

MURPHY TO STAND HIS GROUND AT IRAN HEARING

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WASHINGTON All Sen. Chris Murphy is saying is give diplomacy a chance.

Connecticut's 41-year-old junior senator will get to put that conviction to the test Thursday as the GOP-dominated Senate Foreign Relations Committee _ of which he is a member _ confronts Secretary of State John Kerry and other Obama administration officials at a make-or-break hearing on the Iran nuclear deal announced last week.

The stakes couldn't be higher. A congressional vote to disapprove the controversial agreement might _ or might not _ survive a presidential veto. Defeat for the White House would put already-tenuous relations with Iran back to square one and undercut an Obama legacy item.

Murphy has not stated definitive support for the deal, which would keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon for 15 years and usher in an inspections regimen. However, with the panel's Republican majority expected to vigorously attack Kerry and his agreement rationales on Thursday, Murphy is likely to emerge as one of the deal's chief defenders.

Murphy's mantra on Iran has been that diplomacy should always take precedence over war, and that the alternative to a diplomatic solution _ even a less-than-ideal one _ is an unshackled Iran free to build a bomb.

"If I support this agreement, it won't be because I think that the deal is going to usher in an era of robust international cooperation between America and Iran," Murphy said Wednesday in a speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace here. "It will be because, in my analysis, the deal puts a nuclear weapon further out of reach of the Iranian regime than without the deal."

But Murphy's diplomacy-first viewpoint _ which he described last month as "not just a progressive vision" but rather "a realist progressive foreign policy" platform _ has won him few friends among those suspicious of Iran's motives, particularly representatives of Jewish organizations reflecting Israel's fears of a nuclearized Iran.

"Constituents in Connecticut who voted for Senator Murphy have every right to say nobody wants war," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which compares the Iran deal to the 1938 Munich agreement that set the stage for Hitler starting World War II. "But to say it's this (deal) or war, that's really not the case."

Murphy and other congressional Democratic supporters "believe there are enough safeguards in place to hold Iran's nuclear ambitions in check, but I'm not sure that's correct," said Eric Fusfield, director of legislative affairs for B'nai B'rith International. "I think it is inevitable Iran will cheat. It's a question of when, where and how, and not if."

But Murphy appears to be at home in the foreign-policy crucible, having won his first bid for national office in 2006 when he ran for Congress as an anti-Iraq-War candidate and unseated former Rep. Nancy Johnson, a Republican.

"No matter how many times politicians and pundits say the words 'Neville Chamberlain' (the British prime minister who signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler), the scope of human history tells