The Washington Post

Tom Lantos

Let's Not Reward Iran for Bad Behavior

I share Brent Scowcroft's desire to see Iranian President Mohammad Khatami reelected on June 8 ["An Opening to Iran," op-ed, May 11]. Unfortunately, while President Khatami is a positive force in Iran, his influence is limited. Iran's state apparatus continues to be dominated by the radical ayatollahs, with the military, judiciary and intelligence services firmly under their control. The United States must do what it can to break their grip and support moderates in Iran led by Khatami.

But Scowcroft's recommendation to end the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) would not advance this cause. Instead, it would undermine U.S. interests, which include curtailing Iran's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction, ending its support of terrorism and neutralizing its fanatic opposition to the existence of Israel.

By imposing sanctions on foreign companies that invest more than $20 million in Iran's energy sector, ILSA limits Iran's oil profits, which the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Tehran uses to bankroll its weapons of mass destruction program and terrorist activities. The sanctions act also levels the playing field for corporate America. U.S. firms already are prevented from doing business in Iran; ILSA prevents foreign firms from doing so also.

The sanctions work—take it from the Iranians. In a 1998 report to the United Nations, Iran complained that ILSA had caused "disruption of the country's economic system," a "decline in its gross national product," "reduction in international investment, delays in . . . oil projects and cancellation of some tender contracts." Clearly, the sanctions act has had an impact in Tehran; it's no surprise that it passed with overwhelming majorities in Congress in 1996.

Scowcroft suggests that ending ILSA would send a signal to Iranian moderates such as Khatami. It would indeed send a signal—the wrong one. Despite some encouraging signs, the policies coming out of Tehran remain as ruthless as ever. On issues that matter most to the United States—weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, Israel—there is no difference between Iran's hard-liners and the so-called moderates. And to argue that sanctions strengthen hard-liners overlooks the fact that Khatami was elected after ILSA was passed. The sanctions should end when Iran's policies change, not its politics.

Clearly the concerns about Iran that motivated the sanctions act in 1996 have intensified over the years. A recent CIA report concludes that Iran continues to seek weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Other reports indicate that Iran already may have stockpiled chemical weapons, including blister, blood and choking agents. Iran last year successfully tested an 800-mile-range missile capable of delivering these catastrophic weapons against its neighbors, including Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Israel.

Iran continues to champion terrorism as a means of achieving its extreme goals. The State Department's annual report on "Patterns of Global Terrorism," released last month, once again crowns Iran as "the most active state sponsor of terrorism." A recent New Yorker article reports that FBI director Louis Freeh believes that Iranian security officials were behind the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, which killed 19 U.S. servicemen.

Iran makes no bones about its vision for the Middle East: Israel must disappear. Last year Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said peace can come to the Middle East only if Israel is "eradicated." Even President Khatami calls Israel "an illegal state . . . a parasite in the heart of the Muslim world." Iran conspires to eradicate Israel by supporting terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas with funding, safe haven, training and weapons, fanning the flames of Palestinian violence.

The worst thing we could do would be to ease off on measures that limit Iran's ability to pursue these evil ends. Not to renew ILSA now would show lack of resolve, a preference for profit over principle and a dangerously carefree attitude toward the greatest threat facing the Middle East today.

The writer, a representative from California, is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee.

Taking Exception