

Congressional Update: Week Ending May 12, 2017

ACW Research & Analysis Unit

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I. Congressional Update

The House of Representatives was in recess this week and a number of members held fiery town hall meetings in their districts following the slim passage of the American Health Care Act. The House will reconvene on Tuesday, May 16. The Senate is not in session on Friday and will reconvene on Monday, May 15.

II. Aid to the Palestinians

Last week, during the visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Tom Cotton (R-AR), and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) sent a letter to President Donald Trump urging him to press Abbas to end Palestinian Authority laws and practices that reward terrorism. The text of the letter is here.

Last February, Senator Graham introduced S.474, legislation to condition assistance to the West Bank and Gaza on steps by the Palestinian Authority to end violence and terrorism against Israeli citizens. The legislation has not generated much interest; it has 11 Republican co-sponsors and is pending before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC).

III. Iran Update

According to congressional sources, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) is expected to mark up the Iran Sanctions legislation on Tuesday, May 23. The bill, S.722 was introduced last March by SFRC Chair Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), Senators Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), and Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey). The bill would impose sanctions on Iran over its

ballistic missile program, its support for terrorism, and its violation of human rights. If the markup is held, it is possible the bill could come to the Senate floor for a vote prior to the adjournment for the Memorial Day recess on May 25. On May 8, the following senators were added as co-sponsors to the bill: Jeff Flake (R-Arizona), Bill Cassidy (R-Louisiana), and Joan Ernst (R-Iowa).

IV. Syria Update

The full House is expected to consider the Caesar Civilian Protection Act (HR1677) on Wednesday, May 17.

V. Congressional Hearings

Nomination of Deputy Secretary of State: On Monday, May 8 the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations convened to hear testimony from Deputy Secretary of State nominee John Sullivan. Sullivan was originally first on President Trump's shortlist of candidates to be the Department of Defense's General Counsel before ultimately agreeing to serve as the number two official in the State Department. While Sullivan has no experience serving at the State Department, he held a number of positions in George W. Bush's administration and many believe his experience navigating the federal bureaucracy will help him be a stabilizing force for the department.

The hearing was generally more of a rubberstamp than many of the president's prior nominations. Mr. Sullivan is well respected by members of both parties and what little doubt

there was about his position on a number of issues was surely erased after a good showing. Sullivan agreed to work closely and collaboratively with the senators of the committee to ensure that the State Department is running efficiently and that United States values remain the bedrock of its standing in the world.

Sullivan's nomination will likely move through committee quickly—with no notable objections—and receive a favorable vote from the rest of the Senate.

Hearing on the Importance of US Democracy Assistance: On Tuesday, May 9, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs held a hearing to assess the usefulness of the \$2.3 billion dollar budget that is allocated for supporting democratic efforts around the globe. Chairman Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina)—an admittedly hawkish member—was passionate in his call for sustaining democratic assistance, but he also spoke to the need for senators and policy advisers to justify this budget to taxpayers. While democracy assistance accounts for only 0.0004% of the US budget, according to Graham, taxpayers should understand the necessity for such means of “soft power” and how these are beneficial to global stability and ultimately US security. To attest to such benefits, the committee called on the following experts to testify: former Secretary of State Madeline Albright; former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley; and former Congressmen Vin Weber and Jim Kolbe.

The panelists were in total agreement about the need for this budget to continue in the future. Democratic outreach, they argued, is a vital tool for US national security and is much too valuable to cast aside. They took solace in the fact that senators on this committee worked to include a budget for this assistance in the recent spending bill, but the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has its sights set on fatal budget cuts for the program and they asked for the committee's continued support.

While OPM's Mick Mulvaney looks to cut programs like this to reduce spending, as long as level-headed GOP appropriators are involved in key positions like Graham's, cuts to democratic assistance funding may not be as draconian as feared.

VI. At the Think Tanks

Iran's Voters Go to the Polls: On Tuesday, May 9 the Middle East Institute (MEI) hosted an event to discuss the upcoming presidential elections in Iran and forecast the effects of the election on the broader regional and international dynamics. The elections—slated for May 19—will be between incumbent Hassan Rouhani and five candidates who were approved by Guardian Council. While there are candidates considered “moderates” or “reformists,” Rouhani's greatest challenge comes from purported Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei favorite Ebrahim Raisi—a hardline cleric who has been considered a possible successor to the current Supreme Leader.

To explore the choices facing Iranian voters, MEI enlisted scholars and journalists to share their ideas and expectations for the results of the elections and policy afterwards. MEI's own Alex Vatanka was joined by Alireza Nader of the RAND Corporation, author Nazila Fathi, and *Washington Post* reporter Ishaan Tharoor as moderator. As one might expect, the state of the Iranian economy, questions about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; Iran nuclear deal), and Iran's position towards the West have been at the forefront of this election campaign. However, Vatanka argued—and others agreed—that this election is actually more crucial not because of competing ideas about policies and foreign relations, but because of a power struggle that is unique to Iran.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is 78 years old and with rumors swirling around the status of his health, the possibility of having to choose a successor in the next president's term appears to be plausible. With this in mind, domestic power brokers like Khamenei and his inner circle along with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have great interest in seeing a hardliner like Raisi elected to office. While members of the more conservative social circles in Iran will try to influence this

election, no panelist argued the likelihood of grand scale election rigging like what is believed to have happened in 2009.

The panelists agreed that if voter turnout is high, Rouhani likely will receive the nod for a second term as president. Should voter turnout be low, Raisi could have a shot at winning outright, but it is very likely no candidate would receive a majority and the two who earn the highest number of votes will advance to a second round. Here, most of the panelists still believed Rouhani would come out victorious but they all acknowledged the very real possibility of Raisi becoming the new president of Iran.

VII. Congressional Retirements

Ros-Lehtinen Calls it a Day: Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida) announced last week she would not seek re-election in 2018. Elected to Congress in 1982, Lehtinen has represented the 27th congressional district for more than 35 years. Recently, however, that district has been trending Democratic and in the 2016 presidential election Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton received 56 percent of the vote which is very likely to have prompted Ros-Lehtinen's decision.

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