

Congressional Republicans, Democrats seek vote on Iran deal

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Congressional Republicans and Democrats divided largely along partisan lines in initial reactions to the preliminary diplomatic deal announced Thursday on Iran's nuclear program. But most senators and congressmen of both parties agreed on demanding the most stringent measures against Iran, and seeking a congressional vote on the agreement once it is finalized.

The comments after the deal was announced were significantly more cautious than in the weeks leading up to the March 31 deadline, when House Speaker John Boehner invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to deliver a strident denunciation of the impending pact to a joint session of Congress.

The divisions within Washington over the agreement reflect tactical differences within the ruling class over American imperialism's policy toward Iran and broader geo-strategic calculations. The Obama administration reached the agreement in part as an effort to bring Iran more closely in line with US efforts to maintain control of the Middle East, while it plans actions against Russia and China. On the other hand, sections of the ruling class—along with Israel and Saudi Arabia—favor a more aggressive stance toward Iran, up to and including all-out war.

Obama, vice president Biden and other top officials began telephoning congressional leaders as soon as the agreement was reached after eight days of negotiations in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was leading a congressional delegation to the Middle East and issued no statement on the Iran framework deal. But it was widely noted in the US media that Speaker Boehner, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, and warhawks like Senator Lindsey Graham did not immediately denounce the

agreement. Instead, they demanded to know the details of the pact and called for wide-ranging congressional hearings on it.

Typical was Graham's statement, which combined saber-rattling rhetoric with a request for more information from the White House. "The impacts of a bad deal with Iran are unimaginable to our own national security, the region as a whole, and our allies," he said. "We simply cannot take President Obama's word that it is this or war."

Boehner focused on process, not substance, saying, "Congress must be allowed to fully review the details of any agreement before any sanctions are lifted." He added, "my longtime concerns about the parameters of this potential agreement remain, but my immediate concern is the administration signaling it will provide near-term sanctions relief."

Senator Corker said it was "important that we wait to see the specific details" of the framework agreement with Iran. He said he would proceed with a planned April 14 vote by the Foreign Relations Committee on a bill, co-sponsored by the ranking Democrat on the committee, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, requiring congressional ratification of any nuclear agreement with Iran.

"We want the right to go through the details of the deal and to decide whether we believe congressionally mandated sanctions should be alleviated," Corker said.

Obama has threatened to veto any bill requiring a congressional vote, arguing that the deal is an executive agreement by the leaders of seven countries, not a treaty between the United States and Iran, and therefore not subject to Senate ratification. Supporters of the bill claim they are just short of gaining the 67 votes required to overturn a veto.

Senator Menendez issued his own statement on the

nuclear deal, making no criticism of its substance, but saying, “If diplomats can negotiate for two years on this issue, then certainly Congress is entitled to a review period of an agreement that will fundamentally alter our relationship with Iran and the sanctions imposed by Congress.”

Menendez has been harshly critical of the Obama administration on Iran, declaring earlier this year that statements from the White House on the nuclear talks sounded like they had been written in Tehran. But he is taking a leave of absence from the Foreign Relations Committee after his indictment last week on corruption charges.

His replacement as ranking Democrat on the committee, Senator Benjamin Cardin of Maryland, has been more equivocal on the Iran talks, and has publicly opposed any attempt to override a presidential veto. “The more unity we can have among Democrats and the White House, the stronger US foreign policy will be,” he said.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid called for Congress to “take a deep breath, examine the details and give this critically important process time to play out.” He added, “We must always remain vigilant about preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon but there is no question that a diplomatic solution is vastly preferable to the alternatives.”

Several Senate sponsors of the Corker-Menendez bill suggested the agreement negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry had more support than previously indicated. Republican Jeff Flake of Arizona said the number of Republicans open to the agreement was “bigger than it would seem to some people.” Democrat Tim Kaine of Virginia called the deal “a positive step” that “if fully implemented, would protect the world from nuclear proliferation in the region.”

Only a handful of senators issued all-out denunciations of the agreement. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, author of last month’s letter to Ayatollah Khamenei, co-signed by 47 senators, seeking to undermine the talks, said, “There is no nuclear deal or framework with Iran; there is only a list of dangerous US concessions that will put Iran on the path to nuclear weapons.”

Among Republican presidential candidates, by contrast, there was across-the-board condemnation of the Iran deal, with former Florida governor Jeb Bush

calling it a “flawed agreement” that would “legitimize” Iran’s nuclear capabilities. Wisconsin governor Scott Walker wrote on Twitter, “Obama’s dangerous deal with Iran rewards an enemy, undermines our allies and threatens our safety.” Senator Marco Rubio of Florida called it “just the latest example of this administration’s farcical approach to Iran.”

The leading Democratic presidential candidate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, said in a statement: “The understanding that the major world powers have reached with Iran is an important step toward a comprehensive agreement that would prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and strengthen the security of the United States, Israel and the region,” adding that “diplomacy deserves a chance to succeed.”



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