

Congressional Update: Week Ending May 19, 2017

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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

I. Legislation

Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2017:

On May 17, the House of Representatives passed the Caesar Civilian Protection Act (H.R.1677) by voice vote under suspension of the rules. Legislation considered under “suspension” must receive two-thirds vote and no amendments are allowed. The new legislation outlines additional sanctions to be imposed against the Syrian government and any country or company that does business with the Asad regime. The bill also would impose sanctions with respect to the Central Bank of Syria and foreign persons who engage in certain transactions or provide arms to the Asad regime. The bill was widely supported in the House, gathering 108 cosponsors between the two parties. As mentioned in earlier reports, the Caesar bill was passed by the House at the end of the 114th Congress but died in the Senate due to Obama Administration opposition to the sanctions provision.

Although the Trump Administration has not taken a position on the current legislation, the legislation opens the door for extensive new sanctions with respect to Iran as well as Russia or any other country or entity that aids Syria. The bill now moves on to the Senate where its prospects for passage are uncertain. Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) is unlikely to consider the bill due to the fact that the committee has its own Iran sanctions bill. Moreover, Corker has been reluctant, so far, to consider Russia sanctions legislation.

Countering Iran’s Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017:

As of this update, the SFRC is still expected to markup S.722 on May 23 (though this could be postponed). The bill would impose sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missile program, its support for terrorism, and its violations of human rights.

II. Syria Sanctions Imposed

On May 16, the US Treasury placed sanctions on several individuals and entities accused of providing support to Syria’s ruling regime. These sanctions will freeze any and all US-based assets these individuals and entities may possess and prohibit them from facilitating transactions with those on the blacklist.

III. Iraq

Executive Order 13303: President Donald Trump notified Congress that he planned to publish in the *Federal Register* his intent to continue the national emergency in regards to Iraq’s stability, which was first set forth by President George W. Bush in 2003. Per section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act, the national emergency designation expires May 22, 2017, unless specifically extended by the president. In postponing the expiration for one more year, President Trump elects to address threats to the Development Fund for Iraq and Iraqi petroleum or petroleum products that “obstruct the orderly reconstruction of Iraq.”

The legal consequences of the order include preventing any type of punitive measures

against proceeds or any other type of financial instruments related to the sale or marketing of Iraqi petroleum (e.g., liens, garnishments, etc.) once it is located in the United States or controlled by US persons.

IV. State of International Religious Freedom

On May 17, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (UCIRF) held an event to discuss the recently released 2017 Annual Report on religious freedom as well as its Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. UCIRF is a bipartisan federal commission tasked with documenting religious freedom violations around the world and making country-specific recommendations, as well as assessing the United States' implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act.

In the report, the UCIRF designates states as countries of particular concern (CPCs) or Tier 2 (countries that merit concern but do not meet the threshold to be considered of particular concern); non-state actors can be deemed entities of particular concern (EPCs). These designations are made after considering a host of factors affecting the religious freedom of the citizens of these countries.

This year's report includes Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria among the list of recommended CPCs, while Iraq, Egypt, and Bahrain fall in the Tier 2 consideration. The Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Shabab in Somalia, and the Islamic State were all recommended as EPCs.

V. Legislation of Interest

Preventing Genocide and other Atrocities (S.1158): The bill was introduced on May 17 by Senators Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), Todd Young (R-Indiana), Thom Tillis (R-North Carolina), Dick Durbin (D-Illinois), Marco Rubio (R-Florida), Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-Rhode Island), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota), Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), Al Franken (D-Minnesota), Gary Peters (D-Michigan), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), Debbie Stabenow (D-Michigan), Cory Booker (D-New Jersey), Ed Markey (D-Massachusetts), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin), and Ron Wyden (D-Oregon). The bill would help prevent genocide and other atrocity crimes that threaten national and international security by enhancing US Government capacities to prevent, mitigate, and respond to such crises. The bill has been referred to the SFRC.

Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel (S.Res.167): This resolution was introduced on May 17 by Senators Dean Heller (R-Nevada), Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), Marco Rubio (R-Florida), and Ted Cruz (R-Texas). It relates to the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem. The resolution has been referred to the SFRC.

Prohibit Assessed or Voluntary Contributions to the UN (H.R.2496): Introduced on May 17 by Representative Trent Franks (R-Arizona), the bill would prohibit assessed or voluntary contributions to the United Nations. The bill has been referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC).

No Funds for the Palestinian Authority, West Bank and Gaza (H.R.2497): Introduced on May 17 by Representative Trent Franks (R-Arizona), the bill would prohibit assistance for the Palestinian Authority and the West Bank and Gaza. The bill has been referred to the HFAC.

Two-State Solution (H.Res.331): Introduced on May 17 by Representative Trent Franks (R-Arizona), the resolution expresses the policy of the United States with respect to a two-state solution between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people. The resolution has been referred to the HFAC.

Reunification of Jerusalem (H.Res.328): Introduced on May 16 by Representative Tom Suozzi (D-New York) and Francis Rooney (R-Florida), the resolution commemorates the 50th anniversary of the “reunification of Jerusalem.” The resolution has been referred to the HFAC.

VI. Around the District

Iraq After ISIS is Defeated in Mosul: A View From Kurdistan: On May 16, the Heritage Foundation hosted the Chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council, Masrour Barzani, to speak about the continuing fight against ISIL and the decisions to be made once

the group is defeated. Barzani highlighted the reality that terrorism in Iraq and the greater region will persist past the fall of ISIL, but he praised US-support in Iraq and vowed to work with Baghdad to stabilize the country.

Barzani also spoke on the future of the Kurdish people in Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds have lived in a semi-autonomous state for years, but later this fall, Barzani and the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan will hold a referendum on its relationship with Baghdad. While the chancellor noted he was uncertain regarding outside views of such a move (e.g., US or Turkish opinions), he called the vote an opportunity for his party to execute the popular will of the Kurds in Iraq.

How Much Has the Trump Presidency Influenced Iran’s Elections? On May 17, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy held a panel discussion on how Trump’s presidency has affected the campaign for president in Iran. The panelists discussed the Iranian president’s role in governing the country and how foreign affairs and the economy have shaped the arguments of the candidates.

As divisive as Donald Trump is in the United States, one might think he would also be the focus of debate in Iran due to his combative stance toward the Islamic Republic, his vow to “tear up” the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and his stalled attempt at banning immigration from Iran. However, all three panelists noted that although the candidates sometimes discussed Trump and his policies, he

was not the center of attention that some might have expected. Rather, the economy, corruption, injustice, and inequality have been front and center in this campaign, signaling, as one panelist noted, that “all politics are local.”

The Trump Administration and the Islamic World: On May 18, the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy held its 18th annual conference to discuss President Trump’s view toward and interaction with the Islamic world. Senator Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) was invited to give the keynote address on progressive policy alternatives to US foreign policy in the Islamic world.

Murphy has long been an advocate for a proportional budget, one that emphasizes the value of development and diplomatic tools as

much as the military. The focus on the military has been a longstanding and bipartisan problem, but Murphy said Trump has exacerbated the problem by shifting foreign policy issues to the military (i.e., staffing the National Security Council with former military leaders and understaffing the Department of State). With the appropriate foreign policy tools, Murphy argued, the United States could be more involved globally.

Murphy ended his address with a brief discussion of his expectations for President Trump’s upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia. While his expectations are low, he said Trump could exceed the low bar by shifting his stance away from what Murphy described as “waging war between Christians and Muslims” and reversing his controversial stances against Islam.

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