

HR 362 and the Alarming Escalation of Hostility Towards Iran

By [Alan Nasser](#)

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The current tension among political observers as to whether the U.S. and/or Israel will undertake military action against Iran before president Bush leaves office has been greatly intensified by the prospect that Congress will pass a frightening resolution, HR 362, as early as this week.

The Demands of HR 362

HR 362, sponsored by Rep. Gary Ackerman, a New York Democrat, calls for the president to enact more draconian economic sanctions against Iran. These include an embargo against any imports of refined petroleum. (While Iran is of course a major exporter of oil, it imports at least 40% of its refined petroleum.) The wording of the Resolution is chilling in the extreme: "Congress... demands that the President initiate an international effort to immediately and dramatically increase the economic, political and diplomatic pressure on Iran to verifiably suspend its nuclear enrichment activities by... prohibiting the export to Iran of all refined petroleum products; imposing stringent inspection requirements on all persons, vehicles, ships, planes, trains, and cargo entering or departing Iran; and prohibiting the international movement of all Iranian officials not involved in negotiating the suspension of Iran's nuclear program." The resolution is moving quickly through the House and could pass as early as this week.

The "stringent inspection requirements" listed would require a naval blockade, thereby constituting an act of war. And this is how the resolution would be perceived by virtually all Iranians. The result would surely marginalize moderates in Iran who would shun retaliatory measures against the Bush administration's aggressive rhetoric, which has been escalating since fall of 2007. Iranians would unify behind their most belligerent leaders and the country would have been handed, by the president and Congress, powerful reasons to develop nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence.

The final clause of the Resolution contains a classic example of political doubletalk: "... nothing in this Resolution shall be construed as an authorization of the use of force against Iran." But an embargo-with-inspections scheme can be put in effect only by means of a blockade, which logically entails the use of force.

Congressional Democrats, the IAEA and Factual Falsehoods in HR 362

There is more support now than there was a year ago in Congress, especially among the Democrats, for military action against Iran. Thus HR 362's co-sponsors include 96 House Democrats and 111 House Republicans. These are the same Democrats whom Americans voted into Congress, in November 2006, as majorities in both houses, based on what voters

believed to be the Democrats' opposition to war in the Middle East.

To add insult to injury, HR 362 justifies its content with demonstrably false accusations about Iran's nuclear program. The Resolution charges that Iran's importing and manufacturing of centrifuges are "covert" and "illicit." But under both the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a signatory, and Iran's agreements with the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), these activities are entirely permitted. The IAEA has publicly stated its support of Iran's uranium enrichment program, which it states is in full accord with all treaty requirements to which Iran is subject.

Late last October IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei remarked to CNN: "Have we seen Iran having the nuclear material that can be readily used into a weapon? No. Have we seen an active weaponization program? No. ... I very much have concern building confrontation, because that would lead to a disaster. I see no military solution. The only durable solution is through negotiations and inspections. My fear is that if we continue to escalate from both sides that we would end up on a precipice, we would end up in an abyss." ElBaradei's most recent statements repeatedly echo these October remarks.

The Role of AIPAC

That HR 362 has been so warmly received on Capitol Hill is a sad testimony to Congress's willing dependence on external interests which cannot be assumed to be identical to those of most Americans. The Resolution is known to have been initially drafted by the American-Israeli lobby AIPAC. In early June AIPAC sent more than a thousand lobbyists to Congress to whip up support for this Resolution.

Congress's well known subordination to AIPAC's agenda should not be construed as a democratic response to the wishes of the American Jewish community. Polls show that more than 80% of Jewish-Americans oppose an attack on Iran. Congress's compliance to AIPAC's interests amounts to obeisance to a foreign State, not to any domestic constituency.

HR 362 and the Pre-Invasion Rhetoric Re Iraq: Preludes to War

Reminiscent of Bill Clinton's decision to impose severe extensive sanctions against Iraq, the White House last October unilaterally imposed harsh economic sanctions against a number of important Iranian institutions. In addition to targeting more than 20 Iranian companies and the country's 3 major banks, the sanctions were announced as aimed mainly at Iran's uniformed security force, the Revolutionary Guard Corps (RGC), which the Bush administration characterized, with no evidence, as "proliferators of weapons of mass destruction" and RGC's Quds Force, which has been branded as a "supporter of terrorism." These two accusations were the main pretexts for the invasion of Iraq.

Since Quds is part of RGC, and the latter is a state institution, the branding of Quds as a terrorist organization was ipso facto to brand Iran as a terrorist state.

Just as Washington had earlier cooperated with Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran (by providing him with, among other things, chemical weapons), so too had Washington benefited from Quds's provision of arms to the U.S.-backed Muslim government in Bosnia, its aiding the forces fighting the Soviet military in Afghanistan, and its support for those fighting the Taliban. Quds even assisted, with U.S. approval, Kurdish guerrillas' assault on the Baathist regime of Saddam.

The demonization of former allies has been common to Washington's war preparations against both Iraq and Iran. In both cases perhaps the principal objectives have been to shut down the possibilities for a negotiated settlement, and to provide a "legal" framework for war by specifying the pretexts of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.

The Democrats' overwhelming support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq is well known. Their legislation prior to the October 2007 sanctions is perhaps less well remembered. Shortly before Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson announced the October sanctions, the Democratic-led house passed legislation that would impose sanctions on non-U.S. energy companies doing business in Iran. The legislation passed by an overwhelming 397 - 16 vote.

Democratic leaders justified this legislation as cutting off funding for Iran's (entirely legal) nuclear program. But the legislation was surely motivated in large part by the intention to eliminate any competitive advantage that might be enjoyed by competitors of U.S. oil companies, which no longer have access to Iran-based profits.

HR 362 is a major extension of the October sanctions. The latter were intended to deal a damaging blow to Iran's economy. The RGC is not merely a military institution. It performs a broad range of economic activities. Its engineering unit includes among its major projects a \$2 billion dollar contract to develop Iran's main gas field, a \$1.3 billion contract for a new pipeline to Pakistan, the construction of a Tehran metro extension, a high-speed rail link connecting the capital and Isfahan, the expansion of shipping ports and the construction of a major dam.

The October sanctions are known to have already had a significant impact on Iran's economy. HR 362 is intended to intensify that damage, to take negotiations off the table, to provoke Iranian hard-liners. Its passage would constitute another giant step toward what Mohamed ElBaradei called "an abyss."

Alan Nasser is professor emeritus of Political Economy at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wa. His articles have appeared in The Nation, Monthly Review, Commonweal, and a number of professional journals.

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