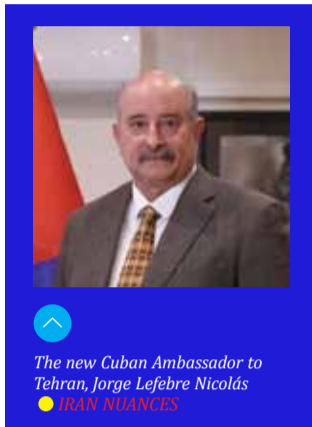


From Havana to Tehran: Cuban perspective on Trump's return, US relations

International Desk
INTERVIEW

The US State Department recently removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Jorge Lefebre Nicolás, the new Cuban Ambassador to Tehran, in an interview, discussed the dimensions, reasons, and implications of this decision. The interview also addressed questions regarding the cease-fire in Gaza, the return of Donald Trump to power, and Tehran-Havana relations. The partial script of the interview is provided below:



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IRAN NUANCES: What is the Cuban government's assessment and reaction to the US government's decision to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism?

AMBASSADOR: This decision made by the Joe Biden administration is renewed annually, and it is an important decision. This was a decision made almost four years ago by the Trump administration, and since then, other sanctions have been added. However, this particular sanction had the most detrimental impact on Cuba's economy and people.

Unfortunately, this action has no relation to reality, and they use this tool solely to exert pressure on countries. If they were genuinely seeking to identify state sponsors of terrorism, Israel should have been on this list long before now. The US itself should also be on this list.

This was one of the sanctions that put the most pressure on the Cuban economy. The lifting of these sanctions has given us some breathing room and made it a bit easier to operate. However, we are still experiencing the bitter taste of sanctions, and despite never having had any connection to terrorism, we were placed on the list for so long.

This recent action has a positive effect, but its impact is very limited because the other sanctions remain in place, and these sanctions have been imposed on us for over 60 years.

Why did the Biden administration decide to remove Cuba from this list in its final days?

That's a question we have as well, why they did this now and not during the previous years. Biden worked with Barack Obama in the past, and Obama removed Cuba from the list towards the end of his term. After Trump came to power, he put us back on the list. However, when Biden became president, he did nothing and waited until now.

This action is a method of exerting pressure on countries. Their thinking is that by applying economic pressure, they can enforce and impose their decisions. For this reason, they kept Cuba on the list to achieve their goals. They did not have the courage to remove Cuba from the list and did so during the last days of their term.

Do you see an immediate impact of this decision in

the economic sphere? Given Trump's return to power, how will the above decision affect relations between Cuba and the US?

This decision was recently made, and it will take about 30 days for the banks to be notified. It should also be noted that even when this decision is implemented, the fear of doing business with Cuba still exists. Therefore, we must wait for this fear to subside so that companies and banks can do business with Cuba. Banks are very careful not to be subjected to US sanctions. As such, we must wait for this fear to subside and for the banks to enter into commercial transactions with Cuba. But we are in a special situation right now. Trump, the person who imposed the sanctions, is returning. There is a possibility that he will re-impose the above sanctions. Time will clarify this issue.

Beyond the recent decision, what policy do you think the new US administration will pursue towards Cuba?

When Trump came to power, he unfortunately adopted the wrong policies towards Cuba. He imposed more than 240 sanctions on the Cuban economy, which are still in place. I don't think there are many sanctions left to be imposed. When we look at the people around Trump, we see that these people hate Cuba and Iran. Therefore, we must proceed cautiously and should not be too optimistic. We have a balanced approach to this issue.

The US's action of including countries, namely Cuba, on the terrorist list and then removing them has fueled speculation. Some believe this demonstrates that the US's actions are politically motivated and have no grounds in reality. Others consider the failure of the previous policy to be the reason for its revision. What is your opinion?

I think it's a political game because there is no reason to argue that this decision was based on it. These decisions are made to exert pressure on some coun-

tries. Sometimes, it is even related to the elections in those countries (the US). Imposing more sanctions makes the groups that support sanctions vote for them (in the US) more. Now that (Democrats) have lost the election, they are lifting this lie-based sanction that is of no benefit to them.

Cuba, Iran, and some other countries have been under US and Western sanctions for a long time. Some even in the US believe that excessive use of the sanctions diminishes the effectiveness of this tool. How do you see the future of the indiscriminate use of sanctions?

The US is a country that has turned sanctions into a major foreign policy tool. We see Israel's actions in Palestine and are still waiting for the US to impose a sanction on Israel and its military. Sanctions have become a policy for powers that want to bring their opposing countries to their knees. These sanctions have been in place for so long that countries like Iran and Cuba have learned how to circumvent them and find ways to bypass them. The prolonged sanctions have also caused some countries not to keep them on their agenda. This means that countries that have been sanctioned continue their activities. However, the US still maintains this policy and imposes sanctions whenever it wants against a country or a group of countries.

A cease-fire has been announced and implemented in Gaza. What is your assessment of that agreement? Has Israel achieved its military goals? What should be done in the post-ceasefire phase, especially given that Cuba recently requested to join South Africa in pursuing Israel's crimes through the International Court of Justice (ICJ)?

Israel is a disgrace to humanity. This is one of the most violent genocides that has ever happened. But there are countries that support Palestine, and you saw that South Africa took this action in the court with the aim of stopping Israel's genocide. Cuba also supports this action.

The first thing we have to do is stop the killing of thousands of women and children. Then hold Israel accountable for its actions so that it pays the price for those actions. I know what they will say is that Hamas started it and hundreds of people were killed. But we have to look before that date and see what Israelis had done in Palestine, how many people they had killed and what genocides they had committed. Nothing and no conditions justify the killing of 46,000 people as retaliation for an attack.

Israel's main goal is to expel Palestinians from their land, but Israel has not been able to achieve this goal and I think it never will.

Do you consider this amount of killing and destruction to be a victory for Israel? In your opinion, who is the winner and loser of the war?

Perhaps some Israelis, especially the extremists, will say that they have achieved their goal. But I'm sure that even there are those who are ashamed of what their government is doing. The interesting thing that happened was that the veil was lifted from many people's eyes to see the truth about Israel. Before that, Israel claimed that the Holocaust happened to them and that they are an oppressed nation against whom a series of actions have been taken. But now they have proven that they are a nation that kills people, women and children, and even destroys schools.

You have been in Tehran for some time. What is your assessment of the state of Iran-Cuba relations? What potentials and areas do the two countries have for further cooperation?

Fortunately, Iran-Cuba relations are historical and are now in their 46th year. Despite the sanctions against it, Iran has been able to make good economic progress and achieve many of its goals. We, along with Iran, must learn how to overcome sanctions. Our political relations are excellent, and we are trying to bring economic relations to the same level.

The joint Iran-Cuba commission will be held in two weeks, during which various agreements will be discussed. Recently, an exhibition was held in Cuba in which dozens of Iranian companies participated. We are looking for more common points to strengthen economic cooperation. We have made very good progress in the fields of health technology and communications. We are trying to expand relations in other commercial sectors, the industrial sector, and the food sector.

In your opinion, what qualitative impact have various international developments had on the relationship between Iran and Cuba? Are issues such as sanctions, the return of Trump to power, and other international developments a threat to the two countries' relations, or an opportunity?

These things are not new. It's been 46 years since the Islamic Revolution in Iran and 64 years since the Cuban Revolution, and both countries are still standing strong. In fact, these events (sanctions and even military threats) have often been an opportunity for the relationship between the two countries. For example, Iran has made progress in the industrial sector that it did not have before the sanctions, or even 10 or 15 years ago. Sanctions sometimes force you to take the initiative and act based on domestic and existing resources, without expecting anything from the outside.

Naturally, we all want a world without sanctions where we can interact, engage, and develop together. Sanctions have shown that this path is not the right one. How many countries are under sanctions now? They haven't achieved their intended goals with sanctions. Dialogue and negotiation are the solution. However, if the goal is to impose sanctions to pressure us into doing something, we will never do it. On the contrary, they will make us stronger and enable us to circumvent the sanctions and even prepare for future events.

Another question about Trump. In your opinion, who

would be more worried about Trump's return, the so-called "enemies" of the US or its friends and allies? How do you see the next few years?

First, we need to address who is an enemy and who isn't. We, that is Iran and Cuba, are not the enemies of the American people. The US government has placed us in this category. Since they see us as enemies, we don't have good expectations of Mr. Trump. We're waiting to see what they do, so we can react accordingly. Therefore, we don't have positive expectations, and we will strive to respond.

I think those who should be more worried are the friends of the US. Look at the problems Trump has caused in the world before he even came to power. He even does this with his friendly countries. His remarks about occupying the Panama Canal or turning Canada into a star on the American flag are strange. He also talked about NATO expenses a while ago, saying that European countries should pay for themselves and that the US shouldn't cover their expenses.

Trump wants to deport hundreds or thousands of immigrants, even though the US is fundamentally a country of immigrants. He threatens everyone, and for him, there's no difference between friends or foes. Biden, who spoke recently, said, as he leaves this position (Presidency), he is very concerned about it. He said that an oligarchy is forming in the US, which is very dangerous; that is, people who have money in America are taking actions for themselves. Biden said that he was worried about the impact of this on American society. Therefore, the US is being taken over by people who are rich and crazy.

For this reason, I think everyone should be worried (smiles). We will see changes in the next four years, and we will see a different world. But what I am sure of is that after his four years in office, we will be here, and we will talk to each other, and we will have no problem.

The above is a part of the interview conducted by Iran Nuances.