

Think twice, Canada, before attacking Tehran

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Do Canadians support participation in a pre-emptive attack on Iran? Do we believe that the issues raised by Iran's nuclear program warrant using the Canadian Forces in another Persian Gulf war? What about protecting Syrian civilians against their own government? Can we do either, or both? Should we? These questions seem ever less hypothetical and ever more urgent.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has issued a report providing considerable circumstantial evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons capability. But in reacting to it, some are inserting exclamation points where question marks would be more appropriate – as took place in the build-up to the U.S.-led attack on Iraq in 2003.

It is not clear whether Tehran intends to cross the nuclear weapons threshold, or merely position themselves to do so relatively quickly at a later time. Either way, the Iranian effort raises potentially grave (albeit differentiated) issues for the international community, including Canada, which joined the United States and Britain on Monday in applying new sanctions against Tehran.

Israeli newspapers have been reporting efforts by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak to muster senior ministers' support for an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. These reports have coincided with tests of an Israeli long-range ballistic missile capable of reaching Iran, air-to-air refuelling exercises with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and civilian readiness drills in Tel Aviv.

Mr. Barak, who met with Canadian National Defence Minister Peter MacKay last week, told CNN on Sunday that if it isn't stopped within months, redundant facilities in the Iranian program will render an attack ineffectual. He asserted that a nuclear-armed Iran would use its nuclear umbrella to intimidate Persian Gulf countries and sponsor terror with impunity. He also warned of a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race involving Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt.

The Israeli positioning may be designed to get inside the heads of Iranian and Western leaders. Perhaps it is deadly serious. Either way, U.S. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta warned publicly against unilateral action during a recent visit to Israel, during which he also reportedly asked – in vain – for a guarantee that Israel would not carry out a unilateral military strike without Washington's clearance. In Halifax over the weekend, Mr. Panetta warned that a military strike could have severe global economic consequences.

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In Israel, cabinet officials and others remain divided. Meir Dagan, the recently retired head of the spy agency Mossad, called an attack against Iran “the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.”

Indeed, such a war would be no piece of cake, as the invasion of Iraq was misleadingly portrayed. The world is unlikely to just move on after a strike and an Iranian response. Unless an attack is authorized by the United Nations Security Council, a distant prospect at best, it would almost certainly plunge the Middle East deeper into turmoil, roil Western relations with the Muslim world, refuel Islamist extremism, disrupt the Arab awakening, damage the international oil market and weaken the precarious international economy.

Assuming the likely near-term inadequacy of sanctions, the essential question boils down to this: Which is worse, the bomb or the bombing? Relying on post-facto deterrence, as we do with U.S., Russian, British, French, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, North Korean and (presumed) Israeli weapons? Or attacking Iran to destroy its capability, or at least delay a nuclear breakthrough?

Separately, there is another *casus belli* developing in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad’s regime has evidently decided to destroy the country’s opposition, killing as many as it takes in the process, using military force against the civilian population. Will the world stand by and let it happen? Should it?

Where does all this leave Canada, with its comparatively small but not inconsequential and quite capable military? On CTV’s *Question Period* this weekend, Mr. Mackay recalled the centrality of the Security Council to any intervention in Syria. And regarding Iran, he described the military option as “the least preferable.” Last week, Foreign Minister John Baird said Canada “will continue to work with its like-minded allies to take the necessary action for Iran to abandon its nuclear program. ... It is not a question of if, but to what extent, we will act in response to this report.” Prime Minister Stephen Harper has repeatedly portrayed Israel as an ally. What is this government, the most pro-Israeli in Canadian history, planning to do?

Major Canadian interests are potentially at risk, including the integrity of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, respect for international law, the safety of friends and kin in the region, the health of the global economy and the preservation of the public peace at home. Canadians need to engage and come to as common a view as possible on how to protect our interests and project our values in the Middle East before we find ourselves drifting into war. This issue is too important to be left to politicians and politics as usual.

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