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Talking to Iran about nuclear nonproliferation

Last March Project Ploughshares hosted a roundtable on Nuclear Issues in Relation to Iran. It was organized in cooperation with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Ottawa Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 24 participants included officials and scholars from Iran and from the Embassy of Iran. Canadian participants included former officials and diplomats, academics, and members of the NGO community, while the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa provided assistance and facilities. The discussions were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis to facilitate a free and frank exchange of ideas. It was jointly chaired by **William Janzen** of the Mennonite Central Committee and **Ernie Regehr** of Project Ploughshares. This report summarizes the day's discussions.

The objective of the roundtable was to deepen common understanding of Iran's nuclear policies and perspectives, to offer our Iranian guests Canadian perspectives on nuclear nonproliferation in general and on Iranian nuclear issues in particular, and to provide a forum for Canadians and Iranians to engage with one another on current nonproliferation challenges.

Challenges to the nonproliferation regime

The discussion was informed by two formal presentations. Professor Trevor Findlay of Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs reviewed the nuclear nonproliferation regime and its challenges, and Dr. Mohammad Taghi Hosseini, Counsellor for Disarmament at the Iranian Mission in Geneva, reviewed Iran's approach to disarmament and nonproliferation. A broad range of issues was addressed, some specific to the nonproliferation question and others more broadly linked to the national, regional, and global contexts within which nonproliferation efforts are pursued. The roundtable did not have a mandate to reach any common conclusions or consensus; rather, the focus was on promoting dialogue and understanding.

Participants were reminded that while states enjoy an inalienable right to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, that right is conditional on compliance with the nonproliferation regime. Primary instances of noncompliant states that are (or were) non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) include Iraq, North Korea, Libya, and Iran. In addition, the nuclear weapon state (NWS) parties to the Treaty are arguably in noncompliance with Article VI of the NPT. It was pointed out that the NPT does not give NWS the right to retain nuclear weapons indefinitely. Disarmament is central to the Treaty

and the indefinite extension of the NPT (in 1995) would not have happened without a clear and renewed commitment from the NWS to disarm.

Besides the key noncompliance cases, which are at varying stages of resolution, the nonproliferation regime faces a number of additional challenges, including the danger that unsecured materials will get into the hands of terrorists, the continuing production of highly enriched (i.e., weapons grade) uranium in civilian research reactors, and the clandestine exchange of nuclear technology and materials. These dangers are likely to intensify in the face of a “nuclear revival” that could see not only the construction of many new nuclear reactors and related facilities, but also the addition of new countries to the list of civilian nuclear users. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will need a significantly enhanced capacity to meet the growing demand for monitoring these facilities and for the effective administration of safeguards.

The point was made that because proliferation pressures and risks (vertical and horizontal) are inevitably linked to strategic dynamics and zones of conflict, solutions to nonproliferation compliance breaches must necessarily be linked to strategic and regional security solutions. Some emphasized the double standards that are endemic to the nonproliferation regime and included them among the obstacles to building universal support for the nonproliferation regime.

It was also pointed out that confidence in the nonproliferation regime requires a high degree of transparency and full and early disclosure of all nuclear-related activity. And while the regime is built on dual standards, that is, on different immediate requirements for NWS and NNWS, the perceived noncompliance of some states does not justify noncompliance or lack of transparency and accountability of others.

Iranian nuclear activities

It was pointed out that Iran’s nuclear activities began in the 1970s in cooperation with the United States. A 1973 Stanford study was cited as concluding that Iran needed nuclear energy. That was during the time of the Shah, but after the Islamic revolution the US attitude toward Iran and its nuclear program changed and US policy moved toward undermining and isolating the Islamic state.

The seminar heard that the Iran nuclear program continues to be focused exclusively on developing the capacity to produce electricity, and while Iran’s clandestine activities had raised many questions about the real purpose of Iran’s program, the IAEA has now cleared up the major issues relating to Iran’s possible noncompliance with nonproliferation obligations. Iran’s legal right to nuclear technology, including enrichment technology, was emphasized, along with the view that both the IAEA and the US National Intelligence Estimate have indicated that Iran is now pursuing these technologies exclusively for peaceful purposes.

It was noted that, despite the recognition of the dual standard and support for Iran’s position within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the international community’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear programs and activities are broadly based. The fact that the

United Nations Security Council has reached unanimous or near-unanimous conclusions about Iran indicates that concerns about Iran's enrichment activity and questions about its objective extend well beyond the US and the West. Others like China and Russia and some members of the NAM share these concerns and have supported sanctions against Iran.

The nuclear fuel cycle

Participants paid considerable attention to proposals for the multilateral control of proliferation of sensitive elements of the nuclear fuel cycle. Questions were raised about how it would work and what states would play what roles. It was asked whether Iran, even if it has a right to produce nuclear fuel, must insist that it exercise that right.

It was pointed out that Iran has started down the fuel cycle road and will not turn back. The key issue is access to fuel. Iran is wary of relying on external sources when the US administration is determined to construct eligibility criteria for access to international sources of nuclear fuel that focus on US judgments about "good guys" and "bad guys" in the international community.

A distinction was made between Iran's acquiring the capacity and knowledge to manufacture fuel and its insistence that fuel manufacturing actually take place within Iran itself. Attention was also drawn to the fact that the NPT is already built on a distinction between "have" and "have not" states, and that the international community should not extend a similar "have" and "have not" division in the manufacture of nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes.

The roundtable heard that, in response to requests to suspend uranium enrichment as a confidence-building measure, Iran responds with the question: under what circumstances would the US support the resumption of enrichment activity in Iran? What incentive would there be for the US to negotiate with Iran and come to a general agreement or meeting of minds if that meant a resumption of enrichment in Iran?

The suggestion was made that, rather than focus on the suspension of enrichment, the international community should focus on persuading Iran to implement the Additional Protocol. It was observed that Iran would be more inclined to respond positively if the issue were to be removed from the agenda of the Security Council.

It was pointed out that Iran has declared its openness to accept participation from foreign companies and governments (from countries within and beyond the region) in its uranium enrichment activity. Iran's interest in enrichment derives from the challenges it faces in getting international cooperation in these technologies, which in turn stems from external perceptions about Iran as a threat. At the same time, it was noted that Iran has not seen any acceptable proposals for fuel supply guarantees that would permit Iran to forgo a domestic fuel manufacturing program. While Iran believes that an effective global fuel supply guarantee would be good, it still insists on being in the fuel supplier club.

It was also noted that some states are concerned that they have not seen any proposals for fuel production by an international consortium inside Iran that would not be susceptible to takeover by the Iranian government, which could then use the technologies and materials gained for non-peaceful purposes. The discussion highlighted three key elements in the acquisition of nuclear weapons: the production of fissionable materials, the building and testing of missiles, and the building of a warhead. Iran is actively and publicly engaged in the first two and some studies suggest that it has also expressed interest in the third and decisive element—building a warhead.

Iranian security concerns and views on the world

Iran's serious security concerns were also raised. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the Israeli nuclear arsenal threaten Iran. The Gulf Wars, the Taliban, and some former USSR states all challenge Iranian security interests. Despite these concerns, it was pointed out that Iran fully supports the NPT, as well as the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. It was emphasized that Iran's legitimate security interests need to be recognized, including the urgent need to pursue a reliable and mutual regional security system for the Middle East. Arms control does not take place in a security vacuum.

Iran, it was pointed out, is not interested in isolation. It wants integration into the international community and wants healthy relations with the West. While Iran has been cooperative on Afghanistan and Iraq, it still gets labeled as part of an axis of evil.

Some of the discussion was on broader Iranian approaches to international relations and its security interests. It was pointed out that Iran must be understood as a post-revolutionary society whose identity, institutions, and perceived interests are shaped by that reality. This analysis did not mean to suggest that Iran has assumed a posture of permanent revolution. Iran is a modern state, but not one based on an imported modernity. Iran is a nation state, but not a monolithic state. It is also a debating society based on a very active public discourse on policy issues.

Iran's post-revolutionary culture values justice, independence, and freedom as the basis for the pursuit of knowledge—including knowledge about the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This seeking is balanced by a high religious conviction and imperative against the acquisition of nuclear weapons. This imperative is confirmed by Iran's own strategic determination that nuclear weapons are unusable.

Going forward

Some participants issued a plea to strengthen the commitment of NWS not to attack or threaten to attack NNWS with nuclear weapons, and expressed a desire to move from a "realist" pursuit of security to a "cooperative" pursuit, perhaps by easing the concentration on nuclear weapons and focusing on other issues as well, for a while. Concern was also expressed over the use of Israel's policies by some countries in the region to justify their own.

Suggestions on future actions or approaches that could help to resolve the Iran nuclear

question included pursuing a broader diplomatic engagement of Iran without preconditions, bolder and more specific confidence-building measures/gestures by Iran as well as the international community, international (and American) acceptance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Iranian acceptance of the US presence in the Persian Gulf and other regional realities.

Participants generally indicated that they found the exchanges genuine and perspectives well articulated and, in some cases, significantly challenged. The Iranian participants also travelled to Waterloo, among other centres, where they visited the offices of Project Ploughshares and the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Conrad Grebel University College.

The full report is available at the Ploughshares website (www.ploughshares.ca).