

Iran in the American Executive-Legislative Relationship

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Abstract

Having reached an interim accord in Geneva, two governments with a tortured political history must now work to sell it and the diplomatic strategy they have laid out to their own constituencies back home. In this paper, the role of the United States Congress in the process of developing American foreign policy in general and, in the current matter of Iran's nuclear file in particular will be examined. To do so, it describes the history of the relationship between the White House and Congress and then examines the difficult task of the Obama administration to garner support for its strategy in Congress. It reviews the reservations voiced by many in Congress regarding the Geneva nuclear interim accord as well as their misgivings regarding a final agreement. As the matter at hand involves high stake politics in the Middle East, it may carry grave consequences for the status quo in the region. The possible ramifications and the way this effects the position of those in Congress will also be explored. Lastly, since lobby groups have historically had a major role in American foreign policy towards the Middle East, their extensively-discussed role in this case as well as challenges they face will also be touched upon. In general, this paper proposes to describe specifically the way the US policy towards Iran is being formulated and what role Congress plays in the process. Effort will be made to find out to what extent the domestic politics has an impact on the approach of Congress towards Iran and how Congress may be influenced by Middle East regional powers.

Keywords: Geneva Accord, Iran' Nuclear Program, US Congress, Obama Administration, Israel Lobby

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(Received: 23 October 2013 - Accepted: 1 January 2013)

Introduction

Iran-US relationship in general and Iran's nuclear file in particular are among the major foreign policy issues on the agenda of the US Government. Any development in this area would warrant remaking of the US policy in other parts of the Middle East and may lead to power realignment in this very important region. The uneasiness with which some regional countries greeted the Geneva nuclear interim agreement could be a prelude to what this accord may mean for the region. In the past three decades, America drew closer to many countries in the region for the purpose of containing Iran and these countries now are said to be party to the US deliberations on how to move forward in light of the new diplomatic path set in following the interim agreement in Geneva.

Therefore, the possibility, even remote, of major power realignment in the very sensitive and important Middle East region has already sensitized the US foreign policy establishment. US Congress that has almost always been on the record to be an anti-Iranian center has further mobilized in the past few months to tie the hands of the administration in dealing with Iran.

Though the US Constitution makes the President the chief navigator of diplomacy with foreign governments, Congress has important leverage that can influence foreign policy decision making process in Washington. The Senate must "advise and consent," responsibilities regarding President's cabinet nominees. The most important power of Congress comes of having the "power of the purse." Congress must allocate funds disbursed by the U.S.



government and therefore appropriate budgets for Executive branch departments and agencies. Many of these powers, especially “advice and consent” and “power of the purse” have historically been used to assert Congress’s role in foreign policy issues. Congress can also adopt sanctions against foreign governments and countries such as those adopted against the Islamic Republic of Iran and Presidents ability to negate or waive even portions of those sanctions are dictated in the legislation and are usually limited. The Senate must also ratify treaties and can even amend them. This allows members of the Senate to influence the negotiations by expressing unwillingness to vote for approval if certain elements are included or ignored by the final outcome (Leyton-Brown, 1983: 59-76). As will be discussed in this paper, especially in tense negotiation environments, Congressional action can also be disruptive to progress of such talks.

Benefiting from the leverage referred to above, the US Congress is one of the major actors that have impacted US policy making towards Iran primarily by enacting a number of sanctions against the Iranian economy, six in total since 2005. The sanctions, initially framed to cripple Iran’s ability to continue nuclear development, have mushroomed over the years to become a comprehensive array of extraterritorial prohibitions that aggressively pursue major Iranian economic sectors including defense, finance, energy, automotive, as well as the nation’s Central Bank. Since most of US sanctions against Iran have been passed by Congress, their repeal would require congressional approval (Hassibi, 2012). If an agreement with Iran is put forth as a formal treaty, the House of Representatives will be bypassed, but a two thirds vote of the Senate will be required to ratify it.

Though Congress has been usually divided on different issues, policy towards Iran has involved rare displays of consensus. In fact sanctions legislation against Iran over the past few years has experienced token opposition, if any. As an example, the most comprehensive sanctions passed by Congress in recent years was the



Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA), which passed by a 408 to 8 vote margin in the House of Representatives and 99 to 0 in the Senate.

However, some sanctions implemented by executive order can be revoked unilaterally by the President, and Congress has no direct role in deciding America's vote in the United Nations Security Council should a vote to repeal that body's sanctions arise.

I - Confrontation over Iran

The Confrontation between the two branches of the US Government over Iran dates back to the Presidential campaign in 2008. At the time, Barack Obama, then a freshman senator from Illinois, campaigned for the Presidency, in part by taking a bold stance demanding a significant shift in foreign policy towards Iran. Obama said that if elected President, he would reverse the policy by President George W. Bush and agree to engage in direct diplomacy with Iran without extensive preconditions (Parsi, 2012). This position was considered foolish in the common wisdom of Washington D.C. The future president was immediately greeted with consternation from all sides. His opponent during Democratic Party primary, Senator Hilary Clinton reacted to Obama's view, saying "I thought that was irresponsible and frankly naïve" (Berman, 2007). Later, in the general election Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona and a renowned Senate hawk, blasted Obama's remarks on Iran, stating "it's hard to see what such a summit with President Ahmadinejad would actually gain, except an earful of anti-Semitic rants, and a worldwide audience for a man who denies one Holocaust and talks before frenzied crowds about starting another" (McCain's Speech to AIPAC, 2008).

This issue became a major factor in the 2008 contest, marking a significant policy difference between Barack Obama and not just his individual rivals but much of the foreign policy establishment in Washington. Both sides strongly distrust Iran and see it as a threat to



America's security; both sides also believe that Iran's nuclear program is not peaceful as the country's government would claim, but rather an effort at developing a nuclear weapons arsenal (DeYoung and Wilson, 2012). However, most political figures and foreign policy thinkers in Washington strongly opposed any significant departures from President Bush's one dimensional policy of confrontation that had yielded little if any result (Bettiza, Phillips, 2010).

Despite the elevation of Barack Obama to President, this establishment is still widely represented in the United States Congress. This fundamental and overarching disagreement over strategy reflects greater differences between Congress and the President over the goals of American foreign policy towards Iran and desired impact of these policies on the Iran American relationship as well as on the region broadly. This informs the current dynamic in Washington where the President is defending his diplomatic approach and seeking Congressional support, while many in Congress are unsatisfied with the outcome of the Geneva interim and seeks to assert the role of Congress in this matter and confront the President's approach.

Fresh from diplomatic triumph in Geneva, Secretary of State John Kerry delivered a video message to Congress, urging them not to pass new sanctions against Iran while the executive branch and partners from around the world are easing and withdrawing some sanctions in the context of the interim deal. Secretary Kerry insisted in his message that the agreement and the diplomatic path forward would give assurances to Congress about Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons. "We all know that if the agreement falls apart, Iran is going to quickly face even tougher sanctions," he said in the message (Klapper, 2013).

Many in Congress are skeptical of the deal and disapprove of any easing of sanctions as prescribed. Senators have already crafted legislation to implement additional sanctions in concert with sanctions that have been passed by the House of Representatives in the summer. "The American people need an insurance policy to prevent a



rerun of North Korea,” said Senator Mark Kirk, a Republican from Illinois, who is designing a bill alongside Senator Bob Menendez, a Democrat from New Jersey, who chairs the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. Senators Menendez and Kirk have led a bipartisan group of Senators who are skeptical of the diplomatic path (Klapper, 2013). While criticizing the President’s approach as too lenient, they insist that passing new sanctions would strengthen the President’s hand in negotiating with Iran (Traub, 2013). A notion the White House has strongly rejected saying that instead it would complicate negotiations. When the President addressed the American public to announce the interim agreement, he listed as one of Iran’s conditions that “We will refrain from imposing new sanctions” (Obama, 2013).

Secretary Kerry also sought to push back against the rush to pass the new law by using his time to brief the legislators about the details of the agreement with Iran. He also spoke personally to Senator Menendez and warned him of the consequences of his legislation. State department spokesperson Jen Psaki called any new sanctions “unhelpful,” and warned that it would compromise the unity of the six powers that are engaging Iran, a key tactical objective of Secretary Kerry in the Geneva talks and presumably in the six months to come (Klapper, 2013).

While the Congress is still looking to impose the harshest sanctions possible, the Obama Administration is concerned with being viewed as unreasonable by international partners and compromising America’s strategic position in both negotiations with Iran and the efficacy of the sanctions regime. The success of the sanctions in applying pressure to the Iranian economy has been in part credited to the willingness of the United States to publically seek diplomacy and non-confrontational resolution with Iran throughout the Obama administration (Pecquet and Herb, 2013). These efforts are claimed to have caused the U.S. endeavor to be viewed as reasonable and Iran by contrast intransigent, giving credence to the American case against Iran and generating international support for



the sanctions regime even among historic American rivals like Russia and China.

New sanctions passed at this time would corrupt that narrative and possibly lead to resistance in much of the international community. If major economic powers chose to ignore sanctions and maintain business ties with Iran, the US Treasury Office for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, which is charged with implementing sanctions, would face a difficult and perhaps impossible enforcement climate. Banning major European and East Asian Financial institutions and conglomerates from conducting business in America would carry untold economic consequences. Secretary Kerry warned that “other countries would think that the United States is not living up to our end of the bargain in terms of giving the negotiations a chance” he said. “And it could have the opposite impact of what is intended by driving the Iranians to take a harder line in these negotiations in response” (Klapper, 2013).

The new sanctions impose a new certification regime on the Obama Administration, requiring them to declare every thirty days that Iran is abiding by the terms of the six month interim agreement and that Iran has not been involved with any acts of terrorism against the United States. If such a certification is not issued, sanctions worth in excess of one billion dollars a month will be reasserted in addition to new extraterritorial bans on investing in key Iranian economic sectors such as engineering, mining and construction as well as a global ban on Iranian petroleum imports by 2015 (Klapper, 2013). Senators Menendez and Kirk hoped to have their legislation ready for other lawmakers to consider when the Senate returns from its two-week recess and that a finalized version would be ready for the president’s signature by the end of the year (Vinik, 2013).

The White House has threatened that the President might consider vetoing the legislation, but this would be difficult if the Congress were to attach these sanctions to the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (Herb, 2013). Such a measure would not



go without precedent and would underscore tension between the two branches that as previously stated predate the Geneva talks. Moreover, a legislation passed by more than two third of the vote, which is possible in the case of Iran, could be veto proof.

The disagreement between the White House and Congress never subsided since 2008. When in 2011, Congress crafted new sanctions especially targeting Iran's Central Bank and foreign financial transactions as well as Iran's petroleum sales around the world; the administration expressed many concerns regarding both the timing and the content of the legislation. The White House requested that the sanctions be postponed as to coincide with a new round of talks, arguing that a timely threat would be more effective. The President also requested additional waiver authority to negate or postpone sanctions on a segmented basis, as to not overburden the intelligence and sanctions enforcement officers. Additionally, the White House expressed concern that if the sanctions were implemented too quickly, they would be excessively burdensome on corporations, especially in fields such as construction metals and energy (Rogin, 2012).

Concerned that the President might veto the sanctions, Congress incorporated them into another piece of legislation, making them section 1245 of the NDAA of 2012 (best analysis and facts, 2013). The purpose of doing so would be to place the President in a politically difficult position. In order to veto such sanctions, the President would have to veto the entire NDAA, which is the principle vehicle by which the Pentagon and various other defense related items are funded and certain important war power authorities are granted. In the absence of a new NDAA at the beginning of each year, the Pentagon as well as other defense related agencies would lack proper funding and would also be left with regulatory uncertainty in carrying out their national defense and counter terrorism functions.

Having voted for new sanctions without the certification conditions in July 2013, the House of Representatives awaits action in



the Senate. It is believed that if the Senate passes its version of the sanctions and the two bills are reconciled through the conference committee process, the resulting bill would easily pass the House of Representatives, having initially received 400 votes in favor and only 20 votes against (Gardner, 2013). The new developments since the interim deal will likely cause some original supporters to reconsider, but probably not enough to impede final passage. The bill would also not encounter procedural barriers as House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner has been critical of the outreach to Iran and supports new sanctions (Takeyh, 2013).

Thus, the real legislative viability of the new sanctions will be in the hands of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada. Senator Reid has spoken cautiously on the agreement and refused to take a strong position on the sanctions. He has acknowledged the historic nature of the accord while giving acknowledging concerns voice by Benjamin Netanyahu who has called the deal a “Historic Mistake.” He has not yet committed to new sanctions stating that “we will take a look at this to see if we need stronger sanctions” (Zengerle, 2013). Senator Reid has power over what legislation will be brought to the floor of the Senate and could not allow the sanctions to even be voted on. Senator Reid would also have sway over whether the sanctions would be added as an amendment to the NDAA. As such, he could single handedly decide the outcome of this issue.

II – Action Plan: Interim Deal

The context in which Congress operates and the rationales the hawkish in Congress put forward could be summarized as follows:

Undoubtedly part of the uneasy reception to the Geneva agreement is simple hostility towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. The two countries have been engaged in political turmoil since the Revolution in 1979, and the takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran still resonate amongst both lawmakers and their constituents. Media



reports of chants of “Death to America” and reports of rhetoric antagonistic to America from Iranian leaders foster a resentful and distrustful attitude towards Iran. Iran’s support for organizations that the US Department of State considers “terrorist organizations” and the Iranian government’s lack of recognition of Israel also negatively affects the perception of Congress. In total, this has led to an atmosphere where some have claimed that Iran is led by leaders, who operate on ideological postulate rather than self-interest. In fact, in response to opinion surveys, Americans regularly rate Iran as America’s greatest enemy (Newport, 2012).

Most congressmen also argue that the meager amount of sanctions relief provided to Iran through the interim deal is excessive. Even though this represents a fraction of the sanctions and Iranian assets frozen in foreign accounts, critical members of congress have said that it is poorly timed and premature. Some argue that no relief should be provided until all concerns are addressed. Senator Charles Schumer, a Democrat from New York and noted pro-Israel hawk, maintained that it “is not a proportionate agreement” (Lesniewski, 2013). Others claim that such easing would diminish Iran’s motivation to negotiate and that additional sanctions would lead to further concessions by Iran. They also argue that any sanctions relief would allow Iran greater flexibility and empower Iranian authorities to move closer to the nuclear breakthrough. Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican from North Carolina, denounced the deal saying “we had the chance to deliver a body blow.” And that “The sanctions actually worked but this interim deal gives the Iranian’s \$7 billion in cash and leaves in place one of the most sophisticated enrichment programs around” (Cohen, 2013).

One of the key points of disagreement in Geneva was the matter of Iran’s “right to enrich.” With Iran arguing that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) based right of signatories to a peaceful nuclear program extends to the processes of nuclear energy development, including enrichment, and demanding P5+1 powers



recognize that right. P5+1 members, however, claim they recognized no such right for any country and that countries could outsource their enrichment (Blake, 2013). The fact that the first step agreement involves regulation of Iranian enrichment is considered by many to be an implicit recognition of that right. President Rouhani stated in comments after the agreement that “Let anyone make his own reading, but this right is clearly stated in the text of the agreement that Iran can continue its enrichment” (Rezaian, 2013). Many opponents of the interim agreement in Congress have denounced the deal by, in essence, agreeing with President Rouhani’s interpretation. Congressman Mike Rogers, a Republican from Michigan, who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, stated “We may have just encouraged more violence in the future than we have stopped.” He added that “you have now given them a permission slip to continue enrichment,” Rogers said. “That’s what the whole world was trying to stop them from doing” (Blake, 2013). Other opponents claim that Iran’s conduct, which they believe defies international norms and laws, forfeits such a right (Cohen, 2013)

Similar concerns have been expressed by some in congress regarding Iran’s heavy water reactor in Arak, which could generate plutonium, one of two materials that can be used for the core of a nuclear weapon. The interim agreement negotiated in Geneva addresses the matter by stating that Iran would not make “any further advances of its activities” on the Arak reactor. Foreign Minister Zarif, speaking on the matter to the Islamic Consultative Assembly stated that “Capacity at the Arak site is not going to increase. It means no new nuclear fuel will be produced and no new installations will be installed, but construction will continue there. Former chief U.N. nuclear inspector Olli Heinonen wrote in his analysis that “The agreement is silent on the manufacturing of remaining key components of the reactor and its continued heavy-water production” (Heinrich, 2013). As previously stated these members of congress are prone to the belief that Iran’s nuclear program is entirely of a military



nature and that if not for the possibility of nuclear breakthrough, Tehran would not insist on retaining a civilian nuclear program and enrichment capability. Therefore as many supporters of new sanctions have stated, the allowance of any enrichment levels should be considered a failure.

Many in Congress worry that thawing of sanctions in exchange for anything less than zero enrichment would legitimize Iran as a major power in the region as well as permitting Iran to come out from economic turmoil and international isolation. For them it would mean both recognizing Iran's ambitions as well as empowering it in that regards. The Middle East has always involved unstable regimes and unsteady regime structures, as well as competing national philosophies and western interference, leading the region to become a constantly shifting field of alliances. For lawmakers in the west, commitment to allies under such circumstances is considered ill-advised and discouraged for fear of what change in the dynamic of alliances would do to the relationship.

In this environment there are few constants. One such constant has been the enduring enmity between the United States and Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Black, 2013). More recently the Shi'ite versus Sunni rift, long a staple of Middle East affairs has become increasingly violent and tense. The sectarian civil war in Iraq, in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion by the U.S., ratcheted religious conflict to levels not seen since the Iran Iraq war. The current civil war in Syria has severely exacerbated this conflict and has largely become a platform for Iran, and Saudi Arabia to clash in a multi front proxy campaign and possibly teeter to the edge of direct confrontation (MacDonald, 2013). The lower Persian Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, have aggressively lobbied Washington for military action against Iran for years. King Abdullah, as revealed by WikiLeaks, famously urged Barack Obama to "cut off the head of the (Iranian) snake" (Black, 2013).

Israel, for its part, sees Iran as an existential threat. Israeli



leaders believe that Iran is trying to acquire a nuclear weapon and that it will then make good on its goal of wiping Israel off of the map (Elliott, 2013). Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah has also contributed to Israel seeing Iran as its greatest military and strategic challenge in the region and a long term foe.

These facts have created what is arguably one of the more consistent and durable de facto alliance dynamics in modern Middle East history: Saudi Arabia and lower Persian Gulf countries – essentially the Sunni world, in addition to the United States and Israel in opposition to Iran, Syrian Government, and the Shiite world. Contributing to this alliance is the Arab countries relinquishing long term hostilities towards Israel, because they value their relationship with the United States, which has made a stable relationship with Israel a prerequisite for friendship. The lower Persian Gulf Arab states have also long seen Iran as a greater threat and strategic rival than Israel. Pejorative talk of a "Zionist-Wahhabi" alliance reflects this state of affairs. (Black, 2013)

The new accord struck in Geneva threatens that dynamic. The US, hoping to peacefully contain what it considers the prospect of Iranian nuclear breakout, considers removing sanctions it has worked with those regional partners to erect. Many believe this could transform the American Iranian relationship in the long term. President Obama gave credence to this notion while addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September by saying that "I do believe that if we can resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear program, that can serve as a major step down a long road toward a different relationship, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect" (Obama's U.N. General Assembly, 2013). Israel, seeing its greatest ally test the possibility of détente with its greatest rival, is unhappy, and though Qatar, Kuwait and eventually the Saudi Cabinet did put out statements cautiously praising the agreement (Saudi: Iran nuclear, 2013), their angst towards it was palpable. The reassurances of the Obama Administration that they will be consulted on these matters



moving forward have not relieved their discomfort with the deal itself and trajectory of the talks.

The fact that Secretary Kerry did not discuss the terms of the Geneva talks with Saudi Arabia until after the agreement had been finalized likely further eroded Saudi confidence (McDowall, 2013). They expressed their opposition privately to the US government and to the press. Speaking on the condition of anonymity a Saudi Arabian official, said "many in Saudi Arabia worry that Iran is not being sincere, and the worry during the negotiations was that any deal reached would mean Iran would widen their influence in the region -- in countries like Lebanon and Bahrain -- and become a bigger threat" (Cohen, 2013). Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries have long been the beneficiaries of tremendous diplomatic and strategic support as well as arms purchases, the benefits of being America's friend against Iran. The US has even proposed and designed a Persian Gulf missile defense system meant to contain Iran (Shanker, 2012). Though these countries have a vast wealth of petro capital with which to purchase these weapons and services, it is unclear if American and western powers would be willing to sign off on sales of such sophisticated weaponry in vast quantities without containment policies in mind. These nations have neither an indigenous base of support in the US, (like Israel has) nor a system of governance built on values similar to western nations. Their security alliance with the west is reinforced by the very anti Iranian common cause that can be undermined by the current trajectory of Iranian American diplomacy.

The above consideration has led US critics to sound serious alarms. The threatening of this alliance system is another matter of concern for those members of Congress who see Iran as an intransigent long term threat to US national security and to Israel's existence. The reshuffling of these coalitions to one that could possibly involve Iran is an unacceptable outcome for conservative and pro-Israel politicians and influences. They have denounced the Geneva accord for what they called the abandonment of allies. House



Majority Leader Congressman Eric Cantor, a Republican from Virginia, and a Jewish American with strong pro-Israel credentials, stated that “All we have to do is listen to our allies who are most proximate to the threat in the region -- Israel, the [Persian] Gulf Arab allies that we have, who have been saying all along that any kind of deal with this regime and Iran is not worth the paper it's written on.” To this end, he argues that the agreement bodes “very ominously for the region, and in fact, U.S. security” (Cohen, 2013). This may lead many to prefer to see an even more comprehensive and restrictive sanctions regime further disrupting the Iranian economy and allow military action to restrict Iran’s nuclear ambitions leaving Iran weakened indefinitely and its regional allies exposed.

Congressional critics of the deal have also found fault with the clandestine negotiations leading up to the Geneva talks. While it was in Geneva that final consensus was achieved between Iran and the P5+1 countries, much of the substance seems to have been settled far away from the international media and the eyes and ears of Congress. It is said that US diplomats and their Iranian counterparts have been working on a way forward in Oman since 2011 through the ruler of that nation Sultan Qaboos bin Said (Kozłowska, 2013). In fact Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Vice Presidential national security advisor Jake Sullivan, along with a team of experts reportedly met with Iranian negotiators at least five times in Oman and Geneva, as well as meeting with them during the United Nations General Assembly this year (Good, Raddatz, Marquardt and Zeleny, 2013).

But this was a matter not just kept away from the press but also some in relevant committees on Capitol Hill. Representative Mike Rogers, who has opposed the interim agreement and supports additional sanctions, strongly expressed his dismay about not being informed about this matter until after the Geneva talks were fruitful. As House Intelligence Chair, Representative Rogers normally received briefing on such national secrets and said that per his knowledge his



Senate counterpart was also left in the dark. Adding that “It was concerning that they didn't believe it was important enough to do this, and that just raises questions about what did they pre-arrange prior to the P5+1” (Blake, 2013).

Members of Congress do not appreciate being seen as bystanders on matters of national import. Administration officials risk powerful members of Congress considering their authority circumvented. In addition, their constituents must be assured that their voices and concerns are being communicated to the executive branch by their congressional representatives; otherwise the voters may view those representatives as being ineffective in pursuing their interests. This may particularly hold true if they are displeased with the outcome. It also undermines the representative's ability to take political credit for the developments if constituents support the effort. Congressional skepticism towards the administration's handling of the process of negotiations can carry over to the products as well.

American politicians tend to deny that Iranian leaders like the leader of current nuclear powers are mainly focused on national interest. Instead, they fixated mainly on the “irrational leaders” reading of Iran's decision making. First they evaluate Iran as a nation not seeking political and strategic interest but rather being guided by a set of religious goals that supersede its own interests. Secondly, Iranian leaders are frequently claimed to be personally unreasonable and consumed with conspiracy theories that would cloud their judgment as to what risks they face and how they should respond. Much of this is at this point focused on the former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Frequently cited by these critics are comments he made questioning the Holocaust, which American largely believe is driven from neo-Nazi or at least anti-Semitic philosophy, along with the 2010 speech at the United National General Assembly, in which many Americans believe he charged the United States with masterminding the September 11th attacks (Stephens, 2010).



In fact Mr. Ahmadinejad had become so famous in the US for these statements, that the slogan “I don’t want Ahmadinejad to have a nuclear bomb” could be heard scattered in the talking points of American politicians and opinion makers even in the few days immediately preceding the inauguration of President Rouhani. Third, Americans’ assessment of Iran as a consumed with religious commandments rather than self-interests and rhetoric regarding the Israel, also promotes the belief that Iran is a practitioner of “apocalyptic politics” (Podhoretz, 2007).

The above as well as widespread claims regarding governance structure and factional politics in Iran effect American perception of the Geneva deal in two significant ways. First it creates suspicion as to whether the government would be capable or interested to abiding by its agreements with the United States. Essentially, why would Iran feel bound by promises it gives to a country it calls “the great Satan?” This is exacerbated by the universal position of American politicians and media figures that Iran has routinely ignored United Nations Security Council Resolutions and international norms (Menendez, 2013). Secondly, it opens to door to the accusation that if Iran was to acquire a nuclear weapon it might very well use it to “wipe Israel off of the map,” or at the least, threaten its neighbors as to significantly change the dynamic in the Middle East, endangering critical US interests and allies. This makes any assurances given by Iran futile and any verification regime imposed by the agreements vulnerable to charges of inadequacy.

III - Role of the Israel Lobby

Another challenge to congressional approval of the administration’s approach is the efforts of some powerful political organizations that lobby the United States Government on behalf of the interests of Israel. The Israel lobby, in coordination with the Israeli government has criticized the administration’s approach on many levels (Gerstein, 2013).



The power of the pro-Israel forces in Washington could be felt before the interim deal was struck. Once the administration began rallying support for the prospect of an interim deal and against a rush to new sanctions in mid-November after an unsuccessful first try in Geneva, they became locked in an information war with pro-Israel groups. The administration and these groups were meeting and briefing lawmakers while providing contrary sets of facts and data on the structure and nature of the agreement being considered by the parties in Geneva (Hudson, 2013). Though the term Israel lobby refers to diverse cast of organizations and think tank, in this case as is often the norm in quickly evolving situations, the rapid response duties fell primarily to the most potent of these groups, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer and the AIPAC stormed the halls of Congress in an effort to discredit the administration's prospective interim deal with Iran. For instance, according to information provided by the Secretary of State, Iran was being offered seven to nine billion dollars in sanctions relief. But Israeli officials and AIPAC advocates were telling members of Congress that the sum was actually about twenty, if not, forty billion dollars. They also claimed the concessions offered by Iran would only set the program back twenty four days (Hudson, 2013). These claims had their source in Israeli intelligence and media reports regarding that intelligence. The State Department rejected these allegations but declined to take aim at those making them.

Many senators were quick to embrace the Israeli position. Senator Mark Kirk, who said Kerry's briefing was "anti-Israeli," and that "the administration very disappointingly discounts what the Israelis say." He went on even to say that "I think the Israelis probably have a pretty good intelligence service." The senator said that he was briefed by a "senior Israeli official" who he would not name (Hudson, 2013). Similar attitudes were reflected by other members of Congress, including many Democrats. This speaks to the



power of Israel and the Israel lobby especially when one takes into account that in this episode, some members of Congress were not only taking the word of a foreign government over their own, but they were taking the facts as presented by foreign intelligence over their own officials who were actually party to the talks and designed the proposals in questions.

While not officially rebuking the Geneva accord, AIPAC did strongly urge Congress to move ahead with new sanctions, bucking the Obama administration. In a statement issued on the Monday following the announcement of a deal in Geneva, AIPAC stated that "Congress must...legislate additional sanctions, so that Iran will face immediate consequences should it renege on its commitments or refuse to negotiate an acceptable final agreement." Adding that "Congress, working with the administration, must strictly oversee the initial agreement and ensure Iranian compliance. In the event Iran violates the agreement, the administration must revoke all sanctions relief" (Gerstein, 2013).

The Israel lobby's efforts might be more difficult in this episode than in some previous endeavors to affect Congress. Roundly considered one of, if not the most powerful lobby group in Washington, the Israel lobby has long had a determinative effect on U.S. policy in the Middle East. The reasons for the organizations effectiveness are many; fundraising prowess, organizational capability, strong and civically engaged Jewish-American populations, meaningful alliances with Christian Zionists and neoconservatives, to name a few. One major reason cited for their success is the lack of consequential opposition in Washington (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2009). Lobby groups have a long and rich history in American politics and there are lobbyist representing virtually every special interest and position in the nation.

On the domestic policy front, many policy battles in Congress are often the interplay of those interest groups and the outcome will largely be dictated by their respective power and influence, as well as



their standing with members of Congress and the public. Every lobby group has a counterweight in the world of domestic policy. Religious group clash with women's right groups, business with labor, and so on. But on foreign policy this is not always the case. On the matter of Middle East policy there is simply no other lobby group of note in the field. There is no significant Arab or Persian lobby groups. Ones that exist either focus on rights of Diaspora communities inside the U.S. and don't concern themselves with foreign policy, or are not organizationally developed enough to even compete (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2009). However, in this case the lobby might for the first time in recent memory have to engage a counterweight. Not in the form of a fellow mighty lobby apparatus, but rather, it would have to confront the collective combat wariness and new found understanding of the follies of war by the American people.

After over a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American people, aware of the toll of these conflicts both in terms of cost and lives have become less interested in military engagement around the world. These conflicts have also taken much longer than anticipated. The Afghanistan engagement was considered all but over by the Bush Administration before the invasion of Iraq began in 2003 and the Iraq war itself was said to be a short term and inexpensive effort by the architects of the war when it began. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke of the length of US military operations in Iraq in February of 2003. He said "it is unknowable how long that conflict will last. It could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months" (Page, 2003).

After over a decade of war, even the more hawkish elements of American society admit that America is a war weary nation. But the lessons learned during this conflict might be even more material to the prospect of future American military engagement and the outlook for public support for such actions. For years, stories of American soldiers being injured and kills by undetectable improvised explosive devices (IED) and overwhelmed at forward operating bases in the



remote treacherous mountain ranges of Afghanistan where close air support can be difficult, have been repeated in the American media. These stories demonstrate at the micro level what the larger chronicle of these two wars, now the two longest in American history, show more broadly.

That overwhelming American technological, logistical, training, and intelligence superiority does not necessarily translate into the US military being able to dictate terms on the battlefield, and that it is particularly vulnerable to asymmetrical methods of warfare. Also, that while military and civilian leaders may advertise a military action as being short term and limited with “no boots on the ground”, the ability and even willingness to stay true to those promises depends on the conditions on the many unpredictable variants, in particular the reaction of the attacked. These morals are likely more consequential to the new American attitude on war than simple fatigue. With the palpable suspicion of military options on the left and the rising paleo-conservative faction on the right that has railed against military adventurism and sought deep reductions in defense spending, as well as the nation's bleak fiscal outlook, selling the American people on a war is significantly harder than it was a decade ago.

When America assessed that President Bashar Asad of Syria had used chemical weapons against his own people during that nation's ongoing civil war, therefore crossing a red line as laid out by President Obama, plans to use military force were announced. The Administration immediately faced strong public disapproval and decided to get the legitimacy they sought by receiving authorization from Congress. By the time a diplomatic path forward was brought to the country's attention, congressional observers had said that the possibility of receiving the authorization for use of force would have been difficult (Jaffe, 2013). Most Democrats had remained undecided, they did not wish to harm the President's credibility by voting against him but they faced steadfast resistance from back home. The Republicans were overwhelmingly opposed. Belated efforts by the



Israel lobby to support the war effort seem to be largely ignored by lawmakers (Landler and Thee-Brenan, 2013).

This demonstrates the difficult atmosphere that would be faced in achieving public support for war. However that is not to say that the prospects of military actions against Iran would be met with the exact same level of resistance. Part of the reason for the strong opposition involved the fact that American action in Syria was described as a humanitarian effort, not a necessary action in the face of a clear and present danger to America. Tens of thousands of Syrians had been killed by their president and the specter of a state using weapons of mass destruction against his own people cannot be responded to with silence, the administration argued (Sanchez, 2013). Presumably if Syria had presented a danger to US national security, as many Americans believe a nuclear capable Iran does, a greater action imperative would exist.

This differentiation is critical to not just to a future military action against Iran but to the actions of congress in the months to come. In increasingly tense back and forth regarding the idea of new sanctions, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney called such legislation “a rush to war,” adding that “The American people do not want a march to war.” He explained his comments by saying “it is important to understand that if pursuing a resolution diplomatically is disallowed or ruled out, what options then do we and our allies have to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon” (Gerstein, 2013) This point is being raised increasingly by supporters of the administration because raises the stakes on the deliberation of sanctions, elevating the issue from a mundane tactical disagreement to a matter of war and peace that the public might be more inclined to engage their representatives about. Additionally, it speaks to the political challenge the military option would involve. Meaning, the availability of a diplomatic track for dispute resolution with Iran, with regards to the nuclear portfolio, makes military action with the same goal an option not a necessity. In other words, if American disregards



the diplomatic alternative not because it's not working but specifically because it is the ensuing military action would essentially become a war of choice.

For the time being, this has not discouraged advocates of new sanctions especially in the pro-Israel community. The moderate pro-Israel group J Street endorsed the interim deal only to be attacked by the more hawkish Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) as "extreme leftwing" (Klein, 2013), and criticism of Netanyahu by his predecessor Ehud Olmert has up to now been fruitless. Some have even warned that the ominous rhetoric and threats from Tel Aviv along with the drumbeat of sanction and war from the Israel lobby can lead to the American body politic developing new reservations about the lobby, and perhaps it leads to a structural change in the way American people see Israel itself. In turn, it could have long term incalculable ramifications for American Israeli relations and Israeli interests (Israel heads for, 2013). It is still unclear whether these warnings will result in behavior modification or affect the dynamic in Congress.

Conclusion

Though the interim agreement reached in Geneva between Iran and the world powers was a small step, it marked a historic event that could not only resolve the nuclear discord between Iran and the international community peacefully, but also serve as a foundation for a long term transformation in the relationship between two longtime enemies, the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Though this scenario is far from guaranteed and possible only in the distant future, its promise has caused tremendous upheaval among those who would oppose it, both in the Middle East and in the United States Congress. With its many opponents in Congress, the Obama Administration will have to work diligently to find ways to persuade and pressure its members to support the President's approach and not pass comprehensive new sanctions that would at



least complicate if not derail the long term negotiations and leave a country deeply suspicious of Iran nuclear ambitions with few options.

Advocates of new sanctions neither trust Iran to follow through nor do they wish for Iran to come out from under the multilevel international isolation that has been the result of the already imposed sanctions regime. Their problems with the Iranian government exceed these talks and the nuclear file and they consider Iran to be a long term strategic foe and challenge. Complicated matters such as “right to nuclear enrichment” and the Arak heavy water facility will undoubtedly continue to be debated in Congress as heatedly as they will be Geneva. The Administration will face a sizable and hard-fought task in convincing members of Congress not to disrupt the negotiation process with new sanction and eventually, to reduce significantly the sanctions regime as part of a long term agreement, despite the fact that such a treaty may not involve a dismantling of the Iranian nuclear program and a permanent arresting of all enrichment activities.

The administrations opponents in this regard are many and from both political parties. The Israel lobby, having been for years an undisputed influence on American Middle East policy, particularly in Congress, is now facing a significant challenge in taking on the administration as well as war weary nation that better understands the nature of war. It shall also encounter many risk points along the way that could alter significantly the American people’s perceptions regarding Israel and its advocate in Washington.

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