

## **Key U.S. lawmaker sees Iran bill by April**

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WASHINGTON – A powerful Congress member says he expects Congress to send President Obama an Iran sanctions bill next month that will include tougher enforcement provisions for violators.

"Time is of the essence," U.S. Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), the chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, told JTA. "The U.S. government and Congress are approaching this with a sense of urgency because Iran continues at many different levels to work on their nuclear weapons program -- and it's my intention and my hope that we will be able to complete deliberations and send a bill to the president during April."

The House and Senate have passed bills that are now in the process of being reconciled with input from the Obama administration. The bills would expand unilateral sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector.

Berman said the reconciliation process would include areas that are not covered by the bill -- a sign of how rapidly the Iran policy landscape is changing.

The California lawmaker wants enforcing mechanisms to address a recent New York Times expose of how companies working with Iran through foreign-owned subsidiaries won \$107 billion in U.S. government contracts. He said the bill would make it clear that U.S. companies with foreign-owned subsidiaries "are covered by U.S. law on Iran" and also would enhance the reporting mechanisms that would uncover such double-dealing.

Berman also wants the bill to include provisions that target Iran's post-election repression of the pro-democracy movement. He would exempt companies from sanctions that make it easier for activists to communicate with one another through instant messaging and similar systems. He would include companies that provide Iranian forces with the means to repress.

The bill also would revive a bill initiated by President Obama when he was a senator that would protect states that divest from Iran from legal challenges.

Berman signaled that he was ready to "complement" Obama administration efforts to enhance multilateral sanctions through the U.N. Security Council.

For its part, the White House has made clear that it first wants to exhaust its efforts to bring about a new set of multilateral sanctions. It is concerned that the bill in Congress would force its hand and alienate entities that do some business with Iran.

Berman denied reports that the White House was asking for a carve-out for China or any single nation, but he confirmed that talks between congressional negotiators and the Obama administration were aimed at allowing Obama the discretion to reward nations it needs -- like China -- to make the multilateral sanctions work.

"There's been discussions about how to deal with cooperating countries," he said.

Berman said he was amenable to making the bill flexible, but he would not discuss details except to say that it could come through presidential waivers or through designations of what constitutes "cooperation."

"We don't want to carve a huge loophole in this bill," he said. "We don't want where a country not selling Iran nuclear weapons, they are deemed a 'cooperating country.' "

Berman said he did not believe the recent tensions between the United States and Israel over the announcement of a housing project in eastern Jerusalem -- made during last week's visit by Vice President Joe Biden -- would affect the close cooperation over Iran.

"The relationship is much stronger than news stories of the last few days that could lead people to believe," he said. "No one wants any issue to divert from the focus on what Iran is doing."

Berman made it clear, however, that he saw Israel's Netanyahu administration as principally responsible for the crisis. Berman noted that last November, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had pledged to keep committees from making announcements at inopportune times.

"The administration had, I think, real justification for being upset because a process was supposed to be in place that would keep it from being blindsided, and that process failed and once again the U.S. was blindsided and the Israelis have to get this right," he said. "They've got to put in place a system that keeps this from happening."