Obama administration are increasingly convinced that sanctions will not deter Tehran from pursuing its nuclear programme, and believe that the US will be left with no option but to launch an attack on [Iran](#) or watch

Israel do so.

The president has made clear in public, and in private to Israel, that he is determined to give sufficient time for recent measures, such as the financial blockade and the looming European oil embargo, to bite deeper into Iran's already battered economy before retreating from its principal strategy to pressure Tehran.

But there is a strong current of opinion within the administration – including in the Pentagon and the state department – that believes sanctions are doomed to fail, and that their principal use now is in delaying Israeli military action, as well as reassuring Europe that an attack will only come after other means have been tested.

"The White House wants to see sanctions work. This is not the Bush White House. It does not need another conflict," said an official knowledgeable on Middle East policy. "Its problem is that the guys in Tehran are behaving like sanctions don't matter, like their economy isn't collapsing, like Israel isn't going to do anything.

"Sanctions are all we've got to throw at the problem. If they fail then it's hard to see how we don't move to the 'in extremis' option."

The White House has said repeatedly that all options are on the table, including the use of force to stop Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, but that for now the emphasis is firmly on diplomacy and sanctions.

But long-held doubts among US officials about whether the Iranians can be enticed or cajoled into serious negotiations have been reinforced by recent events.

"We don't see a way forward," said one official. "The record shows that there is nothing to work with."

Scepticism about Iranian intent is rooted in Iran's repeated spurning of overtures from successive US presidents from Bill Clinton to [Barack Obama](#), who appealed within weeks of coming to office for "constructive ties" and "mutual respect" .

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's claim this week that Iran loaded its first domestically-made fuel rod into a nuclear reactor, and Iran's threat to cut oil supplies to six European countries, were read as further evidence that Tehran remains defiantly committed to its nuclear programme. That view was strengthened by the latest Iranian offer to negotiate with the UN security council in a letter that appeared to contain no significant new concessions.

If Obama were to conclude that there is no choice but to attack Iran, he is unlikely to order it before the presidential election in November unless there is an urgent reason to do so. The question is whether the Israelis will hold back that long.

Earlier this month, the US defence secretary, Leon Panetta, told the Washington Post that he thought the window for an Israeli attack on Iran is between April and June. But other official analysts working on Iran have identified what one described as a "sweet spot", where the mix of diplomacy, political timetables and practical issues come together to suggest that if Israel launches a unilateral assault it is more likely in September or October, although they describe that as a "best guess".

However, the Americans are uncertain as to whether Israel is serious about using force if sanctions fail or has ratcheted up threats primarily in order to pressure the US and Europeans in to stronger action. For its part, the US is keen to ensure that Tehran does not misinterpret a commitment to giving sanctions a chance to work as a lack of willingness to use force as a last resort.

American officials are resigned to the fact that the US will be seen in much of the world as a partner in any Israeli assault on Iran – whether or not Washington approved of it. The administration will then have to decide whether to, in the parlance of the US military, "pile on", by using its much greater firepower to finish what Israel starts.

"The sanctions are there to pressure Iran and reassure Israel that we are taking this issue seriously," said one official. "The focus is on demonstrating to Israel that this has a chance of working. Israel is sceptical but appreciates the effort. It is willing to give it a go, but how long will it wait?"

Colin Kahl, who was US deputy assistant secretary of defence for the Middle East until December, said: "With the European oil embargo and US sanctions on the central bank, the Israelis probably have to give some time now to let those crippling sanctions play out.

"If you look at the calendar, it doesn't make much sense that the Israelis would jump the gun. They probably need to provide a decent interval for those sanctions to be perceived as failing, because they care about whether an Israeli strike would be seen as philosophically legitimate; that is, as only having happened after other options were exhausted. So I think that will push them a little further into 2012."

The White House is working hard to keep alive the prospect that sanctions will deliver a diplomatic solution. It has pressed the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, to quieten the belligerent chatter from his own cabinet about an attack on Iran. The chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, general Martin Dempsey, was dispatched to Jerusalem last month to talk

up the effect of sanctions and to press, unsuccessfully, for a commitment that Israel will not launch a unilateral attack against Iran.

Dennis Ross, Obama's former envoy for the Middle East and Iran, this week said that sanctions may be pushing Tehran toward negotiations.

But in other parts of the administration, the assumption is that sanctions will fail, and so calculations are being made about what follows, including how serious Israel is in its threat to launch a unilateral attack on Iran's nuclear installations, and how the US responds.

But Iran's increasingly belligerent moves – such as the botched attempts, laid at Tehran's door, to attack Israeli diplomats in Thailand, India and Georgia – are compounding the sense that Iran is far from ready to negotiate.

Feeding in to the considerations are the timing of the American election, including its bearing on Israeli thinking, as well as the pace of Iranian advances in their nuclear programme.

Obama has publicly said that there are no differences with Israel on Iran, describing his administration as in "lock step" with the Jewish state.

But the US and Israel are at odds over the significance of Iran's claim to have begun enriching uranium at the underground facility at Fordow, near the holy city of Qom, and therefore the timing of any military action.

Israel's defence minister, Ehud Barak, has warned that Iran cannot be allowed to establish a "zone of immunity" at Fordow where it is able to work on a nuclear weapon deep underground protected from Israel's conventional weapons. Earlier this month, Barak said Israel must consider an attack before that happens.

The Americans say there is no such urgency because the facility is just one among many Tehran needs to build a nuclear weapon, and that other sites are still vulnerable to attack and sabotage in other ways. The US also has a more powerful military arsenal, although it is not clear whether it would be able to destroy the underground Fordow facility.

Kahl said part of Washington's calculation is to judge whether Israel is seriously contemplating attacking Iran, or is using the threat to pressure the US and Europe into confronting Tehran.

"It's not that the Israelis believe the Iranians are on the brink of a bomb. It's that the Israelis may fear that the Iranian programme is on the brink of becoming out of reach of an Israeli military strike, which means it creates a 'now-or-never' moment," he said.

"That's what's actually driving the timeline by the middle of this year. But there's a countervailing factor that [Ehud] Barak has mentioned – that they're not very close to making a decision and that they're also trying to ramp up concerns of an Israeli strike to drive the international community towards putting more pressure on the Iranians."

Israeli pressure for tougher measures against Tehran played a leading role in the US Congress passing sanctions legislation targeting Iran's financial system and oil sales. Some US and European officials say those same sanctions have also become a means for Washington to pressure Israel not to act precipitously in attacking Iran.

The presidential election is also a part of Israel's calculation, not least the fractious relationship between Obama and Netanyahu, who has little reason to do the US president any political favours and has good reason to prefer a Republican in the White House next year.

There is a school of thought – a suspicion, even – within the administration that Netanyahu might consider the height of the US election campaign the ideal time to attack Iran. With a hawkish Republican candidate ever ready to accuse him of weakness, Obama's room to pressure or oppose Netanyahu would be more limited than after the election.

"One theory is that Netanyahu and Barak may calculate that if Obama doesn't support an Israeli strike, he's unlikely to punish Israel for taking unilateral action in a contested election year," said Kahl. "Doing something before the US gives the Israelis a bit more freedom of manoeuvre."

Obama is also under domestic political pressure from Republican presidential contenders, who accuse him of vacillating on Iran, and from a Congress highly sympathetic to Israel's more confrontational stance.

Thirty-two senators from both parties introduced a resolution on Thursday rejecting "any policy that would rely on efforts to 'contain' a nuclear weapons-capable Iran". The measure was dressed up as intended to protect the president's back, but it smacked of yet more pressure to take a firmer stand with Iran.

One of the sponsors, senator Joe Lieberman, said that he did not want to discount diplomatic options but if the president ordered an attack on Iran he would have strong bipartisan support in Congress. Other senators said there needed to be a greater sense of urgency on the part of the administration in dealing with Iran and that sanctions are not enough.

Others are critical of sanctions for a different reason. Congressman Dennis Kucinich said this week he fears sanctions are less about changing Tehran's policy than laying the ground for military action. He warned that "the latest drum beat of additional sanctions and war against Iran sounds too much like the lead-up to the Iraq war".

"If the crippling sanctions that the US and Europe have imposed are meant to push the Iranian regime to negotiations, it hasn't worked," he said. "As the war of words between the [United States](#) and Iran escalates it's more critical than ever that we highlight alternatives to war to avoid the same mistakes made in Iraq."

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Iran: US and EU 'cautiously optimistic' on new talks



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says Iran must make a "sustained effort to come to the table"

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The United States and the European Union have expressed cautious optimism over Iran's willingness to return to talks on its nuclear programme.

Speaking in Washington, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said a letter from Iran to the US and its allies was "one we have been waiting for".

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said she was "cautious" but "optimistic" that talks could resume.

Both said, however, said that they were still studying the reply.

Talks between Iran and six world powers - the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia and China - on Tehran's nuclear programme collapsed a year ago.

Iran has in the past insisted on including a broad range of topics on the agenda.

Ms Clinton said it appeared that Tehran now accepted that talks would focus on the nuclear issue.

The US and Western powers suspect Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons, but Iranian authorities insist the nuclear programme is peaceful.

In recent months, Western countries have stepped up pressure on Iran over the nuclear issue, with the EU and US both

introducing wide-ranging sanctions on the country.