

Congressional Update: Week Ending July 28, 2017

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I. Congress

The House of Representatives finished its business and, barring unexpected developments, will leave Washington for its August recess. As of now, the Senate plans to be in session for the first two weeks of August.

1) Legislation

Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. On July 27, the Senate overwhelmingly voted in favor of adopting the House of Representatives' reworked sanctions legislation. H.R. 3364—which passed the House 419-3 and the Senate 98-2—levies new sanctions on three adversarial nations, including Iran. The bill's language imposes sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp and any individual who supports Iran's ballistic missile program or helps the Islamic Republic skirt the United Nations' arms embargo. The bill will head to President Donald Trump's desk, but thus far he has been noncommittal on whether he will veto or sign it into law. Aside from the bad optics of vetoing popular sanctions on Iran, Russia, and North Korea, the congressional vote tallies indicate members of Congress could easily override his veto, should he choose that option.

2018 House Security Minibus. The House previously packaged four separate spending bills into a single piece of legislation in order to consider the bills once. The "security minibus," as it was coined, includes an operating budget of \$658.1 billion for the Defense Department for fiscal year 2018. Although the House passed the minibus 235-192, it has an uncertain future in the Senate. The spending set forth for the Department of Defense shatters budget limitations set in law, and the minibus also allocates nearly \$1.6 billion to President Trump's infamous border wall proposal. The GOP majority in the Senate needs at least eight Democrats to pass these spending measures, and with many already calling the border wall funding a "non-starter," some serious changes are expected.

State Department Authorization 2018. On July 27, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) approved legislation setting policy guidelines for the Department of State for fiscal year 2018. Two important amendments were narrowly adopted in the committee markup: one legislates the semi-autonomy of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the other prevents the Trump Administration from shuttering the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Both passed by a vote of 11-10. Should the legislation become law as amended, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson would be prohibited from integrating USAID into the State Department as he had previously suggested. S. 1631 will move on to consideration by the full Senate body.

2) Hearings

Held for Ransom. On July 25, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa held a hearing to draw attention to the US citizens who are currently being detained by the Iranian government. The witnesses for this hearing were Douglas Levinson, Babak Namazi, and Omar Zakka, all of whom have relatives incarcerated in Iran.

The hearing began with committee members calling on the Trump Administration to further pressure the government of Iran to release all of the detained US citizens. Some members, like Representative Lee Zeldin (R-New York), criticized the failure of the Iranian government to release all the citizens being held despite receiving what some consider a \$1.7 billion ransom secured through the signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida) called for taking a tough stance toward Iran—including levying more sanctions—to press the Islamic Republic to change its behavior. The witnesses provided emotional testimonies, imploring Congress and the White House to do everything possible to secure the release of their family members. The Iranian government treats the detained citizens like hostages, the witnesses insisted, and cited the maltreatment and alleged torture of their relatives in Iran.

The very next day, the House passed H. Res. 317, as amended, under suspended rules. This resolution expresses the same concerns as discussed in the hearing and calls on the Iranian government to release those who are being held.

II. National Security

Authorization for the Use of Military Force. Discourse of war powers continued this week when the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) held a hearing to discuss the need for a new authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) in light of the global terrorist threat. The committee called on former US Attorney General Michael Mukasey, Ret. Brigadier General Richard Gross, and former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, to offer their opinions on the matter. Chairman Ed Royce (R-California) specifically wanted input about whether the 2001 AUMF gives the US military sufficient legal authority to use force abroad, whether the same AUMF causes any legal ambiguity or operational constraint, and what should be in a new AUMF if Congress decides to issue one.

The three expert witnesses all agreed on one simple fact: Congress should issue a new AUMF that expressly authorizes the military to pursue its operational endeavors against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While the witnesses differed on specific aspects of a new AUMF, they generally recommended that Congress formally establish which groups are authorized to be targeted (e.g., ISIL, al-Qaeda, the Taliban) and where operations may be conducted (e.g., Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and

perhaps Somalia), and that the military and/or the president be required to provide timely reports on the status of their efforts to combat these groups. The one issue on which the witnesses disagreed was that of a “sunset” provision—or an expiration date for the congressional authorization. This has been a point of contention among lawmakers themselves, with some believing it is necessary to prevent prolonging military campaigns and others viewing the provision as a timeline that enemies will simply wait out.

Assessing the Trump Administration’s Counterterrorism Policy. On July 27, the Middle East Institute (MEI) hosted current and former counterterrorism officials and scholars to assess the Trump Administration’s counterterrorism policies six months after inheriting an unprecedented set of terrorist threats worldwide. The panel of experts included Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL; Jennifer Cafarella, lead intelligence planner at the Institute for the Study of War; Matthew Levitt, fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP); Joshua Geltzer, former senior director for counterterrorism on the Obama Administration’s National Security Council; and MEI’s own Charles Lister.

McGurk and Geltzer were most prominently placed to discern any changes in policy between the Trump and Obama administrations and, while there are some small changes, they described consistent policy approaches between the two administrations. McGurk then went on to provide great detail about the progress that has been made in the anti-ISIL campaign, going well beyond the headline-grabbing details and highlighting the real progress being made in and around Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq. The rest of the scholars spent time examining the current terrorism threats facing the United States and its allies in the Middle East. ISIL, of course, commands the most attention, but every scholar warned against underestimating the resurgence of al-Qaeda, especially in Syria. The experts spoke of al-Qaeda as though it had consolidated large bases of support in Syria and Afghanistan and discussed efforts by the group to build an army and expand its influence. Aside from ISIL and al-Qaeda, Levitt sounded the alarm on Iranian-sponsored terror groups gaining influence in a number of countries in the region. Hezbollah, he warned, is expanding and the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and other militias in Yemen have the ability to wreak havoc in the future.

III. Qatar and the Gulf Crisis

While Iran was center stage in Washington last week, this week the focus shifted to its neighbors in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Both on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, a public relations battle has been raging between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and the Trump Administration. On July 25, the Hudson Institute hosted three experts for a panel discussion on Saudi Arabia and the GCC in the Trump era. The panelists included

Mohammed Khalid Alyahya, nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council; Fatimah Baeshen, director of the Arabia Foundation; and Michael Pregent, adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Despite the title, the panel spent less time addressing the Trump Administration and more time criticizing President Obama's policy for the Gulf region. When the topic turned to assessing the Gulf countries individually, the panelists unanimously approved of what they described as Saudi Arabia's progress in domestic and foreign policies. The panel praised the Saudis for what it views as legitimate progress in improving socioeconomic conditions and better observation of human rights. Baeshen argued that Saudi Arabia has improved in areas such as women's rights, education reform, and freedom of expression, citing the rise in Twitter use and the existence of political satire on television.

When it came to assessing the Saudis' GCC neighbors – particularly Qatar – the experts were decidedly in the Saudi camp. They were extremely critical of Qatar's alleged terrorism financing activities, which is an oft-repeated claim from the Saudi-bloc of GCC countries. Pregent and Alyahya cited examples of Qatar's recalcitrance, stating that members of al-Qaeda were given Qatari passports and that extremist groups were allowed to roam freely through the country. The panelists also diagnosed some of the underlying causes of Qatar's negative behavior, arguing that the minimal economic disenfranchisement of its small population and the presence of the US airbase at al-Udeid embolden Qatar to act rebelliously with little fear of domestic or foreign ramifications. Amid the barrage of criticism, the moderator, Lee Smith, interjected to note that Qatar's helpfulness in Syria and its commitment to supporting American troops make it a valuable ally in the region.

Ambassador Series. That same day, the Qatari ambassador to the United States, Sheikh Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, took part in the World Affairs Council's "Ambassador Series." He spoke on a range of topics, including Qatar's relations with the United States, Iran, and its GCC neighbors. Because of the ongoing siege of his country, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), much of his time was spent discussing intra-GCC relations. The ambassador pointedly declared the Saudi-led siege as illegal. Despite the siege and the Emirati cyberattacks, he vowed, Qatar will withstand the bloc's pressure and will not trade Qatari sovereignty for a lifting of the siege. Not only will Qatar not succumb to these bullying tactics, he argued, but the Saudi-led bloc will actually see blowback from this attempt. Instead of moving Qatar to capitulate, he argued that the siege has actually strengthened Qatar but weakened GCC counterterrorism efforts and tarnished the group's reputation abroad. Although the ambassador insisted that Qatar could survive the siege indefinitely, he concluded with a call for the countries involved to reach a political solution to the crisis and resume cooperative relations.

Assessing the US-Qatar Relationship. On July 26, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa held an event to assess the US-Qatar relationship in light of the ongoing

GCC crisis. The witnesses included Jonathan Schanzer of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The third witness was Ilan Goldenberg of the Center for a New American Security who, as reported recently, allegedly took \$250,000 from the UAE ambassador to the United States.

From the outset, most of the committee's Republican members, including Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida), took a hard line with Qatar. They consistently criticized the embargoed nation and echoed many of the same accusations levied by the Saudi-led bloc of countries that have laid siege to Qatar. Many of the Democratic members, like Ranking Member Ted Deutch (D-Florida), offered softer rhetoric on the issue, urging the GCC neighbors to find a way to bridge the Gulf split. These same members did echo their colleagues across the aisle, however, and called on Qatar to establish stricter counter extremism measures.

When the witnesses offered their assessments, Schanzer was especially critical of what he saw as more than just Qatari apathy toward countering extremism, but deliberate material and financial support for extremist groups. Schanzer suggested that Congress reevaluate the necessity of basing troops in Qatar's al-Udeid Airbase – which actively hosts nearly 11,000 US troops. Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen offered her support for that idea after the hearing. Levitt took a similar stance and spoke about Qatar's history of acting independently of its Gulf neighbors when identifying and prosecuting groups or individuals for terrorism activity. Goldenberg concluded with a gentler assessment of how the United States should broach the Qatar issue. He offered several recommendations to the Trump Administration for handling the GCC crisis. In particular, he suggested the administration settle on a singular message to avoid issuing contradictory statements and to refrain from defining the nuanced Middle East in binary terms.

IV. Around the District

Weathering the Regional Storm. On July 26, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri sat down with Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to discuss the numerous challenges currently facing Lebanon. A lethargic economy is compounded by rapidly evolving security concerns radiating from conflicts at Lebanon's border. Despite these concerns and the country's internal political and diplomatic challenges, Hariri described Lebanon as a model for the rest of the world. In terms of countering extremism and hosting refugees, he said his country was a shining example in an otherwise chaotic region.

The prime minister went on to discuss domestic political reforms being implemented in Lebanon and he detailed an ambitious plan for rejuvenating his country's sluggish economy. After spending over two years without a president, the government is now fully staffed and he hopes it is the first step in putting a decade of political deadlock behind them. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for May

2018 and Hariri is hopeful for high participation under election reform laws. As for the economy, he outlined a four-point goal for the Lebanese nation and government: jumpstart fast, inclusive growth; focus on developing and maintaining fiscal responsibility; find a way to mitigate the strain on the economy stemming from the influx of Syrian refugees; and look to the international community to invest capital in Lebanon, particularly considering that it can function as a launch point for companies trying to assist in rebuilding Syria. Perhaps some of Hariri's words were heard in Washington, because the prime minister returned to Lebanon with \$140 million from the United States to help sustain the Syrian refugees in the country.