

ILSA vote does not reflect mood in Congress

Much to the disappointment of those who had expected the Bush Administration to undo at least some of the sanctions imposed during the sanctions frenzy of the late 1990's, Congress acted to extend the Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) for another five years this week. In the Senate, the vote was 96 in favor and only two against; Hagel (R-NE) and Lugar (R-IN). In the House, 409 Congressmen favored an extension whereas six opposed it; Paul (R-TX), Hilliard (D-AL), Conyers (D-NY), LaFalce (D-NY), McKinney (D-GA), and Rahall (D-WV). But these numbers neither reflect the mood in Congress nor the difficulties the Israeli lobby had to overcome in order to force Congress to pursue a policy that contradicts US interest.

The debate over ILSA has been quite intense for the past several months, although it has not attracted much media attention. Already in March, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) announced that it would push for a renewal and that it had gathered around 180 co-sponsors in the House. AIPAC efforts were very much helped by the fact that Libya and Iran, two vastly different countries, were lumped together in this piece of legislation. Pressure from Pan Am relatives was shrewdly used by AIPAC to drum up support for ILSA. Yet, significantly, its attempts to pass the bill before the Iranian Presidential elections on June 8 failed. Again in May, obstacles emerged to what had seemed to be an easy passing of the bill. The Bush Administration announced that it favored a two-year extension in early June. Still, many Congressional offices opposed to an extension were waiting for the Administration to take a stronger position; one based on the U.S. national interests that would be better served by removing some of the most stringent sanctions requirements. They had hoped to be able to stand behind the Administration against the sanctions, since challenging the Israeli lobby all by themselves would have been too politically costly. Although the Administration frustrated AIPAC's campaign, its late announcement regarding its position and its half-hearted lobbying caused many opponents of ILSA to play it safe and line-up behind AIPAC instead.

Nevertheless, some Republican members embarked on a campaign against a five-year renewal. Congressman Paul introduced an amendment that would extend the sanctions for only two years. This amendment was defeated in the House International Relations Committee mark-up (where a flat five-year renewal of ILSA was passed), but it was picked up by Chairman Bill Thomas of the Ways and Means Committee. Much to AIPAC's frustration, Chairman Thomas delayed the passing of ILSA for several weeks by re-introducing the Paul amendment in his committee (which also has jurisdiction over trade matters). After tough negotiations, the Ways and Means committee also dropped the two-year extension idea but passed a version of ILSA that called for the review of the sanctions after 18 months and that included a Jackson-Vanik procedure.

Thus, after what seemed like an easy acceptance of ILSA in June, complications caused there to exist two versions of the bill by late July, only two weeks before ILSA would lapse. Furthermore, it took the two committees more than two weeks to reconcile the differences between their

versions of ILSA. The version of the bill that was passed dropped the Jackson-Vanik procedure but maintained the call for a review (after 24 to 30 months).

The senate passed a five-year flat renewal, but is expected to pass the House version of the bill on July 27. Senator Chuck Hagel had tried to reduce the extension to only two years, but his amendment was defeated in the Senate Banking Committee.

Most interestingly, however, the Speaker Dennis Hastert, in a move that went unreported by any media, read a letter on the floor in which he pledged to insist that if the President, after the 24 to 30 month review, calls for a reconsideration of the sanctions, the committee with jurisdiction over the matter must consider the issue within 45 calendar days. This move, which in reality reinstates a weaker form of the Jackson-Vanik procedure, came as a surprise to many analysts and further indicates that the vote may not reflect the true mood in the House.

How do the current circumstances differ from those of 1996, when ILSA first was enacted? First, whereas no real resistance to the sanctions existed before, today, a vast number of Congressmen are well aware of the fact that this law contradicts US interests. Unfortunately, the political incentives to act on this knowledge are still quite weak. One should keep in mind that ILSA was passed with 415-0 in 1996, whereas six Nay votes were counted this time around. Second, a genuine attempt was made to defeat the sanctions, despite the political cost that opposition to AIPAC entails. Third, AIPAC is not as influential as it was during the Clinton Administration, although it is still one of the most influential lobbies on the Hill (foreign or domestic).

What implications will this have for US-Iran relations? Hopefully, Tehran will recognize that an honest attempt was made to defeat or at least weaken the sanctions. The call for a review and Speaker Hastert's pledge to insist on Congressional action based on the review must also be interpreted by Tehran as a step in the right direction. Tehran must understand that it cannot wait another two or five years before its next step on US-Iran relations, in hope of a miracle in Congress. At the same time, the US should not wait for a miracle to happen in Iran before it starts conducting a policy that defends US interests. ILSA undermines the interest of the US and it should be dealt away with regardless of what Iran does or does not. Last but not least, the Iranian-American community should not wait for a miracle to happen in either Tehran or Washington before it starts playing a role in these matters. Members of IIC, the only Iranian-American group that consistently has urged for stronger Iranian-American lobbying efforts, placed hundreds of calls to their representatives on the Hill. Although this was a significant step in the right direction, more Iranian-Americans need to speak up in order to be heard.

Today, it is clearer than ever: Sad but true; there are no miracles in US-Iran relations.