

Congressman Bob Ney on Iran-US Relations

Ever since the President Mohammad Khatami's historic interview with CNN in 1997, analysts have been expecting a thaw in Iran-US relations. But rapprochement has been slow, with both sides often misreading the other's signals. In the following Iran Focus talks to Congressman Robert W. Ney (R-OH), the only Persian-speaker member of the House, who sheds some light on the American angle.

1- There has been a lot of talk and analysis on the stance of various factions and power centers in Iran regarding relations with the United States and the confusion that it creates. Iranian officials have expressed similar confusion. Can you provide us with a map of the Congress and perhaps the Executive branch in regards to relations with Iran? Is there a general difference in the attitude of Republicans versus that of the Democrats when it comes to Iran-US relations, or is this matter delineated more along a personal line?

There is no difference in attitude among Republicans and Democrats on US-Iran relations. I have personally asked both Republicans and Democrats on their opinion if we should start talking with Iran. The select few that I have spoke with believe that it is a good idea. As for the Executive branch, I have on more than one occasion spoke with and at the State Department on opening dialogue with Iran. Over the past year, some signals have been sent to Iran by the Administration and members of Congress. Some the messages where received well and others not so well, which has been the same way in Iran.

2- The United States has made it clear that it has three major objections to Iranian behavior that stymie prospects of rapprochement. Specifically, Washington alleges that Tehran is pursuing a WMD program, that it sponsors terrorism, and also that the Islamic Republic is trying to derail the Middle East Peace Process. Are these issues an outline of what the US would like to discuss, or a precondition for holding negotiations? Do all three issues carry equivalent weight in your opinion? Please explain.

Personally, I have stated over and over again, that if dialogue begins each country cannot come to the table with a list of preconditions that must be met. If this is the case, nothing will be accomplished. According to the latest State Department statements, these are no longer preconditions as they once were. Now, the Administration argues for unconditional talks, but does point out that they would like to bring up all these issues. Eventually, Iran I'm sure would like to bring up issues important to them as well. The Administration has made no distinction on which one of the above is most important. The Iranians seem convinced that the two first are just smokescreens (terrorism and WMD), and that the real issue is the Arab-Israeli talks. Again, I believe we should just agree to talk without conditions.

3- Many analysts are now claiming that the era of sanctions, at least unilateral sanctions, as a foreign policy tool is rapidly coming to a close. Do you think that sanctions in general are losing their vogue on Capital Hill? More importantly, what do you predict in regards to ILSA when it reaches its sunset clause in 2001? What are the prospects of ILSA being renewed? What are the most important variables that can affect the decision to renew ILSA or not?

I personally believe all sanctions are starting to lose their vogue here in Congress. In the 1st Session of the 106th Congress, legislation was introduced to remove all sanctions imposed on all countries. I am a co-sponsor of this legislation. For sanctions to work, the entire international community must be involved and believe in what you are doing. As the United States has seen, international support for such sanctions as ISLA is very poor.

The prospects for ISLA to be renewed are too close to judge. I believe the more Members of Congress are educated on the issue of renewing ISLA and its consequences, the more likely they will not bring it up for a vote or if it does come to the House floor, it may fail. Of course, chances that it will not be renewed is higher if talks can begin between Tehran and Washington before August 2001.

4- There is a belief among Iranian circles that certain powerful lobbies are pushing Congress to keep away from ameliorating ties with Tehran and that often Washington is forced to pursue the interests of another nation, rather than that of the United States. Can you shed some light on how the lobbies affect the way Congress deals with Iran?

Over the past years, yes, there have been a select few lobbying organizations that lobby against Iran. However, recently there are many organizations forming to pursue the interest of Iran and Iranian-Americans. I believe you will see evidence of these groups this Congress and hopefully have a favorable affect on upcoming legislation.

5- Along the same lines, many Iranian - from government officials to average people on the streets of Tehran - express great anger and surprise that the militant opposition group, the MKO, has been able to exert so much influence in the US Congress, even after they were listed as terrorist group by the State Department. How did such a group come to gain a loud voice in Congress? Why do certain members of Congress express support for a group that engages in terrorist acts? What is the status of the MKO in the Congress today?

Up until last year, it was MKO and not the NCR that was on the list, and many Congressmen were not fully informed on their link with each other. It is a misconception that they have been influential. Once they succeeded in getting around 220 signatures for their letter, but since, they have mostly recycled these signatures and refused to disclose them. This is changing, however. This past October, the NCR was included on the terrorist list and this has caused them to not be allowed to lobby in Congress anymore, i.e. their activities have effectively been curbed. Do realize, at one point in Washington they were one of the only groups talking about Iran in Washington. Now there are many groups and organizations which have been formed to begin

communication about and with Iran.

6- The number of Iranians in the US is quite significant. By the estimates of the Iranian government, there are between 1-1.5 million Iranians in the United States, a considerable number of whom are now US citizens. Have these Iranian-Americans had any role as force to pressure the anti-Iran camp in Congress? Do you see this group as a potential lobby for the interests of Iran in the United States?

As I have seen and met with, many Iranian-Americans are getting motivated after their silence for over 20 years. Today, the majority of Iranian-Americans are pressuring their Representatives in Congress to initiate a dialog with Tehran and to lift the sanctions. Many groups have been formed, such as Iranian Trade Association, American Iranian Council and Iranians for International Cooperation. This is a very positive development, as most Congressmen previously have had no access to the views of the Iranian-American community. If the Iranian-American groups continue these organizations and their involvement in politics, they will be able to exert political pressure on Congress and influence the future direction of US-Iran relations. They are a very able, resourceful, and highly educated community who have been very successful in adapting to the American society.

7- Another element of confusion on the Iranian side is the issue of a \$20 million budget set aside to destabilize the government in Tehran. While some media reports have claimed that this budget was never approved, the common perception in Iran is that Radio Free Europe's Persian service is funded by that budget. Could you clarify what the story with the \$20 million budget against Iran was and why RFE's Persian service was created?

During the height of our non-communication, this was created. Recently, the radio group has succeeded in ensuring that it was filled with people who had a more open-minded approach to Iran, US-Iran relations, and interviewed a wide range of Iranian politicians and analysts. Therefore, it may not be as big of a problem as people thought it could be.

8- Various American officials, including the President of the United States, have expressed that they wish to engage in greater people-to-people exchanges since President Mohammad Khatami's landmark CNN interview. There have been many examples, from the exchange of athletes, to various members of civil society, etc., on both sides. Despite this policy, Iranians visiting the US on such invitations are frequently subjected to a humiliating process including fingerprinting and interrogations. Why does such a contradiction exist and is there anything being done to resolve it?

Unfortunately, due to U.S. law, any state listed on the State Department's terrorist list is subject to fingerprinting when that countries citizens enter the US. I have personally called the State Department to inquire on a solution to stop this humiliating fingerprinting. As I understand, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has so far not fingerprinted any terrorists, they have

only fingerprinted Iranian children and grandmothers, visiting their Iranian-American relatives in the US. This policy is very unfortunate since discriminating against US citizens such as Iranian Americans in no way promotes US interest. This approach is inappropriate altogether.

Nonetheless, the State Department has recognized this by ensuring that the Iranian soccer players were not fingerprinted several weeks ago. They gave them an exemption. I believe this is a good start, but we need to go much further.

9- On the topic of civil exchanges, members of the US Congress are elected representatives of the American people. Are there any members of congress who are interested in visiting Iran officially or unofficially?

Yes, there are some Members of Congress that I spoke to personally on both sides of the aisle that have showed interest in traveling to Iran.

10- Average Iranians reflect that they are extremely upset at the US involvement in the 1953 coup against the popular government of Mohammad Mosadeq. Perhaps that upset is only matched by the US Navy's shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane over the Persian Gulf in 1988, an incident that led to the death of 290 civilians. Time and time again, during our informal interviews with the Iranian people they have told us that they have not been able to forget that the Americans never apologized for either incident, and that such an apology would go a long way as a good will gesture. As a representative of the American people, would you have any comments to the Iranian people in this regards?

I believe many situations on both sides are regrettable. I also believe insisting that the US apologize is one of the preconditions that neither country should demand before communicating. This type of insistence will prolong the process even further. We should talk about the future, not the past. If we constantly glance back, we may miss the bright future that our two countries can enjoy together. Both President Clinton and President Khatami have expressed regret over the past, and I believe this is a good start for dialogue between countries. For now, let's sit down, talk and solve our problems, and once that process has started, I am sure that we will hear apologies and recognition of past mistakes from both capitals.