

NIAC Oct. 2007
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Legislative Strategy

Having taken the reigns of the Legislative Watch program (LegWatch) at NIAC two months ago as Assistant Legislative Director, I am pleased to report significant gains in all areas of our legislative agenda.

NIAC is enhancing its presence on Capitol Hill and in the policy community. NIAC has attended over 86 meetings with Congressional offices, spearheaded two joint letters to law makers, and published two op-eds relating to specific legislation since April. NIAC staff also attended regular meetings with key organizational coalitions on Iran legislation.

NIAC's outreach has yielded tangible results. As a result of our efforts, five congressional offices have issued letters on our behalf and several offices have expressed interest in making changes to pending legislation based on our recommendations. I have summarized our legislative work by topic below.

Discrimination and SBA Petition

As the premier advocate for Iranian Americans, NIAC has been compelled to extend its fight against discrimination to Capitol Hill. Most recently, NIAC has been working with Congress to demand accountability for the hateful remarks of a high ranking US official this September. According to the British press, Assistant Deputy Secretary of Defense Debra Cagan told a group of British MPs "I hate all Iranians." NIAC was the first to break the story to the American press and mobilized over 2000 Iranian Americans to contact the Defense Department in protest. To complement these efforts, NIAC inspired Representatives Honda and Maloney to send a letter to Defense Secretary Gates.

NIAC has also reinvigorated its campaign to ensure a ruling on its petition to the SBA, which it submitted in 2005. After making numerous inquiries to the SBA ourselves, we decided to appeal to our allies in Congress to apply political pressure on the SBA to make a ruling. Congressman Wolf and Moran are currently write letters to SBA requesting an update on the status of NIAC's 2005 petition.

Iran "Democracy Promotion" Funding

There are signs that NIAC has made significant headway in its campaign to convince Congress to reprogram the proposed \$75 million State Department funding intended to support opposition groups in Iran. Originally set at \$25 million by both the House and Senate appropriations committee, the funding was bumped up to \$50 and \$75 million, respectively, at the last minute through amendment submitted by activist Congressmen. NIAC broke the story on its website and quickly informed its allies in the policy community.

The bill is now slated for conference where the discrepancies between the House and Senate versions will be hashed out. NIAC has joined up with key allies to lobby conferees to reprogram the money to activities that can more effectively support democracy in Iran. As of now, we have met with over 23 members on this issue. In addition, NIAC organized a meeting between our members and the policy staff of Representative Nita Lowey (D-NY18), who chairs the appropriations subcommittee that directs State Department funding, to address this issue. NIAC also spearheaded a sign-on letter from 26 organizations urging conferees to reprogram the money. Senators Feingold and Webb have expressed interest in sending a letter to conferees in support of our position.

Sanctions

During Babak Talebi's tenure as interim Legislative Director, NIAC executed an impressive outreach campaign on unilateral sanctions. In the course of one month, NIAC met with over 50 Congressional offices to discuss the negative implications of enhanced sanctions against Iran. MORE BY BABAK.

Informing members and facilitating political action

Staffers provide members with information about important legislative developments through articles on the NIAC website and weekly LegWatch e-newsletter. On issues that demand immediate action, NIAC has issued 7 Action Alerts to mobilize the community to contact their elected representatives, resulting in thousands of letters and phone calls. We have seen tangible results from such collective action. A recent action alert on the Kyl-Lieberman amendment to the defense authorization bill is an example. As a result of the combined efforts of NIAC members and the anti war community, the most dangerous provisions of the amendment were removed.

Agenda for 2008

This year NIAC will continue and expand upon its efforts to positively influence legislative developments on Capitol Hill vis-a-vis the Iranian American community. NIAC will employ a multifaceted approach to influencing Congress through relationships with congressional staffers, media outreach, and collation action. Legislative priorities going forward will focus on three main initiatives:

1. **Diplomatic policy. Promoting diplomatic solution to the current stand-off.** Over the past several months, allegations of direct Iranian involvement in acts on US troops and

destabilization of Iraq have been widely circulated, further bolstering the perception in Congress of an imminent Iranian threat and the need for immediate, punitive action. NIAC will seek to inform the debate in Congress on the best way forward, in an effort to prevent the advent of another disastrous war.

2. **Fiscal Policy.** NIAC will work with a robust consortium of allies on issues intimately connected to the prospect of sustained dialogue between Iran and the US both on a governmental and person to person basis. On the sanctions side, we will be working to dispel the myth that sanctions are a version of diplomacy and alternative to war. We will also be continuing to our efforts to ensure that the counterproductive Iran democracy funding in the State and Foreign Operations Act is reprogrammed to activities that more effectively promote American value.
3. **Domestic Policy Advocacy.** NIAC will be revamping its efforts to ensure a timely and favorable ruling on its petition to the Small Business Administration (SBA) for Iranian American group status in the 8 (a) program. Approval would signify official recognition of Iranian Americans as a socially disadvantaged group, allowing Iranian American small business owners to qualify for substantial government contracts and other benefits presently enjoyed by other minority groups.
4. **Providing valuable information to the community.** In addition to continuing the activities previously described, NIAC will share insight from daily interactions on Capitol Hill by way of regular postings on the newly created “NIAC blog.”

Strategy and Recommendations

I consider the development of strong relationships with Congressional offices as a key requisite for a successful legislative program. This is especially true given the strength of our opponents and the highly political nature of the issues we seek to address. More than ever become, NIAC must expend time and effort to developing three or four stalwart champions in Congress. At the same time, NIAC must be ever working to expand its broader network of contacts and allies in Congress and among the think tank and NGO community. This requires more time spent on Capitol Hill, meeting with staffers, attending conferences and networking. NIACs lobbying efforts are not even close to reaching the 20 percent ceiling for 501 (c) 3 organizations. To have a real voice on the Hill, alongside every other minority community, NIAC must increase its lobbying effort.

I see media outreach as an important means to advance and supplement our agenda on Capital Hill. I cannot tell you how many times, I have been asked if we have published an op-ed or talked to the media about the issue. When an issue is in the news, members are more likely to act. Such news reports and op-eds also lend NIAC credibility on the hill. For example, the article by Robin Wright on our work on the democracy promotion issue created significant openings in Congress. It greatly facilitated our efforts to make contact with offices and inspired several members to come out to champion our cause.

With our growing prominence and notoriety, we are under increased obligation and demand by staffers and reporters to provide accurate information on complex issues in a timely manner. I wish to emphasize the need for more human resources to assist NIAC staff in completing critical projects rapidly. In the short term, this can be attained by hiring quality interns and additional staff.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, NIAC must have access to updated information legislative developments and the activities going on behind the scenes. Unfortunately, this information, which is critical to preempting and effectively taking action on key legislative developments, is not accessible to the general public. Congressional Quarterly (CQ) is the premier legislative service in the country. Quite literally, it is the only adequate means to get this otherwise inaccessible information. It has agreed to offer use substantive discounts on its services, including legislative tracking, budget reports, up to the minute floor updates and scheduling information, and insider news and information. Given our limited resources and manpower, this service will greatly facilitate our efforts going forward.