

Iran Freedom and Regime Change Politics

By Tom Barry | May 19, 2006

At a time when the Republican Party is divided on immigration reform and when the Democrats and the Republicans are positioning themselves for the mid-term elections on such issues as gay marriage, Congress is demonstrating alarming bipartisan unity on Iran.

On April 27 the House of Representatives passed the Iran Freedom Support Act by a vote of 397 to 21. The bill tightens sanctions imposed on Iran under the Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996 and tightens sanctions on companies that invest in the country's energy industries. The bill would make U.S. sanctions against Iran under ILSA permanent unless there is a change of government in Iran.

Sponsored by Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Tom Lantos (D-CA), the bill authorizes the president "to provide financial and political assistance to foreign and domestic individuals, organizations, and entities that support democracy and the promotion of democracy in Iran. The Senate version of the bill, S. 333, sponsored by Sens. Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Evan Bayh (D-IN), currently has 58 co-sponsors.

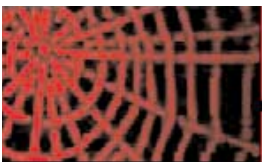
Ohio Democrat Dennis Kucinich, who opposed the bill, argued: "While this bill makes a point of so-called not using force against Iran, be assured this is a stepping stone to the use of force, the same way that the Iraq Liberation Act was used as a stepping stone."

The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is the most prominent lobbying group pressing for congressional approval of the Iran Freedom Support Act. After the House's approval of the bill, AIPAC told its members and supporters: "Please thank your Representative for voting for the bill and urge your Senators to co-sponsor S.333." On its website, AIPAC lists the 58 senators who have already agreed to support the companion bill when it comes to the Senate. The Senate bill counts on such Democrats as Barbara Boxer, Maria Cantwell, Dianne Feinstein, and Barbara Mikulski as well as such conservative Democrats as Joe Lieberman and Mary Landrieu.

While AIPAC is the most powerful group advocating a tougher U.S. policy toward Iran, numerous other pressure groups calling for regime change in Iran have emerged over the past several years. One of the earliest, the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (CDI), formed in late 2002, ceased functioning in mid-2005. Operating out of the office of Morris Amitay, the former director of AIPAC, CDI worked closely with AIPAC to encourage Congress to pass resolutions condemning Iran. The CDI principals continue their efforts to promote regime change in Iran through other organizations, including the Foundation for Democracy in Iran, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Committee on the Present Danger, and the American Enterprise Institute.

Raymond Tanter, one of the original members of the Coalition for Democracy in Iran, founded the Iran Policy Committee (IPC) in January 2005. Tanter, who was a senior staff member of the National Security Council during the Reagan administration, is also associated with several other right-wing policy organizations, including the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Middle East Institute, and the Committee on the Present Danger. Since its founding the Iran Policy Committee has sponsored conferences and policy briefings on the Hill, and has also published four policy papers—a common theme being that the U.S. government should declassify the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) as an international terrorist organization and recognize it as being the "indisputably largest and most organized Iranian opposition group."

According to Kenneth Timmerman, executive director of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran, the MEK (Mujahedin-e Khalq) is shifting its militant rhetoric and is now claiming to be a nonviolent, pro-democracy group. The MEK, which is characterized as a terrorist group,



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operates a political front organization called the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which is sponsoring conferences in Paris and Washington during the last week of May on regime change in Iran. The Paris conference, according to Timmerman, is being organized by the London-based Gulf Intelligence Monitor.

Timmerman reports that the “five American participants—Ray Tanter, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Paul Vallely, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Thomas McInerney, Navy Capt. (ret) Chuck Nash, and Lt. Col. (ret). Bill Cowan—are all members of the Iran Policy Committee, an organization set up by Tanter and by former CIA officer Clare Lopez in early 2005.” According to Timmerman, “The group has published a number of ‘white papers’—all of which have one thing in common: they urge the Bush administration to take the MEK and its various front organizations off the State Department list of international terrorist organizations.”

Timmerman asks where the MEK is getting the money to finance the conferences and why the FBI is allowing an international terrorist organization to operate openly in the United States.

Clare Lopez, the executive director of the Iran Policy Committee, is, like Tanter, a resident scholar at the Middle East Institute. Another leading member of IPC is Bruce McColm, who is the president of the Institute for Democratic Strategies and the former president of the International Republican Institute. Most of the other principals of IPC are retired military officers.

The U.S. government has committed at least \$75 million for projects that directly or indirectly support a regime change strategy in Iran. Over the last couple of years, several million dollars in U.S. democracy assistance aid

for Iran has been distributed to an array of organizations, including Freedom House, a neocon led organization in Washington. New funding would also be channeled to Iranian dissidents, mostly expatriates, although groups like IPC would like to see the MEK, which has bases in Iraq, benefit from U.S. “democracy building” funding.

Following the March announcement that the Bush administration wanted to commit \$75 million for media and political organizing, Senator Santorum, sponsor of the Iran Freedom Support Act, said, “Given the administration’s recent commitment to provide \$75 million to pro-democracy efforts within Iran, I intend to increase the level of funding authorized by my bill to \$100 million.”

Michael Rubin, an AEI scholar who formerly worked as an Iran adviser under Douglas Feith at the Pentagon, said: “Many Iranians have shown they are not embarrassed to take American assistance.” However, numerous Iranian experts say that U.S. aid would undermine the credibility of Iranian dissidents. Abbas Milani, director of Iranian studies at Stanford, told the New York Times, “Anyone who wants American money in Iran is going to be tainted in the eyes of Iranians.”

Well aware of U.S. regime change politics, the Iranian government, according to news reports, has launched a \$15 million program to “discover and neutralize American plots and intervention.”

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