

# At the U.N., Iran Is a Powerhouse, Not a Pariah

March 31, 2013

by Claudia Rossett

WSJ

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324685104578388430983756460.html>

President Obama likes to describes Iran as "isolated." But there is nothing lonely about Iran's berth at the United Nations, where in the corridors and on the boards of powerful agencies, the Islamic Republic has been cultivating its own mini-empire.

How can that be? Iran is in mocking violation of four U.N. Security Council sanctions resolutions demanding an end to its illicit nuclear activities. The General Assembly has passed a series of resolutions condemning Iran's atrocious human-rights record (albeit with almost as many abstentions as "yes" votes). The U.N.'s main host country, the United States, lists Iran as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism.

Yet Iran is no pariah at the U.N., where there are no in-house penalties for being under sanctions or for violating them. Among the 193 member states, terror-sponsoring, uranium-enriching rogue regimes enjoy the same access, privileges and immunities as Canada or Japan—and at far less expense in U.N. dues.

Monstrous human-rights records don't interfere with acquiring plum seats, either. The U.N. has always made room for murderous governments—from the U.N.'s charter seat on the Security Council for Stalin's Soviet Union to Syria's current post on the human-rights committee of the U.N. Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad before he addressed the General Assembly in September. Few have exploited this setup as adroitly as Iran. While the U.S. pays for roughly one-quarter of the U.N.'s \$30 billion-plus systemwide annual budget, Iran chips in about \$9 million in core dues. Whatever additional resources Iran's regime might allocate for its U.N.-related labors, they appear to be spent mainly on fielding big missions to U.N. offices in places such as New York and Vienna, horse-trading behind the scenes, and buttering up the U.N. bureaucracy.

Iran currently heads the second-largest voting bloc in the U.N. General Assembly, the 120-member Non-Aligned Movement (which isn't an official U.N. body but a caucus with a rotating secretariat hosted by whichever country holds the three-year chairmanship). The movement's members wield considerable voting power at the U.N., but most are reluctant to pony up the resources to take the lead. After oil-rich Iran snapped up the job, it was rewarded last year with a movement summit in Tehran attended by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. These days, when Iran's diplomats speak at U.N. meetings, they often double as the voice of a nonaligned bloc that includes more than half the U.N.'s member countries.

Since coming under U.N. sanctions in 2006, Iran has also won seats on the governing boards of many major U.N. agencies. Some of these agencies handle billions every year in funds donated chiefly by Western nations, especially the U.S. This year, Iran won a three-year seat on the 36-member executive board of the U.N.'s flagship agency, the U.N. Development Program, which operates billion-dollar budgets across more than 170 countries.

Along with its seat on the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (naturally), Iran also sits on the 36-member executive board of the U.N.'s children's agency, Unicef—a neat trick for a country that leads the world in executions of juveniles. Iran also sits on the boards of the U.N. Population Fund and the U.N. Office for Project Services (which deals with procurement and U.N. contracts).

Then there is Tehran's presence on the governing councils of the Nairobi-based U.N. Environment Program and UN-Habitat, the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization, the Geneva-based U.N. Refugee Agency, the Spain-based U.N. World Tourism Organization, and the Program and Budget Committee of the Vienna-based U.N. Industrial Development Organization. For 2011, Iran was also elected to be one of the 21 vice-presidents of the U.N. General Assembly.

How does Iran do it? The answer isn't related to the annual burlesque of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visits to New York since 2005. Better explanations lie in the U.N. practice of allocating board seats by quota to five geographic groups, which nominate regional candidates for election. Iran falls into the Asia-Pacific group, which these days includes most of its oil customers. In these opaque deals, there is plenty of room to factor in a swap of Iranian oil for support at the U.N.

Iran populates its U.N. missions with smooth diplomats, some educated in the U.S. Its ambassadors tend to stay in their posts longer than do their U.S. counterparts, hosting parties and cultivating connections.

Iran's current envoy to the U.N., Mohammad Khazaei, studied at Virginia's George Mason University, served from 1998-2002 as Iran's representative to the board of the World Bank, and has served as ambassador to the U.N. since 2007. He is fluent in English and versed in finance.

When U.S. federal prosecutors described him in 2009 court documents as having secretly overseen the multimillion-dollar operations of an alleged Iranian government front operation on New York's Fifth Avenue, the Alavi Foundation, Mr. Khazaei—draped in U.N. immunity—ignored the case and carried on accumulating seats for his country on U.N. boards. A year later, when the State Department approved 80 visas for Mr. Ahmadinejad and his entourage to attend a U.N. conference in New York and denied only one, Mr. Khazaei diligently complained to the U.N. about the lone denial.

In Vienna, home to a big U.N. complex that includes the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iranian Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh is an influential presence. Trained as a nuclear physicist and posted previously as Iran's representative to the IAEA in the 1980s, Mr. Soltanieh presides over an Iranian mission that occupies most of a large city block. For 2011, he was elected head of the Vienna chapter of the Group of 77, which now includes 132 members—the largest voting bloc in the U.N. General Assembly. Mr. Soltanieh has a reputation among IAEA staffers for throwing good parties.

Many of Iran's doings at the U.N. are more hidden from view. In 2010, after the passage of the fourth round of sanctions on Iran, U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice made a loaded remark to reporters. She said that the sanctions were a particular blow to Iran given "the effort, the time, the money" that Iran had employed trying to stop them. The next day, I sent a query to the U.S. Mission: "What money, exactly, was she referring to?" The American diplomats said they'd look into the facts behind Ambassador Rice's remarks. There has been no answer.

Unlike in the case of Iraq—where the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein exposed troves of financial records that helped explain how Baghdad persuaded the U.N. to ignore its own sanctions against Iraq—there is no access right now to Iran's internal records. Perhaps with time, more will become clear.

*Ms. Rosett is journalist-in-residence with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, where she heads the Investigative Reporting Project.*