

FOREIGN POLICY

Plenty of Push for Iran Sanctions Legislation, but Little Consensus Yet

BY TIM STARKS, CQ STAFF WRITER

Advocates for Iran sanctions legislation say they want quick action on a final bill, even though the House, the Senate, the Obama administration and business groups are not yet all on the same page.

Congress is speeding up the pace toward finding a compromise on the House- and Senate-passed versions of the sanctions measure (HR 2194). The Senate last week appointed conferees to begin formal negotiations.

House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., said he would like to have a final agreement between House and Senate negotiators signed into law by April. "Time is of the essence here," Berman, the sponsor of the House bill, said last week. "Every day, Iran moves further along on its nuclear program."

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee also called on lawmakers last week to "enact — without delay — the Iran sanctions legislation currently before Congress." The organization made its position clear in a March 9 letter sent to every member and signed by AIPAC President David Victor and executive director Howard Kohr.

It was a rare move for the organization, which often prefers to make its case discreetly. AIPAC leaders cited a March 7 New York Times report that the federal government awarded \$107 billion in grants and contracts to more than 70 companies doing business with Iran over the past decade, including with Iran's energy industry. The pending legislation could bar federal contracts to companies that deal with Iran's energy sector or provide sensitive technology.

Berman said one of his priorities in conference negotiations with the Senate is House language that would require the executive branch to investigate credible claims about companies providing refined-petroleum products to Iran.

The House bill, which passed by a vote of 412-12 in December, would impose sanctions against companies that supply Iran with, or support its domestic production of, gasoline and other refined-petroleum products. Berman said that provision would also be one of his major priorities.

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bill (S 2799) by voice vote in January. On March 11, the Senate passed the House bill by voice vote after replacing its text with the Senate version.

The Senate bill is more extensive than the House measure, adding proposals that would direct the president to freeze assets of Iranian officials and prohibit the U.S. government from providing contracts to companies that supply Iran with communications monitoring technology.

On March 11, the Senate appointed its conferees to reconcile the two versions of the bill. The House has not yet formally appointed conferees, and it may not do so until the two chambers are closer to reaching a deal.

White House Pressure

The Obama administration has repeatedly — and at times, publicly — urged Congress not to pass sanctions legislation that would curtail its flexibility during multilateral negotiations for U.N. sanctions, even as those efforts have become bogged down.

Some news reports have pointed to contentious disputes between the executive branch and Congress over the administration's stance. The Washington Post reported March 5 that the administration sought an exemption for China and other U.N. Security Council members as a method of enticing countries reluctant to support the sanctions.

Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., the sponsor of the Senate bill and one of the conferees named to work on it, has indicated that he would not be opposed to an administration-backed exemption for companies from countries that are working in "close cooperation" with the United States to develop international sanctions, as long

as there are strict criteria for determining what "close cooperation" means.

Without responding to specific questions about what the White House is seeking, Berman said he had no intention of getting in the administration's way and added that some of the news reports about disputes with the administration were inaccurate.

"We have been working with the administration," Berman said, noting that the effort was also "bipartisan and bicameral."

Business Groups Wary

Lawmakers are also facing pressure from business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, which argued in a Jan. 26 letter that both the House and Senate bills are too broad and could "prohibit any U.S. company from transacting routine business with critical partners from around the globe even if those transactions have no bearing on business with Iran."

Richard Sawaya, director of USA Engage — which signed the Jan. 26 letter with its parent organization, the National Foreign Trade Council — said there is strong momentum in Congress to enact sanctions legislation. But he said lawmakers have been "respectful" to his group's concerns about unintended consequences.

"By 'respectful,' I mean take due acknowledgment of the legitimacy of our concerns," he said. "Do I have hopes that they will be addressed in whatever emerges in the conference process? I have some hope they will be addressed. Frankly, it makes no sense to invite collateral damage given where our economy is . . . on entities exporting both goods and services."

Spokespeople for the State Department and Dodd did not answer requests for comment.

Frederick Jones, a spokesman for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that "the conference process is still in the initial stages, so it's too early to comment on timing or potential issues." He added that Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., one of the Senate conferees on the measure, "is committed to working diligently to ensure that the final legislation achieves the goal we all share of creating maximum leverage to get Iran to change its behavior." ♦