

Iran's 'Only Crime Is We Decided Not to Fold'

Foreign Minister Zarif sketches Iran-US relations for diplomats, former presidents and analysts

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Just in time to shine a light on what's behind [the latest sanctions from Washington](#), Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a speech at the annual [Astana Club](#) meeting in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan delivered a searing account of Iran-US relations to a select audience of high-ranking diplomats, former Presidents and analysts.

Zarif was the main speaker in a panel titled "The New Concept of Nuclear Disarmament." Keeping to a frantic schedule, he rushed in and out of the round table to squeeze in a private conversation with Kazakh First President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

During the panel, moderator Jonathan Granoff, President of the Global Security Institute, managed to keep a Pentagon analyst's questioning of Zarif from turning into a shouting match.

Previously, I had extensively discussed with Syed Rasoul Mousavi, minister for West Asia at the Iran Foreign Ministry, myriad details on Iran's stance everywhere from the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan. I was at the James Bond-ish round table of the Astana Club, as I moderated two other panels, one on multipolar Eurasia and the post-INF environment and another on Central Asia (the subject of further columns).

Zarif's intervention was extremely forceful. He stressed how Iran "complied with every agreement and it got nothing;" how "our people believe we have not gained from being part of" the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; how inflation is out of control; how the value of the rial dropped 70% "because of 'coercive measures' – not sanctions because they are illegal."

He spoke without notes, exhibiting absolute mastery of the inextricable swamp that is US-Iran relations. It turned out, in the end, to be a bombshell. Here are highlights.

Zarif's story began back during 1968 negotiations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, with the stance of the "Non-Aligned Movement to accept its provisions only if at a later date" – which happened to be 2020 – "there would be nuclear disarmament." Out of 180 non-aligned countries, "90 countries co-sponsored the indefinite extension of the NPT."

Moving to the state of play now, he mentioned how the United States and France are "relying on nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence, which is disastrous for the entire world." Iran on the other hand "is a country that believes nuclear weapons should never be owned by any country," due to "strategic calculations based on our religious beliefs."

Zarif stressed how "from 2003 to 2012 Iran was under the most severe UN sanctions that

have ever be imposed on any country that did not have nuclear weapons. The sanctions that were imposed on Iran from 2009 to 2012 were greater than the sanctions that were imposed on North Korea, which had nuclear weapons.”

Discussing the negotiations for the JCPOA that started in 2012, Zarif noted that Iran had started from the premise that “we should be able to develop as much nuclear energy as we wanted” while the US had started under the premise that Iran should never have any centrifuges.” That was the “zero-enrichment” option.

Zarif, in public, always comes back to the point that “in every zero-sum game everybody loses.” He admits the JCPOA is “a difficult agreement. It’s not a perfect agreement. It has elements I don’t like and it has elements the United States does not like.” In the end, “we reached the semblance of a balance.”

Zarif offered a quite enlightening parallel between the NPT and the JCPOA:

“The NPT was based on three pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament and access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Basically the disarmament part of NPT is all but dead, non-proliferation is barely surviving and peaceful use of nuclear energy is under serious threat,” he observed.

Meanwhile,

“JCPOA was based on two pillars: economic normalization of Iran, which is reflected in Security Council resolution 2231, and – at the same time – Iran observing certain limits on nuclear development.”

Crucially, Zarif stressed there is nothing “sunset” about these limits, as Washington argues: “We will be committed to not producing nuclear weapons forever.”

All about distrust

Then came Trump’s fateful May 2018 decision:

“When President Trump decided to withdraw from the JCPOA, we triggered the dispute resolution mechanism.”

Referring to a common narrative that describes him and John Kerry as obsessed with sacrificing everything to get a deal, Zarif said:

“We negotiated this deal based on distrust. That’s why you have a mechanism for disputes.”

Still, “the commitments of the EU and the commitments of the United States are independent. Unfortunately the EU believed they could procrastinate. Now we are at a situation where Iran is receiving no benefit, nobody is implementing their part of the bargain, only Russia and China are fulfilling partially their commitments, because the United States even prevents them from fully fulfilling their commitments. France proposed last year to provide \$15 billion to Iran for the oil we could sell from August to December. The

United States prevented the European Union even from addressing this.”

The bottom line, then, is that “other members of the JCPOA are in fact not implementing their commitments.” The solution “is very easy. Go back to the non-zero sum. Go back to implementing your commitments. Iran agreed that it would negotiate from Day One.”

Zarif made the prediction that

“if the Europeans still believe that they can take us to the Security Council and snap back resolutions they’re dead wrong. Because that is a remedy if there was a violation of the JCPOA. There was no violation of the JCPOA. We took these actions in response to European and American non-compliance. This is one of the few diplomatic achievements of the last many decades. We simply need to make sure that the two pillars exist: that there is a semblance of balance.”

This led him to a possible ray of light among so much doom and gloom:

“If what was promised to Iran in terms of economic normalization is delivered, even partially, we are prepared to show good faith and come back to the implementation of the JCPOA. If it’s not, then unfortunately we will continue this path, which is a path of zero-sum, a path leading to a loss for everybody, but a path that we have no other choice but to follow.”

Time for HOPE

Zarif identifies three major problems in our current geopolitical madness: a “zero-sum mentality on international relations that doesn’t work anymore;” winning by excluding others (“We need to establish dialogue, we need to establish cooperation”); and “the belief that the more arms we purchase, the more security we can bring to our people.”

He was adamant that there’s a possibility of implementing “a new paradigm of cooperation in our region,” referring to Nazarbayev’s efforts: a real Eurasian model of security. But that, Zarif explained, “requires a neighborhood policy. We need to look at our neighbors as our friends, as our partners, as people without whom we cannot have security. We cannot have security in Iran if Afghanistan is in turmoil. We cannot have security in Iran if Iraq is in turmoil. We cannot have security in Iran if Syria is in turmoil. You cannot have security in Kazakhstan if the Persian Gulf region is in turmoil.”

He noted that, based on just such thinking, “resident Rouhani this year, in the UN General Assembly, offered a new approach to security in the Persian Gulf region, called HOPE, which is the acronym for Hormuz Peace Initiative – or Hormuz Peace Endeavor so we can have the HOPE abbreviation.”

HOPE, explained Zarif, “is based on international law, respect of territorial integrity; based on accepting a series of principles and a series of confidence building measures; and we can build on it as you [addressing Nazarbayev] built on it in Eurasia and Central Asia. We are proud to be a part of the Eurasia Economic Union, we are neighbors in the Caspian, we have concluded last year, with your leadership, the legal convention of the Caspian Sea, these are important development that happened on the northern part of Iran. We need to

repeat them in the southern part of Iran, with the same mentality that we can't exclude our neighbors. We are either doomed or privileged to live together for the rest of our lives. We are bound by geography. We are bound by tradition, culture, religion and history." To succeed, "we need to change our mindset."

Age of hegemony gone

It all comes down to the main reason US foreign policy just can't get enough of Iran demonization. Zarif has no doubts:

"There is still an arms embargo against Iran on the way. But we are capable of shooting down a US drone spying in our territory. We are trying simply to be independent. We never said we will annihilate Israel. Somebody said Israel will be annihilated. We never said we will do it."

It was, Zarif said, Benjamin Netanyahu who took ownership of that threat, saying,

"I was the only one against the JCPOA." Netanyahu "managed to destroy the JCPOA. What is the problem? The problem is we decided not to fold. That is our only crime. We had a revolution against a government that was supported by the United States, imposed on our country by the United States, [that] tortured our people with the help of the United States, and never received a single human rights condemnation, and now people are worried why they say 'Death to America'? We say death to these policies, because they have brought nothing but this farce. What did they bring to us? If somebody came to the United States, removed your president, imposed a dictator who killed your people, wouldn't you say death to that country?"

Zarif inevitably had to evoke Mike Pompeo:

"Today the Secretary of State of the United States says publicly: 'If Iran wants to eat, it has to obey the United States.' This is a war crime. Starvation is a crime against humanity. It's a newspeak headline. If Iran wants its people to eat, it has to follow what he said. He says, 'Death to the entire Iranian people.'"

By then the atmosphere across the huge round table was electric. One could hear a pin drop – or, rather, the mini sonic booms coming from high up in the [shallow dome](#) via the system devised by star architect Norman Foster, heating the high-performance glass to melt the snow.

Zarif went all in:

"What did we do the United States? What did we do to Israel? Did we make their people starve? Who is making our people starve? Just tell me. Who is violating the nuclear agreement? Because they did not like Obama? Is that a reason to destroy the world, just because you don't like a president?"

Iran's only crime, he said, "is that we decided to be our own boss. And that crime – we are proud of it. And we will continue to be. Because we have seven millennia of civilization. We had an empire that ruled the world, and the life of that empire was probably seven times the entire life of the United States. So –

with all due respect to the United States empire; I owe my education to the United States – we don't believe that the United States is an empire that will last. The age of empires is long gone. The age of hegemony is long gone. We now have to live in a world without hegemony. – regional hegemony or global hegemony."

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Pepe Escobar is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, at the annual Astana Club meeting in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan last week. Photo: Asia Times / Pepe Escobar

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