

‘IRAN WALKED THE WALK’

Supporters of the Syrian opposition contrast the hesitancy of the U.S. administration in offering arms to the outgunned, poorly trained and deeply divided rebels with the commitment that Iran has shown to its Damascus ally.

The U.S. goal was to pressure Assad into making concessions at the negotiating table, without delivering a resounding military victory to the rebels that might have brought Islamists to power in Damascus, said Amr al-Azm, a history professor at Shawnee State University in Ohio who is Syrian and is active in the opposition. Instead, a proposed peace conference in Geneva seems likely to be held on Assad's terms, should it go ahead.

“Politically we’re screwed, and militarily we’re taking a pounding,” Azm said. “America talked the talk while Iran walked the walk.”

This would not be the first time that Iran has outmaneuvered the United States since the Iranian revolution brought Shiite clerics to power in Tehran in 1979. But the assertion of Shiite power in Syria rankles Sunnis across the region, compounding the dangers that the Syrian conflict could provoke a wider and even bloodier war than the one currently underway, which is estimated to have killed at least 80,000 people.

Escalating violence in Iraq and growing tensions in Lebanon, whose conflicts are inextricably intertwined with the increasingly sectarian nature of the war in Syria, underscore the risk that centuries-old religious rivalries between Sunnis and Shites will be aggravated by Iran's role. The leading religious authority in Saudi Arabia and al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri have in the past week called on Sunnis to volunteer to fight in Syria, marking a potentially dangerous convergence that could herald an intensified influx of Sunni jihadis.

SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE

Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni power in the region and Washington's closest Arab ally, is unlikely to tolerate an ascendant Iran even if the United States chooses to remain aloof, said Jamal Khashoggi, director of the al-Arab television channel.

“It is a serious blow in the face of Saudi Arabia, and I don't think the Saudis will accept it. They will do something, whether on their own or with America,” he said. “Syria is the heart of the Arab world, and for it to be officially conquered by the Iranians is unacceptable.”

One way in which Saudi Arabia could influence the outcome is by facilitating unchecked supplies of arms to the rebels, analysts say. Although the umbrella Free Syrian Army has received small quantities of weaponry from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar over the past year, the United States has sought to control the flow, vetting the recipients and restricting the caliber of the weapons provided.

After videos surfaced in March of Islamist groups wielding antitank weapons funneled across the Jordanian border by Saudi Arabia, the United States imposed a freeze on all further deliveries, putting the rebels at a disadvantage just as Iran, through Hezbollah, was gearing up to rejuvenate the Assad regime's army with reinforcements, according to rebel leaders.

A SYMBOLIC BATTLE

Military analysts caution against overestimating the impact of the rebel defeat in Qusair on what is likely to be a long and unpredictable war. The obscure western town abutting Hezbollah-controlled territory in Lebanon almost certainly offered an easier conquest than other rebel strongholds, such

as the city of Aleppo, where the regime is touting an imminent offensive.

The rebels are continuing to press attacks in the northern, eastern and southern peripheries of the country even as the government appears to be tightening its grip on the central provinces of Damascus and Homs, raising the specter that the country will be partitioned into enclaves backed by rival Sunni and Shiite regional powers. A suicide bombing in Damascus on Tuesday highlighted the likelihood that the rebels will sustain an insurgency similar to the one that persists in Iraq even if they are defeated militarily.

The chief significance of the battle for Qusair lay in the powerful symbolism of the role played by Hezbollah, which eliminated any doubt that the Syrian conflict has turned into a proxy war for regional influence, said Charles Lister, an analyst with IHS Jane's defense consultancy in London.

“External actors are becoming increasingly decisive and pivotal in terms of where the conflict is going,” he said. And if the United States increased its support for the rebels, Assad's allies would be likely to boost theirs, he added.

“The conflict has regionalized, and, unfortunately, that gives it the potential to drag on longer,” he said. “As long as one side increases its assistance, the other will see the need to do so, too.”

NOMINATIONS

Mr. CASEY. I move to the second part of my remarks, which is to talk about two of our judicial nominees who will be coming before the Senate today. Both of these nominees will be voted on today to be members of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. I wish to give Senators the benefit of a little biographical background on both of them.

I will begin with Nitza Quinones Alejandro. Judge Quinones is recognized by her colleagues as being very well prepared as a judge and a conscientious judicial official who exhibits an outstanding judicial temperament and fairness.

Since 1991, Nitza Quinones Alejandro has served as a trial judge for the First Judicial District of the Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia, working on criminal and civil trials with all of the diversity, difficulty, and challenge that comes with that. She runs a good courtroom, treats lawyers and litigants fairly, and renders thoughtful decisions. She was first nominated for judicial appointment back in May of 1990 by Gov. Robert P. Casey, my father, when he was serving in office in Pennsylvania.

At the time—not quite then a judge—Judge Quinones became the first Latina State court judge in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania back in the early 1990s.

Prior to her judicial appointment, Judge Quinones served as an arbitrator for the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas from 1980 to 1991. She also worked as a staff attorney with the Department of Veterans Affairs and as an attorney-advisor for the Office of Hearings and Appeals at the Department of

Health and Human Services. She was also a staff attorney with Community Legal Services in Philadelphia.

Judge Quinones is a founding member and has been active within the Hispanic Bar Association of Pennsylvania for the past 20 years. She has actively recruited students from local law schools and hired numerous Hispanic attorneys as full-time law clerks and serves as a mentor to countless students and professionals.

A native of Puerto Rico, she graduated from the University of Puerto Rico School of Business Administration cum laude in 1972 and acquired her juris doctor degree from the University of Puerto Rico's School of Law in 1975.

Her commitment to public service and substantial judicial experience will make her an outstanding Federal judge. It is also, I should note, a remarkable American story that Judge Quinones brings to us today.

We look forward to the vote today on her confirmation. We appreciate the work that has been done to bring her nomination to the floor.

I have enjoyed working with Senator TOOMEY on both Judge Quinones' nomination as well as the second nomination.

Judge Jeffrey L. Schmehl, the second nominee, as well will bring an extraordinary record of knowledge, experience, and public service to the Federal bench. He is well regarded by lawyers and litigants who appear before him, as well as the people of Reading in Berks County, PA.

Since 2007 he has served as the president judge for the Berks County Court of Common Pleas, where he has served as a judge since 1998.

Prior to joining the bench, Judge Schmehl was a partner at Rhoda Stoudt & Bradley from 1988 to 1997, where he also worked as an associate since 1986.

He has served as the county solicitor at the Berks County Services Center from 1989 to 1997, and he owned his own law firm from 1981 to 1986. He also served as an assistant district attorney in Berks County, as a prosecutor, and as an assistant public defender for the Berks County Public Defender's Office—a rare combination, both a public defender and a prosecutor.

He received his bachelor of arts degree from Dickinson College in 1977 and a juris doctor from the University of Toledo School of Law in 1980. We look forward to Judge Schmehl's confirmation as well.

Both of these are individuals about whom we can be very proud, vote for, and support with enthusiasm. It always helps when you have two judges who are the result of the working together of a Democratic Senator and a Republican Senator—in this case, Senator TOOMEY and myself—working together to bring their nominations to this point and to get them confirmed on the floor of the Senate.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BARRASSO. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ADVICE AND CONSENT

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to talk about the advice and consent duties of the Senate. Our Constitution gives the Senate the responsibility to advise the President on high-level executive positions and judgeships. The Senate is also asked to consent on those appointments to ensure that only those who are worthy of the public's trust hold positions of such great power. The confirmation process is a way to protect the American people from nominees who simply aren't up to the job or to the times we are in as a country.

It is also an important opportunity for the Senate to exercise oversight over the agencies and the policies of an administration and to do this on behalf of the American people. Let me repeat that. It is about exercising oversight on behalf of the American people.

This is one of the most important roles we play as Senators. This is one of the reasons our Nation's Founding Fathers intentionally made the pace of the Senate deliberate. They wanted to make sure there was free debate on important subjects so we could give appropriate consideration to policies, to laws, and to nominations.

The Father of our Constitution, James Madison, explained the Senate's role was "first to protect the people against their rulers."

"First to protect the people against their rulers" was the point of this body. That is why, over its long history, the Senate has adopted rules that provide strong protections for political minorities.

Lately some in the majority have decided the American people shouldn't ask so many questions and the minority shouldn't have so many rights. Here is a little perspective on the conversation we are having today. Over the last 6 years Majority Leader REID has taken an unprecedented stand against the rights of the minority in this body. He has done it through procedural tactics such as filling the amendment tree on bills and bypassing committees using something called rule XIV of the Senate rules. Those techniques may make it easier for the majority leader to get what he wants, but they shut many Senators out of legislating, and they shut out the Americans we represent, Democrats as well as Republicans.

At the beginning of the last Congress and again at the start of this Congress, there was an attempt to use the so-called nuclear option and to use it to radically change the rules of the Sen-

ate and to strip the rights of the minority. Back in 2011, Majority Leader REID made a commitment not to use the nuclear option.

On the floor he said:

I agree that the proper way to change Senate rules is through the procedures established in those rules, and I will oppose any effort in this Congress or the next to change the Senate rules other than through the regular order.

He said this Congress or the next Congress, so that includes the Congress we are in right now today.

It didn't stop some of the members of his caucus from trying to force the nuclear option again earlier this year. I was one of a bipartisan group of Senators—eight of us—who worked together and negotiated, I thought, responsible changes to Senate procedures. Our goal was to avoid the rush that would take drastic steps that would damage this body and our country forever. It was a fair agreement.

It was also an agreement that we were told would rule out the use of the nuclear option. So Republicans agreed to support two new standing orders and two new standing rules of the Senate. Those changes were overwhelmingly supported by Republicans as well as Democrats in this body.

In return, the majority leader again gave his word he would not try to break the rules in order to change the rules. Here is what he said a few months ago on the Senate floor: "Any other resolutions related to Senate procedure would be subject to a regular order process."

He even added this included considerations by the Rules Committee. There was no equivocating in the statement by the Democratic leader. There were no ifs, ands, or buts. This was January 24 of this year. Here we are again, less than 5 months later, and we are having this same argument.

Some Senate Democrats want to use the nuclear option to break the rules, to change the rules, and do away with the right to extended debate on nominations. This would be an unprecedented power grab by the majority. It would gut the advice and consent function of the Senate. It would trample the rights of the minority. It would deprive millions of Americans of their right to have their voices heard through their representatives here in Washington. The nuclear option would irreparably change this institution.

Republicans have raised principled objections to a select few of the President's nominees. In other cases, such as the DC Circuit Court, we simply want to apply the standard the Democrats had set, that the court's workload doesn't justify the addition of three more judges.

The President claims his nominees have been treated unfairly. Even the Washington Post's Fact Checker said the President's comments were untrue. The other day the Post Fact Checker gave the President not just one but two Pinocchios for his claims about Republican delays on his judicial nominees.

The White House and the majority leader don't want to hear it. They want the Senate to rubberstamp the President's nominees. The Democrats aren't happy with the rulings by the DC Circuit Court, and they want to avoid any more inconvenient questions about the Obama administration. Democrats claim they want to change the rules to make things move more quickly, but that is no excuse. Remember when the majority leader threatened the same drastic step a couple of years ago? One of the Democrats who stood up to oppose the current majority leader at the time was former Senator Chris Dodd. In his farewell speech in this body in late 2010, this is what Senator Dodd had to say:

I can understand the temptation to change the rules that make the Senate so unique—and, simultaneously, so frustrating. But whether such a temptation is motivated by a noble desire to speed up the legislative process, or by pure political expedience, I believe such changes would be unwise.

This was a Democratic Senator with 30 years of service in the Senate.

The reality is the pace of the Senate can be deliberate. Extended debate and questioning of nominees is a vital tool to help ensure the men and women who run our government are up to the job and are held accountable.

Under the system some in the majority want to impose, there will be less opportunity for political minorities to question nominees. There will be less government transparency. The faith of the American people in their government will get smaller and smaller.

I believe it would be a terrible mistake for Democrats to pursue the nuclear option and an irresponsible abuse of power. From the beginning the American political system has functioned on majority rule but with strong minority rights. Democracy is not winner-take-all. Senator REID gave his word. We negotiated in good faith earlier this year. We reached a bipartisan agreement to avoid the nuclear option. Using the nuclear option on nominations now would unfairly disregard that agreement. If Democrats break the rules to change the rules, political minorities and all Americans will lose.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HEITKAMP). The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. I listened to my colleague from Wyoming. He states it very well. I have come to the floor for roughly the same reason, but I don't know how many times you have to say it, because I think basically what the Senator from Wyoming was saying, and what I want to say is it is very difficult to reach agreements in the Senate. But when you reach an agreement, particularly only if it involves two Senators but particularly if they are leaders of the Senate, a person's word is his bond. That bond ought to be kept—as far as I know, always kept. At least that has been my relationship with fellow Senators. You say you are going to do