



Congressional Update

Roxanne Perugino

March 23, 2016

Note: Congress has adjourned for the Easter break. The Senate will return to session on Monday, April 4. The House is scheduled to return to session on Tuesday, April 12.

I. More Anti-Muslim Refugee Legislation

(1) Only Christian Refugees Welcome: On March 16, the House Judiciary Committee approved **HR4731, to Provide for an annual adjustment of the number of admissible refugees, and for other purposes**, sponsored by Representative Raul Labrador (R-Idaho). The bill was passed on a straight party line vote of 18-9. **HR4731** caps the number of refugees at 60,000 and gives Congress, rather than the President, the discretion to adjust the number.

The bill is a fundamental attack on the US refugee program and a thinly veiled attempt to prevent Muslim refugees from entering the US. It is based on the falsehood that Muslim refugees pose a danger to the US and its citizens. It also reduces the US ability to respond to international crises, and, prioritizes religious minorities, i.e., Christians, from countries designated by the US Commission on Religious Freedom, as countries of particular concern (CPC). In prioritizing Christians, the legislation effectively would prevent many Muslim refugees from resettling in the US.

The panel adopted two amendments making the bill even more restrictive. By a vote of 15-7, it approved an amendment by Representative Steve King (R-Iowa) to allow states to hold ballot initiative or referendums to block refugee resettlement. By a vote of 17-8, the Committee approved an amendment by Representative Ted Poe (R-Texas) that will allow states to opt out of receiving refugees, if federal authorities do not provide a 21-day advance notice of a placement plan and certify that it would not carry a security risk. Efforts by Committee Democrats to soften the bill were defeated by Republican members.

This is not the first attempt by Congress to deny Muslim refugees entry into the US. In January 2016, Senate Democrats blocked a vote on a House-passed bill (**HR4038**) that would have halted the admission of Syrian and Iraqi refugees into the US until they underwent the strictest vetting process ever required for people fleeing their war-torn homelands. Senators voted 55-43 to advance the bill but fell five votes short of the 60 needed for passage. President Obama had vowed to veto the legislation if passed.

Clearly, the Administration also opposes **HR4731** not only because it denies admission of Muslim refugees, but also because it limits the President's power to take executive action. Republican members of Congress are angry at the President's recent executive decisions with respect to refugees and the legislation is a heavy-handed effort to tie the President's hands. The Administration opposes the bill and therefore it is unlikely to be enacted into law.



(2) No Muslim Syrian Refugees: On March 17 Senator Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas), without any cosponsors, introduced S.2708 “**A bill to provide for the admission to the United States of up to 10,000 Syrian religious minorities as refugees of special humanitarian concern in each of the fiscal years 2016 through 2020.**” The bill has been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Like the House bill, Cotton’s bill seeks to admit only Syrian Christian refugees into the US. The resolution has been referred to the Committee on the Judiciary. Cotton’s press release on the bill is [here](#).

II. Israel/Palestine

(1) US-Israel Defense Cooperation: On March 17, Representative Elise Stefanik (R-New York) introduced HR4810, **a bill to authorize the Secretary of Defense to cooperate with Israel to develop directed energy capabilities to detect and defeat ballistic missiles, and for other purposes.**” Apparently “directed energy capabilities,” means assorted lasers. The bill has been referred to the HFAC and House Armed Services Committee. Text of HR4810.

(2) Condemning President Abbas and Palestinian Attacks: On March 17 Representative Alcee Hastings (D-Florida) and no cosponsors, introduced HRes651, **condemning the recent violent terrorist attack against Taylor Force and the recent wave of terrorism against Israel and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' failure to condemn such attacks.** The resolution has been referred to the HFAC.

(3) US-Israel Memorandum of Understanding: On March 16 Senator Chris Coons (D-Delaware) and Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) sent a [letter](#) to President Obama calling for a “substantially enhanced” new long-term agreement “to help provide Israel the resources it requires to defend itself and preserve its qualitative military edge.” AIPAC, which recently concluded its annual policy meeting, has posted this letter on its website meaning this subject most likely was a priority during AIPAC’s lobbying day on March 22.

(4) Israel-Palestine Peace Tenets: Representative Nita Lowey (D-New York) and Kay Granger (R-Texas), the Ranking Member and Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations have sent a [letter](#) to President Obama outlining six “tenets” for US policy regarding Israeli-Palestinian peace effort, including calling on the US to veto one-sided UN Security Council resolutions. The letter is dated April 8, but AIPAC has posted the letter on its website indicating this was another lobbying “ask” during AIPAC’s lobbying date on March 22.

III. Iran

(1) More Iran Sanctions: On March 17, Senators Kelly Ayotte (R-New Hampshire) and eleven Republican cosponsors, introduced S.2725, **a bill to impose sanctions with respect to the ballistic missile program of Iran, and for other purposes.**” The bill has been referred to the Senate Banking, House and Urban Affairs Committee. Ayotte’s press release



announcing the introduction of the bill is [here](#). Ayotte also provided a section-by-section analysis of the bill. The text of the bill is [here](#).

(2) Some More Sanctions: On March 17, Senator Mark Kirk (R-Illinois) and 15 Republican cosponsors introduced S2726, “**A bill to hold Iran accountable for its state sponsorship of terrorism and other threatening activities and for its human rights abuses, and for other purposes.**” Upon introduced Kirk issued a press [release](#) explaining the [bill](#).

Neither S2725 nor S2726 has bipartisan support, so it appears likely that the bills will not be considered. Moreover, SFRC Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) and Ranking member Ben Cardin (D-Maryland) are continuing to work on bipartisan sanctions legislation that will target Iran for its ballistic missile testing, a violation of the Iran Nuclear Agreement.

(3) And Yet, More Sanctions: On March 21, Representative Mike Pompeo (R-Kansas) and no cosponsors, introduced HR4815, **a bill to impose sanctions with respect to the ballistic missile program of Iran, and for other purposes.** The bill has been referred to the following House committees: HFAC; Financial Services; Judiciary; Oversight and Government Reform; and Ways and Means.

(3) No Money to Iran: On March 7, Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida) and Ted Poe (R-Texas) along with 50 Republican co-signers, sent a [letter](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry expressing their deep concern over the Obama Administration’s payment of \$1.7 billion to the Iranian regime, “...a US designated State Sponsor of Terrorism.” Members suggest that the payment will “encourage radicals in Iran and elsewhere to take more Americans hostage.” The signers complain that Congress was not part of negotiations over the payment, and dispute Iran’s claim to the funds arguing that the real issue is that “Iran should pay American victims of Iranian terror...not be rewarded with American taxpayer dollars for a dubious claim.” The joint statement by Ros-Lehtinen and Poe is [here](#).

IV. Hearings

(1) Hizballah’s Growing Threat against US National Security Interests in the Middle East: on March 22, the HFAC’s Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia held a hearing to assess Hizballah’s threat to US security interests in the Middle East. Testimony was received from Matthew [Levitt](#), Washington Institute on Near East Policy; Tony [Badran](#), Foundation for Defense of Democracies; and Daniel [Byman](#), Georgetown University and the Brookings Institution.

Ros-Lehtinen fervently believes that Hizballah represents a growing threat to US national security interests in the region, particularly in the wake of the sanctions relief that the Iranian government has received as part of the “weak and dangerous” Iran nuclear agreement. With the \$100 billion windfall that Iran recently received it is only reasonable to expect Iran will increase its support for Hizballah. The Lebanese Shi’ite militia is a “vital arm” of Iran’s



foreign policy agenda, so the US would be “...silly and ignorant to expect that it wouldn’t use this as an opportunity to strengthen its damaging apparatus.”

Witnesses generally agreed with Ros-Lehtinen’s assessment of Hizballah. Levitt asserted that Hizballah officials are comfortable and confident that Iran will not abandon the group because Hizballah is more than just an ally for Iran. Badran told the panel that in his view, Iran and Hizballah clearly intend to leverage their success in Syria to change the balance of power with Israel, by specifically expanding into the Golan Heights and on linking it to the south Lebanon front. Byman’s testimony focused on why and how Hizballah has transformed in recent years with an emphasis on the Syrian civil war. He also described Iranian support for Hizballah in the aftermath of the US-Iran nuclear agreement.

(2) Trafficking in Victims Report: On March 22, the HFAC Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, held a hearing on how to improve the annual Trafficking in Persons Report, (TIP) a report required pursuant to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). Testimony was received from Mark P. Lagon, President of Freedom House, and other private witnesses who addressed trafficking issues in Cuba and North Korea.

Representative Christopher Smith (R-New Jersey), Chairman of the Subcommittee is extremely disappointed at the political manipulation of the annual trafficking report. He expressed hope that this year’s report is not plagued by the political manipulations that tarnished the 2015 report. He warned that the State Department, which issues the annual report, must get the TIP report right or the US will lose the foundational tool created to help more than 20 million victims of trafficking enslaved around the world today. Smith was particularly concerned that last year’s TIP report gave a pass to several countries meriting Tier 3 accountability—countries whose trafficking victims desperately needed protection. The 2015 TIP Report failed many victims. Smith named Cuba, China, Malaysia, and Oman as specific examples of countries originally recommended for tier 3—but ultimately listed in last year’s report at the Tier 2 level by the Obama Administration. “Fourteen countries were given higher grades than warranted,” Smith said.

The report identifies country practices at combatting human trafficking in three tiers:

Tier 1: countries whose governments fully comply with the TVPA minimum standards;

Tier 2: Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards;

Tier 2 Watch List: countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards and



a) The absolute number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing;

b) There is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year; or

c) The determination that a country is making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with minimum standards was based on commitments by the country to take additional future steps over the next year.

Tier 3: countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.

Note: In the 2015 TIP Report Algeria, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Syria and Yemen were listed as Tier 3 countries.

Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia were listed as Tier 2 Watch List countries.

Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Oman and the UAE were listed as Tier 2 countries.