

Obama Correct -- and Canny -- to Refuse a Visa to Iranian Envoy

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If the nuclear talks cannot survive this unrelated incident, then the P5+1 must reexamine its narrow approach to the negotiations.

In refusing to grant a visa to Iran's ambassador-designate to the United Nations, Hamid Aboutalebi, President Barack Obama risks complicating his still-delicate diplomatic dialogue with the Iranian regime. He may also raise the ire of other states, including allies, who worry that the incident will be precedent-setting and restrict their own freedom to send their chosen representatives to New York. Nevertheless, Obama's decision was not only correct, it may make his Iran strategy more effective.

First, about the risks: Tehran's objections are a bit rich. They claim that the Obama administration's hesitancy to grant the visa is a violation of American diplomatic obligations. Yet Aboutalebi has admitted to participating -- even if as a bit player -- in one of the most serious violations of diplomatic privileges and protections in recent memory. Even if he has since reformed, he nevertheless represents a government that not only has refused to disavow the hostage-taking, but continues to glorify it. For the same reason, Aboutalebi's case should be seen as unique rather than precedent-setting.

These hazards aside, the administration's refusal to grant the visa may well pay tactical dividends. One of the major drawbacks of Obama's approach to Iran is that he has raised suspicions among allies that he is willing to overlook troubling behavior by Tehran on other fronts in his eagerness to clinch a nuclear agreement. Refusing Aboutalebi a visa should at least partly allay these concerns, as it demonstrates that the Obama administration is unwilling to overlook Iranian misbehavior simply to avoid ruffling feathers in Tehran, or to subordinate every other concern to the nuclear talks.

In addition, the Aboutalebi episode has provided a much-needed opportunity for the Obama administration to demonstrate unity of purpose with Congress. The heated debate over legislation threatening sanctions on Iran

contingent on the failure of nuclear talks suggested to Tehran that it could sow division and chaos in Washington by threatening to scuttle the negotiations. It also obscured the fact that Congress and the White House share the same objective -- preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons while avoiding a military conflict -- and the same strategy -- diplomacy buttressed by pressure and military threats -- even if they differ widely on the details.

This incident is also, in effect, an opportunity to call Tehran's bluff. Iran's supposed willingness to walk away from the talks -- or at least to threaten to do so -- has lent it a psychological advantage. Even as senior Iranian officials have maintained their anti-American vitriol and worked hard to chip away at sanctions outside of the negotiations, U.S. and European officials have adopted a deliberately cautious approach. However, while there is no reason to give gratuitous offense, neither is there any advantage in telegraphing one's extreme reluctance to walk away or to take actions, even justified, that might threaten the talks.

There is a chance that refusing to grant Aboutalebi a visa will disrupt the nuclear negotiations. If Iran is willing to end the talks over an unrelated disagreement, however, it raises the question of whether it would ultimately honor any agreement produced by the talks, leaving in place deep disputes over Iran's regional activities and support for terrorism.

There is also a chance that the episode will be used against Iranian President Hassan Rouhani by the country's hardliners. But Rouhani nominated Aboutalebi; it is possible that he did so to demonstrate that he has neither embraced nor been embraced by the West. If however he did so without anticipating resistance or fallout, it brings into question his ability to manage his own domestic politics, in which P5+1 negotiators have put much faith -- to be durable, a nuclear agreement must be accepted not just by one Iranian faction, but by the Supreme Leader and future governments.

Many longtime observers of U.S.-Iran relations fear that the Aboutalebi episode will prove to be yet another example of a potential diplomatic opening derailed by an unrelated dispute. But any difficult negotiation must overcome such obstacles. Furthermore, the idea behind the P5+1 negotiations is to produce a narrow agreement addressing only the nuclear issue. Even if such an agreement can be reached, it must hold up amid continuing tensions between Iran and the United States and our allies over myriad other issues. If the talks cannot survive this incident, then this narrow approach to the negotiations must be reexamined.

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