

[By Neal P. Goswami](#)

Vermont Congressman Peter Welch says he will use information gleaned from a recent trip to the Middle East focused on Iran's effort to create a nuclear weapon to advocate for changes in U.S. energy policy.

"[The fact that] they're proceeding is the bottom line and it's very dangerous. There's a lot of apprehension in the United States and it's widely shared in the region," Welch, a third-term Democrat, said in a phone interview Tuesday.

The congressman returned over the weekend after stops in France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The trip was led by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va. Welch was the lone Democrat in the delegation.

Sanctions on Iran

Welch said the countries he visited are all opposed to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. They support strong sanctions "to try and change Iranian behavior." The sanctions would restrict Iran's ability to sell its oil.

Iran recently threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to new sanctions. About one-sixth of the world's oil flows through the narrow waterway.

There is also "broad apprehension in those countries about military action," according to Welch.

"What we have is a situation where there is no good answer," he said. "It appears to be located deep underground out of range of effective military action that would stop it. It might slow it down, but it would not stop it."

With a presidential election underway, how to deal with Iran has become a major issue. Some have advocated for military strikes to dismantle any ongoing efforts in Iran.

"I always worry about the military drum beat. What we've seen is that when we go to war, Vermonters pay a steep price," he said. "I'm concerned about nuclear Iran, but I'm also concerned about folks who think there's an easy military answer."

Small Arab states like Qatar and United Arab Emirates worry that military action could make Iran "more bellicose and more involved in interfering with other countries," Welch said.

In Turkey, which has a large Muslim population, one-third of the natural gas for heating homes comes from Iran. "The prime minister was very concerned about how a price disruption would impact the economy and their families there. That's something Vermonters can appreciate," Welch said.

"This is a situation where I found it extremely valuable to meet with these leaders in a region of the world that would be most effected by any action we would take, either sanctions or military," he added.

Welch said he plans to use the information he gathered on the trip to promote the idea that the country's energy policy is closely tied to national security. He said progress on developing renewable, green energy and creating energy independence will make the country safer.

"This is going to be an ongoing debate in Congress," he said. "My view is that the information that I have is going to be very helpful for me in trying to advocate for some of the long-term changes that we need. We need a new energy policy."