



Iran nuclear crisis: "negotiations only alternative to war"

The EU agreed last week on sanctions on oil imported from Iran to force the country back to the negotiating table and prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. As MEPs prepared to discuss the issue, we spoke to Tarja Cronberg, chair of the EP delegation for relations with Iran. The Finnish Green stressed the need for negotiations: "The problem is that the EU mistrusts the Iranians and the Iranians mistrust the Europeans, but it is necessary because the alternative is war."

What is the EU's problem with Iran?

The EU has had a long history of negotiations with Iran about the nuclear issue and I think the problem has been that EU has felt that the Iranians are not serious, that they are playing with the EU and not being transparent enough. So the sanctions are a strong message to the Iranians that the EU is willing to negotiate, but they have to be serious about it.

Is Iran the new "bad guy"?

(George W. Bush's) "Axis of Evil" speech, created a political stasis which still affects the situation. The Iranians feel that their right to enrich uranium, which they have under international treaties, has been unjustly infringed, and that they suffer harsher sanctions than many other countries that enrich uranium, such as Japan and Brazil. I see a need for incentives for negotiation and think that Catherine Ashton should say the EU is open to discussions without preconditions. The problem is that the EU mistrusts the Iranians and the Iranians mistrust the Europeans, so it is a difficult starting position, but it is necessary because the alternative is war.

What are the sanctions for and what is the position of the European Parliament?

These sanctions are very general. They are sanctions on oil and on the central bank. This will have an impact on the whole Iranian economy, but whether it will make the government change its policy, we don't know. Probably not. There are very few examples in the world where sanctions have changed policy. Iran is being pushed into a corner and it will have difficulties saving face in front of the population while starting negotiations. Hence the need for new incentives. The Parliament is going to vote on a resolution tomorrow. It supports the sanctions, but also stresses the need for Iran to be more open and transparent about its nuclear programme.

Is it possible that the sanctions will not affect the people?

It is impossible to squeeze a country's economy without it affecting its people. I'm sure that the Iranians will have to dismiss teachers, save money on hospitals, so it will affect people, their working places and their income.

But these oil sanctions will also have an impact on the world economy, they will also affect us. We will have to pay more for oil if Iranian oil is not on the market. What is worse is that it will hit certain countries in Europe harder than others: Greece imports most of its oil from Iran under very good conditions and they will feel the sanctions. So people in the EU already experiencing economic problems will face even more.

Can we compare Iran with Iraq?

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There are some parallels. The West suspected in both cases that there are weapons of mass destruction under development. Iraq didn't have nuclear weapons, there were no decisions to make such weapons and in Iran there are no nuclear weapons, so this is a parallel. A difference is that while Saddam Hussein suspended the inspections, so there were no inspections, in Iran there are continuous inspections and actually there was an inspection team that just left today.