

FT interview: Mohamed ElBaradei

Print

By Daniel Dombey

Published: February 19 2007 21:12 | Last updated: February 19 2007 21:12

On Monday, the Financial Times talked to Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency ahead of a crucial week in the dispute over Iran's nuclear programme.

A UN Security Council resolution passed last December calls on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment – which can produce both nuclear fuel and weapons grade material – by Wednesday February 21, the date that Mr ElBaradei is due to produce a report on Terhan's compliance with the Security Council's demands.

On Tuesday he is scheduled to meet Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. Barring a last minute breakthrough, the dispute will then return to the UN, where the US will push for additional sanctions.

In his 40-minute interview with the FT, Mr ElBaradei made clear his doubts both about calls for more sanctions and the international community's emphasis on suspending enrichment. He says that it is far more important to dissuade Iran from pursuing enrichment on an industrial scale – a development that could be a mere six months away – since the country has already acquired considerable technical knowledge from enriching uranium in a "research and development" facility.

This is a transcript of his conversation with the FT.

The importance of negotiations:

FT: What hopes do you have that the Iran nuclear dispute will be resolved in a reasonable time period?

ElBaradei: I'm still quite hopeful because I don't see any other option, quite frankly. How long will it take to convince all the parties to go back to the negotiating table is a matter of speculation. I know however for sure that even if you go for a year or two for retaliation and counter-retaliation and more sanctions it will get worse for everybody, Iran of course, but also all other parts of the international community, specifically, in the Middle East which simply cannot afford an additional escalation which would lead to militancy and increase terrorism. So if we can avoid going through this painful process, knowing that it can never resolve the issue, and try to resolve the process going back to negotiation, that's obviously in the interest of everybody. Both sides understand that. Both sides understand that there's no other way except than to go to negotiation. It's just a question of how to get both sides to the negotiating table while saving face. It really is about saving face...

There's a lot of efforts by everybody trying to do that right now, a lot of it is really, more [of a] drafting process, more how to present a package in a balanced way and whereby the Iranians would feel that they have not lost face and the international community would feel that their requirements had been satisfied. I came up with this idea of double, simultaneous suspension, a time out.

FT: Which would be simultaneous rather than sequential?

ElBaradei: Correct, and that would require some sort of road map to agree on that, or a timeline if you like, that Iran will take a time out from its enrichment activities as a confidence building measure. That obviously does not impact on its right because nobody is questioning its right and this is a concern of Iran that this might compromise the right. I don't think anybody is questioning the right, it's about timing and modalities of implementing fully this right in light of the confidence deficit created. And the Security Council made clear that if Iran does suspend they are ready to suspend [sanctions].

FT: Although that was sequential, wasn't it?

EIBaradei: Yes, but really, you can say sequential a day after, it doesn't really matter if you agree in advance how this will happen, it can be simultaneous. It can even be the same day, somebody will look at it as sequential, others can look at it as simultaneous.

As I said, it is not a major hurdle to get over that, because the stakes are just too high right now in my view to go towards a confrontation route. Sanctions were all right because the international community wanted to send a message that we are concerned and they did that, but... everybody knows that sanctions are not going to resolve the issue in and of itself.

Iran's failure to comply with UN demands

FT: People expect on Wednesday you will report that Iran has not suspended because there's no sign that Iran has suspended. That's the clear expectation.

EIBaradei: Yes.

FT: So after your report there will obviously more pressure from the US to push for more sanctions. Do you think that it will be ill advised to push for more sanctions at the Security Council straight away?

EIBaradei: Obviously, short of a major change of heart, I would report that Iran has not complied with the demand of the international community to suspend. I'm going to see Mr Larijani tomorrow, who's coming to see me in Vienna. And I will continue to make a last ditch effort to try to convince them that it is in their interest to find a way to go into negotiations. If it doesn't happen and I don't see that it is going to happen overnight, I will have to report negatively.

The Security Council resolution, the previous one, 1737 [agreed in December], indicated that if Iran did not comply they will take additional measures. It's a policy judgment, I do not want to replace myself for the Security Council's judgment, but I know for sure that even with additional sanctions, if they were to go for additional sanctions, they would still, in parallel, look for ways to get Iran to the negotiating table and in compliance with the concern of the international community that the programme is not a peaceful programme. Really the whole thing is about confidence building.

Sanctions

FT: You have have real concerns about sanctions. If they begin to bite do you think they are counter productive?

EIBaradei: I have major concerns about relying on sanctions alone. Our experience without exception is that sanctions alone do not work and in most cases radicalise the regime and hurt the people who are not supposed to be hurt. So I have a major concern not about sanctions per se but sanctions alone. And sanctions have to be coupled at all time with incentives and a real search for a compromise based on face saving, based on respect.

I mean we always forget this word respect. A lot of the problems we face, fifty per cent at least if not more, is psychological. Substance is important, but fifty per cent of it is how you approach it, how you reach out to people, how you understand where they're coming from. So I will continue to say: 'Yes, it is your prerogative to apply sanctions but sanctions alone will not do it and you need to invest as much in trying to find a solution through negotiation.'"

The tensions between Iran and the US

FT: Do you think both sides have invested inadequately in negotiations?

EIBaradei: I think so. I've been on the record for saying for many years that the Iranian issue will only be resolved when the US takes a decision to engage Iran directly... The nuclear issue is the tip of the iceberg, it masks a lot of grievances, security grievances, competition for power in the Middle East, economic issues, sanctions, it has to do with human rights, support for extremist groups, there are a lot of other issues that need to be resolved. Iran could be very helpful as a stabilising force in the Middle East. The US could be very helpful in providing the security assurances that obviously lie at the heart of some of the Iranian activities.

Iran's mastering of nuclear technology and the next steps

EI Baradei: Even if the Iranian programme is for peaceful purposes there is no question that at the back of their minds this is a deterrent, that it has a deterrence value as it were. So we need to understand that. I look at things also from the global security perspective. My worry primarily is that if Iran were to be pushed out of the regime, then we have another repeat of North Korea. My worry primarily [is about] if Iran were to start chipping away at an inspection authority or ability to do any inspection. And I start to worry [about] if Iran were to develop industrial capability before we at least clarify all these outstanding issues about the history and the nature of the programme.

These are the three important issues for me from a non-proliferation point of view, much more important for me than Iran acquiring the knowledge [of how to enrich uranium]. Because even if that was relevant six months ago it is not relevant today because Iran has been running these centrifuges for at least six months.

Yes, they might acquire a little bit more, perfecting the knowledge, but to aim at denying a country knowledge is almost impossible, to say the least. And there's a big difference between acquiring the knowledge for enrichment and developing a bomb. It is almost impossible for a country to, particularly because this right is quoted under the NPT [nuclear non-proliferation treaty], and the difference between acquiring knowledge and having a bomb is at least five to ten years away. And that's why I said the intelligence, the British, intelligence, the American intelligence, is saying that Iran is still years, five to ten years away from developing a weapon.

We need, what is really important is to have, a proper diagnosis of the problem, assess the problem properly. My concern is that there has been a lot of hype about the Iranian issue because you need to assess it properly and then you need to address it properly, afterwards.

Military action

EI Baradei: What you see right now, all this talk about the use of force, it's not only counter productive but in fact does not in any way help resolve the issue. Imagine what a regime would feel if they hear that force will be used against them, in addition to being called names, in addition to talk about regime change in the past. Even if they were not going to develop a nuclear weapon today, this would be a sure recipe for them to go down that route.

FT: And how worried are you that the US or Israel might carry out military action, an air strike?

EI Baradei: I of course cannot give hundred per cent guarantees that this will not happen because you read about this all the time. I don't know whether it is hype or if there is some kernel of truth to it.

I know for sure that this would be catastrophic, counterproductive, whatever you called it because for a variety of reasons.

One, I know that what we see in Iran right now is not the industrial capacity you can [use to develop a] bomb. You have small R&D at the knowledge level... to enrich uranium. And I said a hundred times you cannot bomb knowledge.

So there is not really much to bomb. And if you [do] then [you] turn the Iranian drive or you put it in high gear for developing a nuclear weapon. We know that if you jolt a country's pride, all the factions, right, left and centre will get together and try to accelerate a programme to develop a nuclear weapon to defend themselves.

That's classic strategic thinking in any country, whether it's a democracy, a theocracy, whatever... There is a fundamental choice people need to make, which is either you understand that there is a limit to military power, that these issues mask a sense of insecurity or even competition for dominance or influence but force is not the appropriate means to address these issues. Or [you] go for the military option and then either you'll have a repeat of North Korea or you have a repeat of Iraq and these are not our greatest achievements as civilised human beings.

Iran's current nuclear capacity

FT: You talk about them having a small R&D programme. There's a certain amount of cloudiness

about where they are. We know that they have two 164 centrifuge cascades above ground in the "R&D" facility at Natanz. They have also said but sometimes denied that they have two further 164 centrifuge cascades below ground in in Natanz. Is that where they are at the moment?

EI Baradei: I think that's where they are at the moment. I think they probably even have one, I'm not sure they've even installed the second one, so it is still just one, so it is still small scale, so whatever they have, what we have seen today, is not the kind of capacity that would enable them to make bombs.

FT: So have the two [cascades of centrifuges] above ground been functioning smoothly at all?

EI Baradei: They have been functioning, I think they have been functioning, they have been able to run them simultaneously, and that also shows as I said that they acquire the knowledge.

The UN demands for suspension of uranium enrichment

EI Baradei: The idea... to continue to focus only on the suspension in my view is not the right approach. You can focus on suspension because it is a confidence building measure but... if I look at it from a weapons perspective there are much more important issues to me than the suspension of this.

The ideal situation is to make sure that there is no industrial capacity, that there is full inspection, because you are asking me how much do they have underground, well I can tell you, but we are not implementing the Additional Protocol [of the NPT], so I don't have spot checks and I do not have the confidence I would have with the Additional Protocol.

FT: When did the inspectors last visit?

EI Baradei: It was last week [when] we were there. I mean the inspection is going smoothly insofar as that I think. It gives us additional authority, it's not just the spot checks. I mean spot checks are not that important, I mean frankly you go after a week, you see what's happened. But what happens is that it gives us [more insight into] R&D. For example [under the additional protocol, currently not applied by Iran, we have] authority to see manufacturing of equipment, which for now we are not able to see. Are they manufacturing more equipment to install later on, that we are not able to see at the moment.

Top priorities

EI Baradei: My three priorities as I said are [for] Iran not to go to industrial capacity until the issues are settled, confidence is built, we need full inspection, involving additional protocol, and at all costs I would like to see Iran not moving out of the [treaty based non-proliferation] system. That would set a terrible precedent and I do not want them to come back in a couple of years and say: 'Good morning gentlemen, we have nuclear weapons.'

The prospects of Iran achieving industrial scale enrichment.

FT: If you define industrial capacity as a cascade of 3,000 centrifuges or more, since if that was fully functioning it would take a year to get enough fissile material for a bomb, how far away do you think they are at the current stage of progress?

EI Baradei: I think they are still far away

FT: A year, two years?

EI Baradei: It's difficult, I really like not to take numbers, to speculate, but away from what, from developing the three thousand [centrifuges]?

FT: From getting three thousand functioning smoothly.

EI Baradei: I don't know, it could be a year, it could be six months. It could be a year, but we need to remember but as long as even they have 3,000 [centrifuges], as long as these 3,000 are under [NPT] safeguards, they cannot go beyond five per cent, people forget that... it's really a risk

assessment more of tomorrow more than it is of today...

The choices ahead

EI Baradei: I don't judge intention. It's very difficult to judge. And you know it very much on which kind of environment you create in the region. If you create an environment in which Iran feels isolated, in which Iran is subject to further sanctions, then some of these worst case scenarios could take place, because then you would put the hard liners in the driver's seat, you would make the country feel more and more insecure and then some of these scenarios could happen.

If there is another narrative, based on engagement, based on dialogue, based on reconciling differences, based on stabilising Iraq, stabilising Lebanon, opening up a trade agreement with the Iranians based on providing [them] with nuclear technology, western technology, as the six party offer [tabled last year by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana on behalf of the UK, France, Germany, the US, China and Russia] promises, then this progression could be quite different, because first of all Iran would not necessarily fear that they would be attacked.

FT: So the US needs to give security guarantees?

EI Baradei: Oh yes, absolutely, then we should also stop calling names and threaten regime change. And of course if we give them all the technology they need then of course it's costly anyway [to pursue their own uranium enrichment], even if they wanted to. However, we need to explore all these options...

Iran sees enrichment.. sooner or later as a strategic goal because they feel that this will bring them power, prestige and influence. They feel that this will bring them into the company of some of the large and influential [states], the 12, 13 countries with enrichment processing, even if they don't have a weapon, and to change that perception you need to then to look into the whole regional and global security position, because unfortunately a lot of that is true. A nuclear capability is a nuclear deterrent in many ways...

When you see here in the UK the programme for modernising Trident, which basically gets the UK far into the 21st century with a nuclear deterrent, it is difficult then for us to turn around and tell everybody else that nuclear deterrents are really no good for you, it does not increase your security, because all the weapon states, without exception, are either modernising, or thinking about developing new weapons not only for deterrence purpose, but actually usable [ones]. Statements have been made during the last couple of years about possible actual use, such as mini-nukes, bunker buster. So the environment is do as I say not do as I say and that is not sustainable.

What Iran needs to begin negotiations

FT: Your 'time out' idea is deliberately vague. Would it be enough for the Iranians to suspend enrichment activities since the resolution calls on them to do more?

EI Baradei: I think the resolution talks about if they suspend enrichment-related activities, [then] they will suspend sanctions. They ask them to do a host of other things, but suspension of sanctions is linked to the enrichment. And yes, there is a part of constructive ambiguity because I would like to leave people room for manoeuvre to negotiate the details.

I cannot replace myself for governments, it is governments to negotiate the details, but it is encouraging that I have not seen anyone so far reject the idea. Everyone so far is saying we like this but we want to add this or that or the other. I still think it's very much an idea that's alive and kicking. President Putin recently came in support of it, the Germans, the French said that this mutual suspension is a good idea. The Americans also did not reject it so far although they said that the Security Council resolution is clear. That's fine, but somebody needs to take it and translate it into a working solution.

FT: Have you seen any solid or substantial response from the Iranians? I know that they didn't make a big noise on Revolution Day [which Iran celebrates on 11 February].

EI Baradei: That was frankly quite positive, because all the expectations were that they were going to announce that they were going to go for the 3,000 centrifuges and maybe some other stuff.

They did not do that and I think the president [Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad] said he would make that announcement in April. That to me is an effort to reach out. It's a moderate reaction, frankly. So we still have this window of opportunity, but the window of opportunity is frankly until our board meets.

Even if my report is coming out this week, I can still add and reverse judgements there until the 6th of March. So we have a window that is not very long, but still I would still like to see something happening before the board because once I go to the board then you go into this sort of autopilot process, the board would react, the Security Council would react, it then makes things much more difficult.

The US

FT: How constructive has the US been?

EI Baradei: The US has been helpful in joining the six party offer. That took a lot of time and was a step in the right direction. I still hope that eventually the IS will be able to get into direct contact with Iran about the regional issues and not only the nuclear issue because they are very much linked, the connection between the regional issue and the nuclear issue are very much linked because they are all about security, we should not delude ourselves about that.

The US building up of military force in the Gulf, I think it's not only [because of] the nuclear issue, it's.. Iraq, it's... Afghanistan, Gulf protection, we have seen that over time, people flexing muscles, and the Iranians have been making parades.

But flexing muscles and showing how much force you have, it's part of the game, but... the issues at hand are not going to be resolved by shows of force and frankly a lot of issues we are facing in the Middle East today are absolutely immune to any resolution through the use of force...

I am all for dialogue, as I am all from negotiation, not because this is a soft approach, but I know if you engage people you moderate their behaviour. If you isolate them you radicalise them. That's why I always say if you have a problem sit and talk it over but if you continue to think that dialogue is the icing on the cake and I will only do it if people are behaving well you might have to wait for very long.

North Korea

FT: Some people see the agreement on North Korea as a re-enactment of the Agreed Framework [the 1994 nuclear deal between the US and Pyongyang] but this time North Korea had nuclear weapons. So was it a mistake for the US to walk away?

EI Baradei: I leave it to the US government and the public to judge that. People refer to this agreement as the son of the Agreed Framework. Hopeful, it's a legitimate son, hopefully it will allow us to go forward. I have a lot on my plate for me now, while I'm still doing this job, to reminisce and say what we have done wrong.

We have done a lot of things wrong on this and many issues but the important thing is to focus on the future. I think this is a step in the right direction. It is not the ideal solution. Korea should not have had nuclear weapons. We have mismanaged nuclear North Korea to the point where they have a nuclear weapon so that's why I say we do not want a repeat of it in Iran...

And it is not ideal because we are going to deal [with] inspection in an incremental way, but the world is not black and white, as long as we are talking and not bombing each other, I think that is positive.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2007