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Experts

EU Action on Iran

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Introduction

The EU has played a significant role from an early stage in the action taken by the international community's response to evidence that Iran was developing a nuclear weapons programme. In October 2003 the Foreign Ministers of three EU Member States, the UK, France and Germany (usually known as the EU3), reached an agreement with Iran that it would suspend the enrichment of uranium and admit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) to its nuclear plants.

Over the last nine years negotiations have continued (to little effect) between the EU3, now represented by the EU's Foreign & Security Policy High Representative Baroness Ashton, working with the USA, China and Russia, on the one part (known as the E3+3), and Iran on the other to ensure implementation of this and other Iranian promises. (The early part of these negotiations were described in the Senior Experts paper, 'The CFSP in Action – Iran,' available on the European Movement website).

Iran has been subject to sanctions by the European Union in recent years, primarily because of these concerns about its nuclear programme but also in response to concerns about human rights abuses. This briefing paper explains the background to these sanctions.

Nuclear Programme

Iran began working on peaceful nuclear power in the 1950s with US assistance but co-operation was withdrawn following the Iranian revolution in 1979 because the nuclear research programme was stopped by Ayatollah Khomeini. The programme was restarted later but because Iran had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and it complied with its duty to keep the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) informed of its nuclear-related activities, there was little international concern.

In 2002 an Iranian opposition group revealed that there were undeclared nuclear research facilities in Iran, one of them being a partly underground uranium enrichment plant. Uranium needs to be enriched before it can be used as fuel in a nuclear reactor; the fact that the facility at Natanz was undeclared raised suspicions that Iran was seeking to go further and to enrich uranium to a higher grade so that it could be used in a nuclear weapon. It was established that Iran had received assistance from the former head of Pakistan's nuclear research programme, A Q Khan, who also stood accused of having assisted North Korea with its nuclear weapons programme.

Following negotiations with the EU-3, in the October 2003 "Tehran Declaration" Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment activities and promised to co-operate fully with the IAEA. The IAEA's report in November 2003 confirmed that Iran had not made a full

declaration of its past nuclear activities, contrary to its treaty obligations and while it did not find evidence of a nuclear weapons programme in Iran it could not confirm that Iran's intentions were entirely peaceful. A series of IAEA reports followed with reports in 2010 and 2011 declaring that there was now evidence that Iran had been working on nuclear weapons prior to 2003 and possibly at a lower level since.

Negotiations since 2003 have failed to resolve the issue. Iran rescinded its promised to suspend uranium enrichment in 2005 and announced the following year that it had successfully completed an enrichment programme. Tensions in the region were heightened by a speech made in 2005 by President Ahmadinejad that "Israel must be wiped off the map". This exacerbated fears in Israel that Iran might use any nuclear weapons it developed to attack it. Israel had bombed Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981 and Syria's in 2007 to prevent those countries from developing nuclear weapons and has made it clear that it would do the same to Iran if it believed Iran was close to developing a nuclear weapon.

Sanctions

The UN Security Council has adopted seven mandatory resolutions on the Iranian nuclear programme, beginning with a call in July 2006 for Iran to cease enrichment activity. Sanctions for non-compliance were adopted in December 2006 and have been extended since. In June 2010 the UN imposed an arms embargo on Iran.

The involvement of the EU, acting through the High Representative for the CFSP, reflects the historic trading and political links between Iran and Europe. The EU is Iran's single largest trading partner, receiving almost a third of Iran's exports, 90 per cent of them being energy or energy-related products. EU countries have been large exporters of machinery and chemicals to Iran.

This trade pattern makes the EU important in the implementation of the UN's sanctions. The EU has adopted a more far-reaching series of sanctions designed to encourage Iranian compliance with UN Security Council resolutions, the most important of which have been in the field of nuclear technology and the more recent ban on the import of oil. The EU has banned trade in a number of fields including the following goods and services (in addition to targeted sanctions against a number of named individuals):

- arms and related material;
- the import of crude oil and petroleum products from Iran;
- equipment connected to nuclear weapons and enrichment;
- most dual-use equipment (*i.e.* for civil or military nuclear use);
- investment and other financial services related to arms sales *etc.*;
- equipment and services connected to oil and gas industries;
- many forms of financial services, including banking services.

In terms of economic impact, the ban on crude oil imports, which comes into force on 1 July 2012, is the most significant step the EU has yet taken. Given Iran's dependence on oil

exports, this step could have serious consequences for the Iranian economy if Iran is unable to find alternative markets for its oil or if it has to discount its prices to sell its oil.

The sanctions introduced by the EU and the UN are designed to encourage Iran to return to the negotiating table; they are a lever to achieve a shift in the Iranian position and not simply an end in themselves.

Human Rights

Iran, a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has persistently been accused of serious violations of human rights. The EU held several rounds of discussions with Iran between 2002 and 2004 on these issues but further talks were suspended by the Iranians in 2006. This followed a tough statement from EU Foreign Ministers drawing attention to Iran's practice of executing child offenders, the ban on moderate candidates in the 2005 Presidential elections and many other violations of human rights.

The EU's concerns increased after the 2009 Presidential elections, which were widely seen inside and outside Iran as neither free nor fair. The detention of presidential candidates from the opposition parties and the repression used against protestors challenging the election result led to repeated EU objections and demands for the Iranian Government to honour its obligations under human rights agreements.

In April 2011 the EU adopted legal measures restricting the ability of certain persons in Iran accused of human rights violations to enter the EU and freezing their assets inside the EU. Those targeted include the chief and deputy chief of the Iranian police, the commander of the Basij militia, many senior officers in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and a number of judges and other criminal justice officials. The EU continues to make its concerns about human rights in Iran clear and to support action on the issue through the UN Human Rights Council and other international fora. The EU does not have a representative office in Iran and several EU Member States, including Britain, have no diplomatic representation there now.

Future Developments

A new negotiating process has begun in respect of Iran's nuclear research with a meeting held in Istanbul on 14th April 2012 and a further meeting agreed for May 2012. It is too soon to see if these talks will fail as previous ones have done because of Iranian stalling or whether it will lead to substantive negotiations.

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Senior European Experts

The Senior European Experts Group is an independent body consisting of former high-ranking British diplomats and civil servants, including several former UK ambassadors to the EU, and former officials of the institutions of the EU.

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