

As Enrichment Deal Is Struck, Iran Exercises Diplomatic Clout In Numerous UN Agencies

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Iran, already exulting about the “surrender” of the West in its nuclear enrichment negotiations, may soon have another diplomatic victory to celebrate: a role in the election of the next executive director of the U.N.’s World Property Organization (WIPO), a which deals in the complexities of international copyright and technology transfer.

The election takes place in early March, and Iran—along with North Korea—is a member of WIPO’s so-called “coordination committee”—a select group of less than half of the organization’s membership. It will nominate a leadership candidate for ratification by the entire 183-member organization.

Three other candidates are running, but WIPO’s current executive director, an Australian native named Francis Gurry, is considered by most observers to be a shoo-in.

As it happens, both Gurry and WIPO came in for searing criticism in late 2012 for their role in the shipment to North Korea and Iran-- both under U.N., U.S. and other sanctions for their extensive and illegal nuclear programs--of largely U.S.-made computers, servers and other equipment subject to U.S. export restrictions.

A WIPO-appointed investigative panel subsequently asserted that the two countries could never legally have purchased the equipment, some of it subject to high-level export scrutiny even to U.S. allies, on their own.

Due to the U.N. privileges and immunities that swaddle WIPO, however,

U.S. sanctions against Iran were apparently never an issue.

Nor did Gurry or WIPO inform U.N. sanctions committees about the shipments, part of a pattern of disregard for the sensitivities of the issue that a subsequent WIPO-appointed investigative panel said “we simply cannot fathom.” Both WIPO and Gurry, however, were absolved of taint for their actions.

Now, apparently, Iran’s role has come full circle: having helped to spark a proliferation-related scandal within WIPO, it will now flex its privileged membership status in the same organization by helping to re-elect its top official.

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Iran’s important role in WIPO is far from its only high-status position in the sprawling U.N. archipelago of funds, organizations and programs around the world. Despite its longtime status as a nuclear pariah and U.N. international scofflaw, the Islamic Republic sits on the boards of at least seven of the 29 organizations that make up the U.N. system.

Those boards can, as in the case of WIPO, have a role in selection of the organization’s top bureaucrat. But they also in many cases supervise and approve programs and strategic plans in all the countries that each organization serves; approve budgets for the organization as a whole as well as for individual countries or regions; receive and react to internal critiques of the agencies’ performance; and raise issues of policy and privilege on their own.

In short, board members, during their rotating tenure, have a unique chance to exercise clout and trade favors—exert influence, in other words-- that is the most valuable diplomatic currency of all.

At around the same time as the WIPO episode was brewing, for example, Iran was able to win permission from the U.N.’s 62-nation Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific to build a regional “disaster

information management center” that some experts worried could advance its ballistic capability, a move that the U.S. long opposed.

In other words, throughout the long international struggle over its clandestine nuclear weapons activities—which is far from over—Iran has been an international bad guy and a U.N. big dog, all at the same time.

Its big dog status is considerable, and long-lasting. At the moment, Iran sits until 2015 on the 36-member executive board of the influential United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which is the chief coordinator for U.N. programs in all 162 countries where it has offices, as well as the U.N.’s chief anti-poverty agency. (The U.S. is also a UNDP executive board member.)

The Islamic Republic also has appointed a member to the 34-member board of the World Health Organization (WHO), and is a member of the 49-nation governing Council of the 192-member Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as well as the 36-member Executive Board of UNICEF.

Iran also sits on the guiding industrial development board and program and budget committees of UNIDO, the United Nations Development Organization, an agency increasingly shunned by developed nations but a bastion of the developing world. In addition, it is a member of the 32-nation executive council of the 156-nation World Tourism Organization, which, among other things, promotes a “global ethics code for tourism,” an activity that the WTO says makes up 9 percent of global GNP.

“Iran's success in promoting its candidates to important U.N. positions demonstrates a basic U.N. failing,” argues John Bolton, a former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. (and a Fox News contributor). “Namely its inability to distinguish truly threatening states -- real threats to international peace and security -- from all the rest.”

At the same time, Iran is a major object of attention from U.N. organizations on its home turf. According to a spokesman for UNDP, there are 18 U.N. agencies of various types operating in Iran, with about 370 personnel. Together, they spend about \$160 million, principally on such areas as anti-

poverty programs, health issues such as HIV/AIDs and malaria reduction, drug prevention, and climate issues, as well as “disaster risk reduction and management.”

The internal activities are coordinated by a high-level steering committee co-chaired by a representative of Iran’s foreign ministry and the U.N.’s Resident Coordinator, the top U.N. official in the country. Representatives of five other Iranian Cabinet ministries also sit on the committee.

Last October, as negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program began to pick up steam, UNDP’s top official, Administrator Helen Clark, visited Tehran to commemorate U.N. Day, and extolled “our strong partnership with the government and people of Iran,” and hailed “the enormous progress the country has made on human development.”

Much of Iran’s high profile in the U.N. system is due to the peculiarities of a region-based nomination system in most U.N. organizations, where countries in a specific area—in Iran’s case, the Asia-Pacific region—are allotted a certain number of seats on governing bodies, and often take them on a rotating basis. This system alone allows many nations to translate regional influence—even if malign-- into a much more substantial global role.

The argument of many U.N. supporters is that it is precisely through its membership in such U.N. bodies—often touted as non-political, humanitarian and otherwise devoted to good causes—that renegade countries like Iran can be coaxed back into the fold of non-belligerent nations. But there is also another view.

“There’s a real gap in the U.N. governance system,” agrees Mark Wallace, himself a former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. for management and reform, and currently head of United Against Nuclear Iran, an organization devoted to bringing financial, corporate and grassroots pressure to bear to rein in Iran’s nuclear weapons ambitions. “Iran has flouted U.N. Security Council resolutions for years and years. It is not good governance for a country running afoul of U.N. sanctions to be building legitimacy for itself through the same U.N. system.”

At the same time, Wallace acknowledged, Iran and its foreign minister, Javad Zarif, have done a “masterful job of using U.N. organization bodies” for Tehran’s own diplomatic purposes, especially in recent months to help generate a receptive climate for the most recent sanctions relaxation negotiations.

All of which raises a question: with international financial pressures on Iran waning, if only temporarily, as a result of the budding nuclear enrichment deal, what additional ways will Iran find to extend its clout and influence in a U.N. system that it has learned how to game so well?

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