
WHITE HOUSE WORKED SECRETLY TO DELAY SYRIA SANCTIONS BILL

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The White House worked behind the scenes last week to prevent a bipartisan bill to sanction the Assad regime for war crimes and atrocities against civilians from getting a vote in the House of Representatives. The Democratic leadership bowed to White House pressure and withdrew its support for voting on the bill for now.

Lawmakers and congressional staff had been preparing to bring up the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act this week and pass it out of the House with relative ease. The bill, named after a Syrian defector who presented the world with 55,000 pictures documenting Assads mass torture and murder of civilians in custody, has more than 50 co-sponsors, a majority of whom are Democrats.

Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, was the primary author of the bill, along with his committee counterpart Ed Royce (R-Calif.). Even liberal Democrats like Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) had signed on. But late Friday afternoon, just before the legislative calendar for the following week was to be released, White House legislative affairs staffers began calling leadership in both parties urging them to shelve the legislation.

The office of House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) told me that the White House pressured House Democratic leadership to pull their support for moving the bill, and Democrats obliged.

After President Obamas disastrous handling of Syria, hes now adding insult to injury by pressuring House Democrats to kill a bipartisan bill aimed at cleaning up his mess, said Ryans press secretary, AshLee Strong. We hope members will have a chance to vote on this important legislation soon.

The bill would impose new sanctions on the Assad regime and its supporters, spur investigations meant to fuel the prosecution of war crimes in Syria, and encourage a process to find a negotiated solution to the crisis. Specifically, it would require the president to impose new sanctions on any entity that does business with or finances the Syrian government or its military or intelligence services, which includes Russia and Iran. It would also require sanctions on any entity that does business with several Syrian government-controlled industries, including the airline, telecommunications and energy sectors.

There had been an agreement between Republicans and Democrats to bring the bill to the House floor this week under a suspension of the rules, which provides for a streamlined process but also requires two-thirds support to pass. Once Democratic leadership went back on that agreement,

the obstacles to passing it increased immensely. Royce, whose committee approved the bill in July, also put the blame on the Obama administration.

Im dismayed that the administration seems to be throwing up roadblocks to our bipartisan effort to cut off the resources Assad uses to annihilate his own people, and I will continue working to find a path forward for this important legislation, he said.

An administration source told me that its normal for the White House to be in touch with congressional officials in both parties on any piece of legislation. The administration source said House Democrats opted not to move forward with this legislation on their own volition.

Several congressional officials disputed that assertion, saying that the administration argued that if Congress even voted on the Syrian sanctions bill, that could negatively affect the delicate cessation of hostilities that Secretary of State John Kerry negotiated with Russia.

It was the desire of the National Security Council that this bill not move, one senior congressional staffer who received a call told me. White House legislative affairs staff said the timing was not good.

Engel, in a statement, said that he agreed with the White House that a delay was appropriate and that although he was skeptical about the cease-fire, it should be given a chance to succeed. But he promised to work to ensure that, sooner or later, the sanctions bill will get a vote in the House.

At the end of last week, the implementation of the cessation of hostilities in Syria was just beginning. It would have been short-sighted — even irresponsible — for the House to proceed with the consideration of the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act as if nothing had changed, he said. That said, things can change quickly, and if they do, Congress should act quickly * If that happens, I will work day and night to move this bill through the House.

Engel and the administration dont agree on Syria policy. Engel has been a strong supporter of a no-fly zone to protect civilians and more robust support for the armed Syrian opposition. But Engel worked with the administration when crafting the bill in an effort to get the administration to buy in and prevent the White House from opposing the legislation.

Some of the congressional officials who worked on the bill believe the administration is intentionally trying to delay it because the White House opposes placing strong pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Evan McMullin worked on the bill when he was policy director for Royce and then for the House Republican Conference. Now he is running as an independent candidate for president.

In 2014, the administration fought hard to prevent Caesar from testifying to Congress and the public of Assads crimes, all in the name of security, he told me. Now theyve mobilized similarly against the sanctions bill, which is the very thing needed to help compel Assad to stop killing.

If the administration is serious about preventing Assad from committing war crimes and seeking accountability for the regime, it should welcome the leverage that Congress is trying hard to give it, McMullin said.

Mouaz Moustafa is a Syrian activist who helped Congress craft the bill as a representative of the Coalition for a Democratic Syria, an umbrella group of nongovernmental organizations that support the moderate Syrian opposition. He said the delay of the bill equals a delay of justice for

victims of Assads atrocities and for possible prevention of future horrors.

This bipartisan measure pursues nonviolent means of compelling the regime to stop murdering civilians and the administration shuts it down in what can only be described as a subversion of the democratic process, he said. Do the victims of war crimes not at least deserve a vote?

Democrats desire not to be seen as interfering with the cease-fire, which represented a measure of hope last week for progress, is understandable. But this week, with the cease-fire in tatters and Assad resuming his indiscriminate barrel bombing of civilians in Aleppo, theres no more excuse.

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