

Iran legislative working group
January 28, 2009
Open Society Policy Center

We began by discussing the role we want Congress to play in the upcoming months regarding Iran policy. Obviously, the Executive Branch is in the drivers' seat, and for that we should all be grateful. Though Congress looks to be trending upward on our positions, the shift is very gradual.

It is important for us to consider the risk that any Congressional action we push for could prove counterproductive--if the administration is moving forward with engagement anyway, a Congressional resolution that fails/or that is done improperly could actually make diplomacy more difficult. That being said, we can't cede Congress to AIPAC entirely. Therefore, we are planning to focus our efforts on pushing for Congressional hearings as well as letters from lawmakers and other public statements.

Mike is already working with Berman's office to produce a letter similar to the seven Senators' last year supporting an interests section. Paul has been in touch with Kerry and Murray to ask them to resubmit their letter to Obama. Both of these are very worthwhile efforts.

Rep. Conyers is planning to introduce a resolution supporting an incidents-at-sea agreement with Iran, but is hoping to obtain bipartisan momentum prior to introducing it. He's working the backrooms and is staying pretty targeted, so there's no role for our community to play just yet; but once the bill is introduced we should push hard for its passage. [The caveat here is the concern from some of the ongoing track 2 talks covering this same issue--there is a hope that these talks could produce an agreement, and that the public spotlight from a House resolution could scuttle the already-sensitive talks. The sense that I've gotten from Conyers' office is that they're only willing to wait for so long before introducing this--they held off last summer for this same reason, and they want to get rolling.]

We also discussed at length the issue of parliamentary exchanges, which produced a number of ideas that we could pursue. The largest problem in the past has been the issuance of US visas to Iranians hoping to travel here. Many in the group felt that the real obstacle was the Bush administration's lack of support for Iranian exchanges--that those in DHS, INS and others would draw the process out and put up barriers to Iranians, effectively stifling the exchange. All of this could change under Obama--if the President makes it a priority to expedite exchanges, we don't envision running into the same obstacles. Of course, this doesn't account for the issuance of visas in Iran. On that issue, we discussed possibly getting lawmakers to send a letter to both President Obama and President Ahmadinejad requesting both countries ease restrictions on parliamentary exchange. In the US, that would play to Obama's approach to engaging Iran, and in Iran it could be welcomed as a positive signal from the US.

Additionally, we explored the option of either a parliamentary summit in a third country--though that loses some of the appeal--as well as a virtual summit, using the World Bank's videoconference systems. I expressed a concern about the feasibility of

arranging such a summit--perhaps some of the groups that coordinate track 2 talks would be in a better position to handle this.

Finally, we considered pushing for hearings at the Committee level. Suggested topics include confidence-building measures to take with Iran; OFAC reforms that are needed; Democracy Fund reforms that are needed; what role should diplomacy and sanctions play in Iran policy?; and the nuclear program .

In all, this was a very good brainstorming session, but not a very good meeting for deciding on what we'll focus on in 2009. I suggest we all consider the following ideas and let's discuss over email which we want to pursue. Thanks,

-patrick

1. Invite delegations from Iran to meet with Congress
2. Parliamentary summit in third country
3. Virtual summit--videoconference
4. Letter to both Presidents urging them to ease restrictions on parliamentary exchanges
5. Resolution supporting diplomacy, similar to 321 from last year
6. End the Democracy Fund outright
7. Reprogram the Democracy Fund to alternatives
8. OFAC reforms -- general licensure, other alternatives
9. Hearings on Iran--confidence
10. Letters regarding interests section
11. Incidents-at-sea resolution
12. No new sanctions until diplomacy is underway
13. Set benchmarks for Iran to meet, after which Congress will support rolling back sanctions

In attendance/on the phone:

Patrick Disney (NIAC)

Richard Sawaya (USA*Engage)

Eric Ham (3D Security)

Jim Fine (FCNL)

Tony Wilson (OSPC)

Paul Kawika Martin (Peace Action)

Chelsea Mozen (Just Foreign Policy)

Julie Schumacher Cohen (Churches for Middle East Peace)

Richard Parker (American Foreign Policy Project)

Mike Amitay (OSPC)

John Isaacs (Council for a Livable World)

Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach (Mennonite Central Committee)

Jonathan Granoff (Global Security Institute)