

- Ernie Regehr
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Tone down Iran rhetoric

While a not-so-fringe cadre of Israelis and American Republicans can't seem to stop talking about attacking Iran, we should be grateful that there are still people and institutions with formal responsibilities who are determined to rise above the current din and stick to facts and the careful pursuit of an actual resolution of the Iranian nuclear question.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper was right to offer a frank assessment of the dangers of an Iranian bomb, as he did in a recent CBC interview, but he squandered an important opportunity to reinforce the formal and critically important efforts of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Declaring the evidence to be "overwhelming," Harper said "there is absolutely no doubt (Iranians) are lying" when they claim that Iran's nuclear program is for peaceful uses. But neither the atomic energy agency nor U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Iran has made a clear decision to acquire nuclear weapons.

There is certainly evidence that Iran is in pursuit of fuel cycle technologies that would help give it the capability of acquiring nuclear weapons. But as uncomfortable as that may be, there is still a real and important distinction between such a capability and actual acquisition.

The atomic energy agency continues to reject the kind of absolutist rhetoric used by the prime minister and is instead carrying out inspections in Iran and engaging directly with Iranian authorities to evaluate evidence that points to weapons ambitions. The recent statement by the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani, that Iran is ready for "serious" talks, is another welcome development. Turkey has offered to host new talks between Iran and the international community represented by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

These modest but positive developments come in the midst of tightening sanctions that are reportedly beginning to bite deeply into Iranian society and its economy. The U.S. has been pressing for tougher sanctions and is winning support in Europe. Russia, on the other hand, warns sensibly that sanctions could be counterproductive, by escalating tensions and bolstering those in Iran arguing for taking the next step toward acquiring a bomb.

The primary way to lessen the danger that Iran's increasing isolation could lead it to intensify its pursuit of a nuclear weapon is to ensure that harsh sanctions are matched by intensified diplomacy that offers Iran a clear, but realistic, way to end the international community's pressure on it. And being "realistic" requires two important changes in the international community's approach.

First, the UN Security Council will have to make full transparency and unfettered inspections, not a suspension of all uranium enrichment, the primary measure of Iran's willingness to abide by its international obligations.

Iran has an increasingly advanced enrichment capacity, as do some other non-nuclear weapon states in good standing with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Enrichment is not prohibited by the treaty, of which Iran is a signatory; being open and fully transparent about its nuclear activities is however a key requirement of the treaty. In other words, the focus should be on getting Iran to meet enhanced transparency standards, including implementation of the International Atomic Energy Agency's additional protocol (something the Security Council has already demanded), compliance with which would increase access by agency inspectors and allow them to come closer to confirming whether or not Iran is now pursuing a weapons option.

The second change in approach is to recognize that the Iranian nuclear issue requires a regional approach. This is the year for a proposed international conference on creating a nuclear-weapon-free-zone in the Middle East — a proposal promoted by the Arab world in particular and fully accepted by the international community already in 1995 as an essential requirement for stability in the Middle East and for progress toward global nuclear disarmament. Even Israel, with its robust nuclear arsenal (the existence of which it neither confirms nor denies), accepts that this must ultimately come to pass, and it is this regional context that will be a key to developing long-term confidence that a scientifically advanced Iran will eschew the nuclear weapons option.

That does not mean that the Iranian nuclear issue cannot be resolved until Israel disarms, but it does mean that active and concrete work toward eliminating all weapons of mass destruction from the Middle East region is an important part of the process of creating a regional environment conducive to persuading Iran not to take the final and fatal step toward weaponization of its nuclear capacity.

It is appropriate for prime minister Harper to warn of the dangers of an Iranian bomb, and his confirmation that he is in touch with other world leaders in search of a solution is also welcome, but that search is not aided by absolutist rhetoric and repeated declarations that military options must remain on the table.

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