

ICE removes Turkish man convicted in a scheme to violate US economic sanctions on Iran

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) News Release
ENFORCEMENT AND REMOVAL

07/24/2019

<https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-removes-turkish-man-convicted-scheme-violate-us-economic-sanctions-iran>

PHILADELPHIA — On Tuesday, July 23, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) officers removed a Turkish man, convicted in the United States District Court, Southern District of New York (SDNY) of conspiracy, bank fraud, and money laundering, in violation of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

On March 23, 2017, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, 48, entered the United States lawfully, in Boston, Massachusetts, with a valid B-1 non-immigrant visa.

On March 27, 2017, Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) arrested him in New York, New York, and charged him with conspiracy to commit bank fraud.

On May 16, 2018, he was sentenced to 32 months in prison for his participation in a scheme to violate U.S. economic sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran involving billions of dollars in Iranian oil proceeds held at Atilla's employer ("Turkish Bank-1"). On Jan. 3, 2018, after a five-week jury trial, he was convicted of conspiring with others to use the U.S. financial system to conduct transactions on behalf of the government of Iran and other Iranian entities – actions barred by U.S. sanctions – and to defraud U.S. financial institutions by concealing these transactions' true nature.

Atilla and others conspired to provide access to restricted oil revenues through international financial networks, including U.S. financial institutions, to the government of Iran, Iranian entities, and entities identified by the Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control as Specially Designated Nationals (SDNs). They did so by, among other things, using Turkish Bank-1, at which Atilla served as Deputy General Manager of International Banking, to engage in transactions involving billions of dollars in petroleum revenues held by the Central Bank of Iran and the National Iranian Oil Company. In particular, they facilitated and protected the ability of Turkish Bank-1 customer, international gold trader Reza Zarrab, to supply currency and gold to, and facilitate international financial transactions for, the Government of Iran, Iranian entities, and SDNs using Turkish Bank-1. Many of those financial transactions involved unwitting U.S. financial institutions, in violation of U.S. sanctions against Iran. The elaborate scheme established by Atilla and others also shielded Turkish Bank-1 from U.S. sanctions.

He lied to and deceived U.S. Treasury officials about Turkish Bank-1's activities and its purported compliance efforts to avoid subjecting the bank to U.S. sanctions. Additionally, Atilla, and others conspired to create and use false and fraudulent documents to disguise prohibited transactions for Iran and make those transactions falsely appear as transactions involving food, thus falling within humanitarian exceptions to the sanctions regime. As a result of this scheme, Atilla and his co-conspirators induced U.S. banks to unknowingly process international financial transactions in violation of the IEEPA, and to launder through the U.S. financial system funds promoting the scheme.

On Sept. 18, 2018, an immigration judge in New York granted the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor's (OPLA) Motion for a Stipulated Removal Order and Waiver of Hearing, based on Atilla's admission of the factual allegations and the concession to the charges. He was ordered removed from the United States to Turkey.

ERO officers removed Atilla from the United States and handed him over to Turkish officials without incident.

Last Reviewed/Updated: 07/24/2019

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