

# US Senate Passes New Sanctions on Iran

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The U.S. Senate approved a new round of economic sanctions against Iran Friday, ignoring warnings by the White House that the additional measures could prove counter-productive to the goal of persuading Iran to curb its nuclear programme.

The 94-0 vote, which was immediately praised by the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), marked a rebuff to President Barack Obama who has argued that piling on too many sanctions risks undermining the international coalition that has backed U.S. efforts to pressure Iran.

"As we focus with our partners on effectively implementing these efforts, we believe additional authorities now threaten to undercut these efforts," said Tommy Vietor, the spokesman for the National Security Council.

The new sanctions, which came in the form of an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), would impose sanctions against foreign companies or individuals engaged in trade with Iran in several sectors, including energy, ports, shipping, and shipbuilding, that allegedly support Tehran's nuclear or arms programmes.

Among other provisions, they would also penalise foreign buyers of Iranian oil and natural gas if they pay for them with gold or other precious metals – a measure apparently aimed specifically at Turkey, a key U.S. ally, which reportedly exported 6.4 billion dollars in gold to Iran in exchange for natural gas during the first nine months of this year.

"With today's overwhelmingly bi-partisan action, we underscore our serious commitment to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons capability," said Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez, one of the amendment's co-sponsors.

"Yes, our current sanctions are having a demonstrable affect on the Iranian economy, but Iran is still working just as hard to develop nuclear weapons. That's why it's imperative for us to... adapt our policies to tighten the economic noose," he added.

The new measures must still be reconciled with another set of anti-Iran measures included in another version of the NDAA approved earlier this fall by the House of Representatives.

The final bill could also be vetoed by the White House, which has already warned that a number of measures unrelated to Iran that have been included in the Senate version will indeed be sent back to Congress if they survive the House-Senate conference committee.

The Senate action comes amidst heightened speculation about the likelihood that negotiations between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (the U.S., Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) will soon resume, especially now that Obama, who stressed his strong

preference for a diplomacy in dealing with Iran during the campaign, has been re-elected.

Washington's top negotiator, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, met her P5+1 counterparts in Brussels last week to discuss a common negotiating position, as well as the desirability of direct bilateral talks between Washington and Tehran, a possibility that Obama himself raised earlier this month.

Most analysts here believe a negotiated settlement to the nuclear issue can be reached if each side is prepared to compromise.

The outlines of such a settlement would include Iran's agreement to halt all uranium enrichment above five percent, ship out its stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium, clear up outstanding questions from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about possible military dimensions to its nuclear programme, and accept a stricter IAEA inspection regime.

In return, the P5+1 would be expected to provide a number of guarantees regarding the supply of nuclear material and other assistance and, most crucially, to ease and eventually lift economic sanctions that, among other things, have reduced exports of Iranian oil by about one million barrels a day and cut the rial's value by more than 60 percent.

Whether the two sides can agree on such terms – and their sequencing – within what many analysts believe is a relatively short timeframe looms over the prospective talks.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has repeatedly threatened to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, indicated in late September that he was willing to hold off until next spring or summer. Many analysts, however, believe that Netanyahu, whose Likud Party faces elections in January, is unlikely to take military action without a green light from Washington.

But the U.S. is also acting as if time is short. On Thursday, its envoy to the IAEA, Robert Wood, said Washington intended to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council if, by March, it had not “begun substantive co-operation” with the agency's investigation into possible military dimensions of its nuclear programme.

In addition to signaling mounting frustration with Tehran, his remarks were also interpreted as an expression of concern that Iran's leadership may become too involved by its own presidential election in June, campaigning for which is expected to follow the Mar. 20 New Year holiday (Nowruz), to gain the necessary consensus from its many factions, particularly hard-liners, for serious negotiations to take place.

“The deadline increases the pressure for an early breakthrough in the P5+1 talks,” Daryl Kimball, director of the Arms Control Association here, told IPS.

Like Iran's leadership, the administration also faces resistance from hard-liners in both parties in Congress where the Israel lobby wields its greatest influence.

The initiators and co-sponsors of Friday's sanctions amendment insist that their efforts are designed to give Washington maximum leverage in dealing with Iran.

“What the sanctions say to Iran is that we're going to bring down your economy ...and we're

going to do it fast,” Mark Dubowitz, director of the Likudist Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) who has drafted much of the sanctions legislation, told ‘Congressional Quarterly’ this week.

“The only choice you have at this point is to return to the table and reach an agreement that with us that satisfies your obligations under international law,” he added.

Indeed, the amendment’s initial version brought to the Senate by Menendez and another Israel lobby loyalist, Republican Sen. Mark Kirk, called for virtually across-the-board sanctions against foreign companies doing any business with Iran with the apparent aim of imposing a de facto trade embargo.

It also was designed to drastically reduce or, in some cases, eliminate the president’s ability to “waive” sanctions against certain countries on grounds of “national interest”.

After several days of talks, however, the administration and its allies succeeded in watering down the draft and preserving the president’s waiver authority in some cases; although the White House’s reaction Friday indicated that it would try to dilute the amendment even more when the bill goes to conference.

Still, many analysts see the legislation as designed to reduce, if not sabotage, any possibility of a compromise agreement that would permit Iran to enrich uranium at any level, a long-held Netanyahu demand.

In that view, additional punitive measures – particularly those that reduce Obama’s ability to ease U.S. sanctions and offer positive incentives for a deal – will serve only to strengthen hard-liners in Tehran who also oppose an agreement.

“With every new sanctions bill that Congress passes, the president’s flexibility is reduced, and doubts solidify about whether sanctions can ever be leveraged for a diplomatic deal,” noted Jamal Abdi, policy director of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC).

“This is what we saw happen with Iraq in the 1990s. Unbending sanctions do not buttress negotiations; they make diplomacy impossible and war inevitable.”

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