AIPAC pushes for Iran sanctions during Ukraine Crisis

Over the past few weeks, one primary issue has blanketed Western media coverage: the situation in Ukraine. Since this issue is of great interest to the world community, it has allowed other developments, especially in the Middle East, to escape public scrutiny.

We have seen relatively little coverage concerning important events in Turkey, Israel and Gaza, Egypt, Syria, Libya and the Persian Gulf that have barely reached the public long enough for them to even notice, let alone analyze.

In the midst of this shift in focus, there have been cunning efforts in the United States Congress to pass new sanctions against Iran, hoping that no one will notice because of Ukraine. We have a saying in English: "While the cat's away, the mice will play", similar to the Russian phrase "Без кота мышам раздолье".

It is no secret in any situation that the best way to accomplish something controversial or illegal is to create a diversion and then rush to commit your objectionable act while your opponents are looking away. That is a ploy used by everyone from children trying to sneak candy while no parent is around, to criminals and terrorists who seek to get away with crimes and terror attacks. It is also used so frequently by governments that those working on contentious issues frequently lie in wait for their opponents to become distracted, and then move quickly to take action.

I know from personal experience at the White House and Pentagon that even seasoned officials are sometimes caught off-guard by these brazen diversions. Even after seeing this strategy used repeatedly, it still often works.

The most obvious diversion in which I was personally involved was during the 1998 Impeachment deliberations over President Clinton's private dalliance with an intern. Over the course of six weeks in the Autumn of 1998, while the US Congress and media spoke non-stop about bringing down President Clinton, I was ordered to create a diversion twice.

The first order was to oversee the coordination of an attack on Iraq over its non-cooperation with the United Nations weapons inspectors. I did my job, everything was in place and everyone was "on board" so to speak. Then suddenly I was informed, 15 minutes before the scheduled operation was to begin, that we were standing down. Many US military officials and regional allies were furious at the sudden cancellation of the operation, and it required a lot of domestic and international diplomacy to calm everyone down.

I was thus left speechless when, two weeks later, I received the second order and had to inform the US military to prepare the whole operation again. The senior military officials to whom I had to deliver these orders thought I was joking the second time around. I wasn't, and the final result was Operation Desert Fox.

It is difficult not to laugh when I read detailed, elaborate articles on what Operation Desert Fox was really about and what it accomplished. I invite you to consider these writings: this one and that one.

I do not know these authors personally, but their articles demonstrate that the diversion worked, in that I see no
mention of how this fabricated military crisis affected the public's views with regard to President Clinton's impeachment proceedings.

If I had not been responsible for coordinating the operation, I would have never believed a government would go to such lengths to distract attention intentionally from other problems. The simple reality is, however, that it is a tried and true tactic that frequently succeeds, so no one should be surprised to see it being used today with regard to Ukraine.

The events in Ukraine are clearly of interest to the US, Russia and the rest of Europe (in spite of the US Assistant Secretary of State's widely publicized statement "f%#k the EU"). The debate is genuine among global leaders who rightly see the potential for developments in Ukraine to affect their own interests.

The reality that very little can be done by outside players other than Russia only adds to the frenzy of rhetoric and meetings as the situation unfolds, with few actually expecting this frenetic activity to alter the future course of events.

The objective is to register displeasure and not be seen to be doing nothing, regardless of whether it changes events on the ground. Thus the US Congress has been working frantically to show their concern by passing a Ukrainian relief bill. What such a bill would actually accomplish is immaterial. It simply needs to be passed as a public token of US support.

The real problem is that, while everyone is focused on watching events in Ukraine, those who should be closely monitoring other areas of interest and potential conflict are distracted. I recently commented to a serving Middle East adviser in the USG on matters involving the Middle East that I found it appalling that the only thing anyone, including those who were supposed to be monitoring the Middle East, is focused on is Ukraine. Here is part of the reply I received:

“You may think there are all manner of issues going on in the region and you are right these issues don't change. Egypt is having an election, and people are being arrested. The Syrian war goes bloodily on. The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are failing, as expected by many.

Problems in Bahrain are arguably worsening, and perhaps the only new development is this spat between Saudi, Bahrain and UAE and Qatar which seems to be advertising a rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Those who expected the GCC to unite against Iran may be proved wrong. At least the problem in Ukraine gives us something new to think about, other than the depressing sameness.”

Clever Israeli lobbyists in Washington realize that US Middle East specialists are weary and easily distracted by a crisis like the one involving Ukraine. These Israeli lobbyists have been quick to seize the moment to try to slip additional contentious new Iran sanctions past lawmakers through adding them to an attachment sponsored by Senators Kirk and Menendez.

If Israel can somehow slip this language past the public by adding it quietly onto an unrelated bill, the new sanctions could become law before anyone noticed. The most odious of these recent attempts occurred when those supporting new Iran sanctions attached those sanctions to a bill which provides for the funding of US veterans' benefits.

The callousness and cruelty of holding US veterans' interests hostage to the anti-Iran agenda of the powerful lobby American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) crossed the line as far as what most Americans will tolerate and was even satirized in the widely-watched, US political comedy program "The Daily Show With John Stewart."

There were still plenty of other bills to which the Kirk-Menedez anti-Iran language could be attached. But then there was a new development: the US Congress proposed a Ukraine relief bill, a bill that few if any anti-Russian Republican hawks in the US Congress would dare try to block. Suddenly, AIPAC's previously unquestioned support for its plan to attach Iran sanctions to every bill possible faced opposition from its strongest advocate, Senator John McCain, and others seemed to be wavering.

Al Monitor summed up some of reactions to this attempt among key Republican AIPAC supporters to add the anti-Iran Kirk-Menedez language to the Ukrainian relief bill:

“**I would do anything we can do to get Iran sanctions, so I would say almost every vehicle that’s out there should include that.**” Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services panel, told Al-Monitor. “**I think it’s a good idea. The discussion [among Republicans] is going on right now.**” (Al-Monitor)
“I’ve tried to attach [Iran] sanctions to every bill; yes, it does make sense,” said Sen. James Risch, R-Idaho, the No. 2 Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations panel. Still, he worried about the possibility of derailing aid to Ukraine by forcing an unrelated issue. “I don’t know how bad it’s going to throw a wrench in the works,” he said. “I’m not ready to see yea, nay or where we are.” (Al Monitor)

Then AIPAC discovered that it really had gone too far when right-wing hawks Senator John McCain and Senator Lindsay Graham spoke:

“I want to get it [the Ukraine relief bill] done,” said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the second-most senior Republican on the Armed Services panel. “If somebody has IMF, Iran sanctions or anything else as a higher priority, then they’ve got their priorities badly skewed.” (Al-Monitor)

“Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who has taken the lead in pushing for a vote, agreed. “I don’t want to give anybody a reason not to support the Ukraine … bill,” he said.” (Al-Monitor)

Those, like AIPAC, who bank on passing controversial legislation and undertaking other dubious actions while decision makers are distracted, are frequently rewarded. In this case, however, it appears that being seen to counter Russia is far more important than challenging Iran or blindly supporting Israel. This is likely no surprise to Russia, but in Israel’s case, it would be enough to send many key players into a panic.

After hearing the above quotes from Senators McCain and Graham, AIPAC is likely relieved that President Obama even renewed existing Iran sanctions for another year during the past week. And yet still, while Israel may have had its efforts to ratchet up sanctions against Iran derailed by events in Ukraine, they will not give up.

Anti-Iranian, pro-Jewish pundits have already begun sounding the alarm trying to link Iran to the tragic and mysterious disappearance of Malaysian Airways Flight 370. But at least Israel now knows that even its staunchest supporters in the US Senate can no longer be relied upon unconditionally, even when they are distracted.

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