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## Iran Sanctions, 'Regime Change,' Take Center Stage

By Jim Lobe

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With the Senate set to take up major sanctions legislation against Iran by mid-February, neo-conservative and other hawks are calling on the administration of President Barack Obama to pursue a more aggressive course of "regime change" in Tehran.

In recent days, their call was unexpectedly bolstered by a Newsweek column authored by the president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Richard Haass.

Haass is a long-time protégé of realists such as former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and secretary of state Colin Powell, who have advocated a policy of broad engagement with Iran over its nuclear program and other issues.

Citing the unprecedented and persistent unrest generated by the disputed June elections in Iran, Haass argued that "Iran may be closer to profound political change than at any time since the revolution that ousted the shah 30 years ago" and that "the United States, European governments, and others should shift their Iran policy towards increasing the prospects for (that) change."

"Even a realist should recognize that it's an opportunity not to be missed," he concluded.

Haass's change of heart was quickly seized on by leading neo-conservatives who have long favored a regime-change policy toward Tehran as the most effective way to deal with Tehran's controversial nuclear program

Writing in the Washington Post Wednesday, Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace cited the Haass conversion with enthusiasm, arguing that "President Obama has a once-in-a-generation opportunity over the next few months to help make the world a dramatically safer place."

"Given the role that the Islamic theocracy in Tehran has played in leading and sponsoring anti-democratic, anti-liberal and anti-Western fanaticism for the past three decades, the toppling or even substantial reform of that regime would be second only to the collapse of the Soviet Union in its ideological and geopolitical ramifications," he wrote.

The renewed push for a "regime change" policy comes as Congress moves closer to enacting sweeping sanctions legislation that many Iran specialists, including some inside the Obama administration, believe could, if implemented, actually strengthen the regime in Tehran.

Under heavy pressure from the so-called "Israel Lobby", the House of Representatives last month approved one long-delayed bill that would, among other things, impose penalties on foreign energy companies that provide gasoline to Iran or invest more than 20 million dollars a year in Iran's energy sector. The vote was 412-12.

Majority Leader Harry Reid Tuesday announced that the Senate will take up its own sanctions legislation by mid-February.

In addition to incorporating the House bill, the Senate version would extend sanctions to businesses that sell Iran technology that can be used to disrupt monitor or disrupt communications among Iranians or between them and the rest of the world. It would require the administration to freeze the assets of Iranians, notably officials in Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), allegedly active in weapons proliferation or terrorism.

While that legislation is also expected to pass by a wide margin, it may be softened between now and then in negotiations with the administration, which is insisting that Obama be given maximum discretion in imposing or not imposing sanctions so as to ensure they do not undermine Washington's efforts at maintaining a united front on Iran's nuclear program with other key countries, notably the major European powers, Russia and China.

"I am concerned that this legislation, in the current form, might weaken rather than strengthen international unity and support for our efforts," wrote Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg in a letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair John Kerry last month.

The administration's position is also backed by multinational business associations worried that unilateral sanctions will provoke resentment and retaliation from third countries whose corporations could be targeted under the pending legislation.

Nine such associations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the National Foreign Trade Council, warned in a letter to the White House Tuesday that the "the unilateral, extraterritorial, and overly broad approach of these bills would undercut rather than advance th(e) critical objective... of preventing Iran from developing the capability to produce nuclear weapons."

While corporations appear most concerned about the impact of the proposed sanctions on their overseas business interests, the administration has reportedly become increasingly worried that the kinds of broad sanctions featured in the pending legislation could weaken the opposition movement in Iran by imposing hardships on average citizens whose response may be to rally behind the regime.

"Our goal is to pressure the Iranian government, particularly the Revolutionary Guard elements, without contributing to the suffering (of Iranians,) who deserve better than what they are currently receiving," said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in early January.

Earlier this year, Clinton called for the adoption of "crippling sanctions" against Iran — including those that are included in the pending legislation — if it did not curb its nuclear program

"Up until recently the administration thought of sanctions only in the context of trying to alter the Iranian government's nuclear calculations," according to Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran specialist at the Carnegie Endowment.

"I think they're now thinking much harder about what types of measures would be helpful or hurtful to the cause of democratic reform in Iran. It is not coincidental that the word 'crippling' has been replaced by the word 'targeted'," he said.

In his op-ed, Haass appears to mostly agree with this approach, opposing unilateral sanctions — except against the IRGC and its businesses — that could alienate Washington's international allies or average Iranians. In addition, he calls for continuing talks on Iran's nuclear program, although he suggests it should not rise above "working-level negotiations."

And although he calls for "regime change", he does not rule out "full normalization of relations" with the Islamic Republic, provided that it is "linked to meaningful reform of Iran's politics and an end to Tehran's support of terrorism."

Haass also urges greater support for the opposition, including funding for a human rights documentation Centre here and technical support to facilitate communications among Iranians and with the outside world, measures that are currently also being considered by

the administration and Congress. He stresses that all support for the opposition should be non-violent.

Kagan, like other neo-conservatives — some of whom have long urged U.S. and Israeli military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities — has a somewhat more sweeping view of "regime change" by calling for "a new form of government."

While he does not explicitly reject continuing negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program, he argues that the opportunity created by the ongoing political turmoil should give it a much lower priority.

"Regime change is more important than any deal the Obama administration might strike with Iran's present government on its nuclear program," according to Kagan.

Significantly, he also warned against an Israeli attack which, he noted, "would provide a huge boost to the Tehran regime just when it is on the ropes."