

Flouting international law, US bars Iran's UN ambassador

Keith Jones
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In a flagrant violation of Iran's national rights, the US is refusing to allow Iran's ambassador to the United Nations to take up his seat at UN headquarters in New York.

Earlier this month, the White House declared that Iran's appointment of career diplomat Hamid Aboutalebi as head of its UN mission was "not viable."

Then last Friday, President Barack Obama signed into law legislation specifically designed to prevent Aboutalebi from taking up his UN appointment.

Unanimously adopted by both houses of the US Congress, the legislation instructs the US government to bar from the US any UN diplomat deemed to have engaged in anti-US terrorism or espionage or who may pose a threat to US national security.

Aboutalebi has been denounced by the US political establishment as a "terrorist" on spurious, trumped-up grounds. Specifically, they charge him with having helped occupy the US embassy in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution. In fact, his participation was limited to acting on a handful of occasions as an interpreter for the students who took over the US embassy and detained its personnel, uncovering in the process a mass of documents that showed that the embassy was a center of spying and conspiracy against the 1979 revolution that toppled the brutal dictatorship of the US-backed Shah.

The legislation's co-sponsor, Texas Senator and Tea Party leader Ted Cruz, hailed it as an example of bipartisan co-operation and praised Obama for signing it into law. After the House of Representatives had joined the Senate in passing his bill, Cruz declared it "great to see Congress send a strong, bipartisan message that Iranian evildoers will be treated like terrorists, not tourists."

According to press reports, never before has the US denied entry to a UN ambassador. The closest parallel is the Reagan administration's decision to prevent Palestine

Liberation Organization (PLO) head Yasser Arafat from addressing the UN General Assembly in November 1988. That arbitrary and illegal action prompted the UN General Assembly to hold a special session in Switzerland in December 1988. Ultimately, a US Federal Court ruled that the ban on Arafat violated commitments the US has given the UN and its member states.

While the White House needed little if any persuading to deny Aboutalebi a visa, President Obama issued a special statement when he signed Cruz's bill, saying that the White House considers it only as advisory and does not accept that Congress has any authority over the executive's exclusive right to determine which diplomats should be given visas.

Iran, as would be expected, has vigorously protested the US's highly provocative decision to blacklist one of its senior-most diplomats, terming it a gross violation of the US's commitments to the UN and international law. Tehran has said it will not name a replacement. Instead it is demanding the convening of a special meeting of the UN Committee on Relations with the Host Country to discuss the matter. The deputy head of Iran's UN mission, Hossein Dehghani, has warned the US's exclusion of Aboutalebi "will create a dangerous precedent and affect adversely the work of intergovernmental organizations and activities of their member states."

Aboutalebi has previously served as Iran's ambassador to Australia, Belgium and Italy. He has been described in the international press as a "moderate," i.e. a strong supporter of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's attempt to reach a rapprochement with US imperialism. Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif has called Aboutalebi "one of the most capable, experienced and rational diplomats in Iran."

The exclusion of Aboutalebi underscores the US elite's utter contempt for international law. While Washington

cynically claims to be the world's foremost advocate of international law, it trashes it at will, mounting drone strikes, spying on governments and people the world over, and conducting illegal invasions and occupations.

A transparent act of bullying, the barring of Iran's UN ambassador is clearly meant to send a message to Tehran that the US is not ready to give it any quarter, in little things as in big. Any "normalization" of relations between the US and Iran will be on Washington's terms and until then, as Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have said so often, "all options remain on the table." Just as it is insisting that the punishing economic sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy remain in force and that Iran is "not open for business," so it is ready to insult and bully Iran to satisfy ultra right-wingers like Senator Cruz.

While indignant at the US's violation of Iran's sovereign rights, Tehran has said the barring of Aboutalebi will not impact on the negotiations it is now conducting with the US, the other four permanent UN Security Council members (Britain, France, Russia and China) and Germany on a "final agreement" concerning Iran's civilian nuclear program.

At a meeting earlier this month, negotiators for Iran and the so-called P-6 agreed that they will meet in Vienna starting on May 13 to begin drafting the text of a "final" nuclear agreement.

The April 8-9 meeting was the third since a six-month interim nuclear agreement came into force on January 20. Under that agreement, Iran rolled back significant parts of its nuclear program and froze others in exchange for a slight easing of the punitive US-European Union sanctions regime. US officials have boasted that more than two-thirds of the approximately \$6 billion Iran will receive due to the relaxing of the sanctions is Iran's own money—funds from oil sales that have been frozen in the world banking system—and that the total "relief" is equivalent to what Iran loses in oil revenue due to the sanctions every six weeks.

Speaking at the conclusion of the April 8-9 meeting, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif claimed that more than half of the issues in dispute have now been sorted out. "We have agreement over 50 to 60 percent of the (final) draft," Zarif told reporters, "but the remaining parts are very important and contain various issues."

Russia's lead negotiator Sergei Ryabkov was far less optimistic, saying "We have not accomplished even a third of the work."

While little about the substance of the negotiations has

been revealed, the US and its European allies are known to have a long list of demands. These include that Iran close its underground nuclear facilities, cease research on developing more efficient uranium enrichment technology, and dismantle much of its ballistic missile program.

Iranian officials have insisted that its missile program and other contentious non-nuclear issues, such as US demands that Tehran cease its support for Syria's embattled Assad regime and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, are not part of the nuclear negotiations or any separate talks with the US.

An unnamed US diplomat, for his part, recently told Reuters, "every single issue you can imagine" has been raised.

For the US, the nuclear issue has always been a pretext for bullying Iran into foregoing any challenge to US strategic dominance in the Middle East and mobilizing support in the US for military action against Iran. It was first brought forward by the administration of George W. Bush in 2003 immediately after US troops had illegally invaded Iraq on phony charges of weapons of mass destruction.

Iranian authorities are now indicating that they are willing to make sweeping changes in the design of the unfinished Arak heavy-water nuclear reactor—changes that would reduce its production of plutonium by 80 percent. "Iran has offered a proposal to ... redesign the heart of the Arak facility," Iranian Vice-President Ali Akbar Salehi told Iranian state television last week.

While issuing bellicose threats against Russia, US Secretary of State John Kerry has continued to use blunt language to threaten Tehran with military action unless it agrees to US demands.

Replying to Republican Senator John McCain's assertion that the nuclear talks with Iran will soon collapse, Kerry said April 9, "You can go to war. A lot of people are ready to drop bombs all the time. ... But this president and this Secretary of State believe that the United States of America has a responsibility first to exhaust every diplomatic possibility." Kerry then added he is not "predicting success" in the nuclear negotiations and remains "agnostic" about their outcome.



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