

Lobby groups

The policy arena in regards to Iran in the US is surprisingly empty – over the past decade, very few interest groups have played a decisive role in US foreign policy making towards Iran with the noted exception of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). As the drums of war have become louder, however, new actors have emerged on this scene. Today, much indicates that the balance of power on Capitol Hill is shifting away from AIPAC, though it remains a pivotal force in this arena.

AIPAC

Since 9/11, Iran has no longer been AIPAC's top issue. It has become AIPAC's *only* issue. Yet, AIPAC is going through one of the toughest periods in its history as an organization. Two of AIPAC's key staffers on Iran, Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman, are charged with espionage for Israel and are awaiting trial. At the same time, prominent US academics have publicly argued that Israel was behind the increasingly unpopular war with Iran, creating anxiety in the Jewish-American community that they will be made the scapegoat of the Iraq fiasco, particularly mindful of the neoconservative movements' close ties to Israel.

To make matters worse, with the new Congress, AIPAC must allocate significant resources towards rebuilding ties with a new Democratic leadership that has been troubled by AIPAC's pro-Bush foreign policy positions. (At AIPAC's annual conference last year, Vice President Dick Cheney received 40 applause and 8 standing ovations when he gave the Bush Administration's toughest speech yet on Iran.) For AIPAC to take a pro-war and pro-Bush stance with the new Congress under these circumstances can be extremely risky and jeopardize AIPAC's future standing on Capitol Hill. In spite of its public announcements and efforts to give the opposite impression, there is a clear feeling on Capitol Hill that AIPAC is on the defensive.

These factors would make one expect that AIPAC would soften its stance and avoid beating the war drums on Iran. However, AIPAC's strategy has been to lower its profile and make its activities less visible than usual. But on the substance, little has changed. Indeed, the advice from Tel Aviv to AIPAC has reportedly been to go forward strong but quietly. AIPAC continues to push for a very hawkish position – both economic sanctions and military action against Iran. AIPAC's leadership recently told a senior US Senator that military strikes on Iran is “the only thing that can save Israel.” At the same time, AIPAC's is also pushing for stricter economic sanctions on Iran including a naval blockade as a fall back position in case diplomacy with Iran eliminates the military option.

An effort by AIPAC to submit a resolution calling for tougher actions against Iran was recently rebuffed by the Democratic leadership in the House. This unusual step by the Democrats may reflect the shifting mood in the legislature. AIPAC may respond to these

setbacks by further lowering its profile – or by revering its tactics and embark on a more visible and aggressive campaign. AIPAC’s annual conference in Washington DC in mid-March will give a hint of its strategic orientation in this changing political environment.

In spite of these setbacks, absent significant opposition by other interest groups, the likelihood of AIPAC succeeding in getting Congressional support for stricter financial sanctions against Iran or implementation of already existing sanctions remains fair to strong. The likelihood of Congressional support for military action as a result of AIPAC’s pressure, however, is weak.

Anti-War and Pro-Dialogue groups

As of early 2005, Washington’s heated rhetoric over Iran has attracted the attention of a variety of interest groups eager to prevent the escalation of tensions in the Middle East and the prospects of a war between the US and Iran. These groups have managed to build unprecedented support in Congress in favor of dialogue and against military action among progressive Democrats as well as conservative Republicans on Capitol Hill.

This coalition of pro-dialogue and anti-war entities consists of a diverse group of organizations ranging from arms control organizations, to Iranian American organizations, to religious groups. Key players in this coalition are the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, which coordinates a coalition of approximately 50 organizations, MoveOn and the National Iranian American Council.

As the most potent progressive lobby in the US, MoveOn has played a very low-profile but important role in shaping the Democratic leadership’s vocal opposition to any military campaign against Iran. MoveOn has more members in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s district than in any other congressional district, and has managed to use its influence to with the House Speaker to rebuff AIPAC’s efforts.

This coalition has worked closely with key lawmakers such as Jack Murtha and introduced resolutions and bills that would prevent the President from initiating war with Iran without Congressional authorization. In addition, language will shortly be introduced to the supplemental prohibiting the President from using any of the Iraq funds to finance military operations against Iran.

While these groups have focused extensively on passing measures to reduce the risk for war with Iran, little attention has been paid to efforts to intensify sanctions against Iran. Furthermore, while a momentum exists for anti-war measures, no comparable opportunity exists currently for an anti-sanctions campaign. Nor is the coalition of disarmament, religious and progressive groups best suited to take on this issue. Here, the absence of pro-business interests on Capitol Hill active constitutes a key point of advantage for AIPAC.

Pro-Business groups

With the exception of USA Engage, American businesses and oil companies have after September 11 next to eliminated their efforts on Capitol Hill in favor of greater trade and contacts with Iran.

USA Engage is a coalition of approximately 500 major US companies which has retained a distant interest in the Iran issue, though the coalition has devoted little resources towards promoting trade or preventing new sanctions from being imposed. In particular, the recently imposed UN sanctions have granted the sanctions track with Iran new legitimacy and made efforts to oppose such measures on trade grounds more difficult.

However, initial efforts are currently being made to make align the trade groups with the pro-dialogue coalition and frame sanctions an initial step that invariably will lead to war. If such a coalition of pro-trade and pro-dialogue groups can be formed, the current momentum for sanctions may be significantly hampered.

Conclusion

The balance of power on Capitol Hill is currently shifted in favor of sanctions on Iran but against military action. AIPAC continues to seek both military strikes against Iran and draconian sanctions and has benefited from the absence of active lobbying by pro-trade groups. A change in heart by pro-trade coalitions may significantly hamper efforts to have Congress impose new draconian sanctions on Iran. This is great significance since Congressional sanctions are far more difficult to undo than those imposed by the Executive Branch.