

Notes From “Iran and the US: An Off-the-Record Conversation with Foreign Minister Mohamad Javad Zarif”

Iranian Ambassador’s Residence, NYC
October 4, 2018

MJZ replies to questions posed by a group of US former ambassadors and policy analysts at an informal, off-the-record meeting.

Afghanistan

Now there is collective interest to bring the Taliban and Afghan government to the negotiating table. In the past the US and Pakistan may have differed. I had misgivings about the utility of negotiating with the Taliban in the past. The Pakistan Government is also now talking about interest in negotiations and the ISIS is something else than in the past and supporting these talks. Now Pakistan is interested. I met with General Bajwa and Imran Khan. ISIS is now interested in ending this [conflict in Afghanistan]. More than before.

Iran wants to secure the eastern provinces with the Taliban’s help. Now there is a convergence of interests between us all in settling the Afghanistan conflict. But there is a new serious challenge with the introduction of ISIS into Afghanistan. Insecurity is on the rise and the Taliban now find it difficult to be cooperative since they are competing with ISIS for money and recruits. We have seen the recent radicalization of the Taliban because of this and their entering the peace process may create further divisions within the Taliban.

President Ghani decided to bring Hekmatyar onto the center state and for those who know him, this is a dangerous game. Hekmatyar said he is against reconciliation in Afghanistan.

The two main challenges come with the two main elections that are forthcoming. Accusations of voter fraud will be a reality, so that is another problem. Probably will require a lot of coordination and oversight.

Hekmatyar is actively supported by the Saudis and UAE. You [the US] should take off the anti-Iran glasses and look what is happening in the region. MSB paid a scheduled two-day visit to Kuwait that was cut short to a few hours because he insulted the Emir.

Regional Developments

- 2 -

The region is in turmoil. The Houthis ignored our advice not to enter Sana and Aden. We [Iran] do not exert a controlling influence over anyone including Hezbollah; but we do have some influence over Hezbollah and others and we have exercised it. In March or April 2015 we talked to the Houthis about a cease-fire.

The reason that Iran is more successful in the region than the US and Saudi Arabia is that we don't impose our will on anyone. In Iraq we try to build consensus. The reason we are successful in Lebanon is the same. We don't arrest the prime minister, and we help Lebanon avoid civil war. Saudi Arabia interferes and meddles. Hezbollah is restrained and an important power in Lebanon. Our influence is useful.

There is a vacuum in Sanaa and we didn't want war. I [Zarif] was able to convince the Houthis to accept a ceasefire. The first time I saw a Houthi in my life was when we started negotiations with Europe. At the second meeting we agreed with Europe to have a humanitarian ceasefire for Ramadan and a partial exchange of prisoners. We succeeded in achieving this, not the Saudis.

The Houthis want an end to this war. The Saudis are still under the impression that the war in Yemen can be won militarily and so want to bring the US into the war there and then against Iran.

During a meeting of the ISSG chaired by Kerry, Zarif pleaded to include one sentence that "Syria doesn't have a military solution." It was never included because the Saudis prevented it. Their message is that "With the help of G-d we will remove Bashar Assad, either politically or militarily." When the Saudis say this they mean that g-d means the US. They hope to drag the US into Syria and Yemen and why they continue refusing to give ground.

The Saudis tried to talk to the Houthis and we [Iran] did not object. At the end of the day, Yemen needs good relations with Saudi Arabia. We understand that. But we also understand that we need a cease-fire, humanitarian assistance, intra-Yemeni dialogue and an inclusive government friendly to its neighbors. MBC and MBS though for their own personal reasons—not reasons of state—are opposed to this.

Syria

Two phase plan for peace in Syria. A cease-fire; government of national unity; inclusive transformation of government; constitutional reform; and fair-elections. On constitutional reform a meeting was convened by Kerry in Lausanne. The art of getting

- 3 -

to "yes" is by creating a condition where everyone has a stake in the outcome, not where one is digging one's own grave. I [Zarif] still believe that is the answer, but today that is a very hard sell to Bashar. We can't forget the realities on the ground. A constitution is an outcome from Istana or the Sochi conferences. But now Trump is presenting the constitutional conference as his own. One thing is clear: the political process can include a defeated party, but cannot make the defeated a winner.

At the Teheran summit we had detailed discussions between the Iranian military, Zarif and the Turks and their military and drew lines on a map. We had a good understanding with the Turks, but Erdogan used an open meeting to raise questions to score points by calling for an immediate ceasefire. This led to a Turkish-Russian disagreement. The following day the agreement was nonetheless finalized and we averted a bloodbath. I [Zarif] hope permanently.

The DMZ there is mostly Nusra and I don't know how we get rid of them. The Turks have some limited influence over Nusra; Qatar too. If we can resolve this challenge, which is next to impossible to resolve. When we had the agreement for eastern Gouta, and the terrorists were relocated. I spoke with Bashar about this and he said, once we start military operations, we'll give people amnesty. So, like what is happening in Iraq, people can go back to their villages. But this is why the PMF cannot be abolished since ISIS is very much active in Iraq, only its leadership has relocated. The fighters are still in Iraq. The same thing can happen in Syria, so the fighters can go home and Bashar can live with that. But we have 20,000 hardcore Nusra still in Syria of whom about 5,000 are foreign fighters. Even if Bashar can deal with Nusra, what do we do with the foreign fighters? It's everyone's problem. There are thousands of Europeans, thousands from Central Asia, thousands from South East Asia and many hundreds from China. This is a problem we need to address and I don't have an answer. No one is eager to receive them, I think. Rouhani said to Europe you allowed this to happen and at the end of the day, they have hardcore fighters coming back. The chickens have come home to roost."

Way Forward in Iranian-US Relations

I will answer this question in two ways. First, what people think in Iran. Polls by the University of Maryland of Iranians, as well as Iranian polls, say the same thing. Iranians prefer engagement. I was the top Iranian personality for two years after the

- 4 -

end of the JCPOA talks . Zarif had 97%, 87% approval. No one else came close. I am not a politician, so Iranians prefer engagement is my reading. My popularity dragged as Obama sourced on the deal. I was as popular as Suleimani but now I am at 47% and his is up. He is closer to 80%. People of Iran once preferred engagement, now opted for resistance as the only reality. That is what the polls are telling us now and it is the reality of the region. This is the choice of Iranians not something they aspire fore, but something they now see as no choice. The popular mood in Iran now is that engagement will not work. We haveo be responsive to the population, we don't poll every day, but have to pay attention.

If we apply this to Trump, the problem we see is first of all a photo op with Trump was an asset for Kim Jung-Un. He needed the photo op for his vanity. We don't. Second problem is that I talked to the North Korean foreign minister after the agreement with the US and he said that Pompeo and Bolton can't get the peace declaration that Trump promised. The US says no peace deal and the US will reimpose sanctions but the condition is zero missiles, zero nuclear enrichment. This what Bolton wants. I know Bolton and negotiated with him years ago. His views are so radical, that we could not reach an agreement. Absolute impossibility to reach an agreement with John Bolton unless you ask him to sit down and read at dictation speed what he wants and then you sign it. He is incapable of compromise.

My read of Trump is that he will be a two-term president. I said Trump would be elected in 2016 when others thought it was Clinton for certain.

I see Putin saying the same thing that I have: that the US is excessively weaponizing the dollar and that this is leading to the world pulling away from the dollar as the currency of choice.

Brian Hooks said that the JCPOA was a personal agreement, between two persons, but we want a treaty. But the JCPOA was a UN General Assembly decision. We had a treaty, but the US took Iran to the International Criminal Court of Justice on two cases and appropriated \$2billion of assets but the court ruled against the US. The US withdrew from the treaty and from the Protocol of Vienna Convention. Is there any reliability left?

When Trump left the JCPOA, Iran had a meeting with EU foreign ministers and we were asked if were talking behind their backs with the Americans? We can't. There are no sunset clauses in the JCPOA but that doesn't matter as Iran will never seek

- 5 -

atomic weapons. The preface alone took eight-and-a-half years. Every time table has been subject to the longest negotiations and reached the most carefully negotiated document. It doesn't mean that Iran will start building a bomb in 15 years but when we start the nuclear fuel project . It is almost impossible to turn fuel rods into nuclear weapons. The talk about a sunset clause was misleading and those critics don't understand the assumptions reached between John Kerry and me. This was about what an industrial scale peaceful nuclear program would look like. One that is economically feasible, technically sound. I have always believed in non-zero sum outcomes.

Iraq

Why is our own consulate burned to the ground in Basra and then Iran is blamed for bringing Ira to the brink of conflict?

The Saudis are paying everyone in Parliament and are the ones to blame.

Corruption is rampant in Iraq and undermines the state's functioning. Garbage is on the street in Najaf leading to the home of Sistani. Look at the sky and there are hundreds of wires because there is no reliable electricity. The situation is dreadful. I was with Sistani and he was complaining about what is taking place. It is a consequence of instability and heated domestic disturbances. One element feeding this is the US obsession to get Iran out of Iraq. Pressuring Iraq not to do business with Iran. This leads to corruption since we are Iraq's largest trading partner. The US obsession doesn't help Iraq. Our people know Iraq and have a religious commitment to work in Iraq that isn't based on money but an ideological belief of Iranian's wish to build a road for Najaf. I don't know why the US is trying to deprive Iraqis of this huge asset. In twenty days there will be the march of Arbaeen. Twenty million will march. Many Iranians. We don't fight a war with the US over Iraq since to improve the situation in Iraq is a major priority. Pompeo likes threats. We have reason to believe that people associated with the US embassy burnt the consulate in Basra.

Hostages

You cannot call someone a hostage when they have been convicted in a court of law on espionage charges. They are not hostages.

- 6 -

Research from a US perspective is not viewed like that elsewhere, but in the Iranian system that type of scrutiny is espionage. Different perspectives in the US of what is transmitting of information. Tell our American friends to talk to someone in the NSC

I have a friend here, in New York, who graduated from Columbia and is very pro-American. He was always pushing for engagement. He ran a clipping service. All open source and on e-mail. He was arrested by the FBI and told to cooperate and spy on the Iranian Mission and threatened if he did not. He refused and was charged with tax fraud. He was arraigned and put under house arrest and threatened with 2 ½ years in prison. Tell us about the use of the term hostage?

At the court hearing, there were 11 FBI agents present. The judge heard the case and threw it out, but gave him a three-month prison sentence and ordered him to pay \$80,000 in court fees. He had done nothing.

There are cases and there are cases. My hope is we can find a way [to resolve the Wang case] since government cannot interfere with the judiciary. My hope is to find way to exchange the prisoners that we each have.

People here [in US] are being imprisoned for sanctions violations. There is a lady in Australia who worked as a translator and helped in the purchase of equipment in the US for Iranian radio transmitters. There was no restriction on the purchase of this equipment. She left the company and moved to Australia with her husband and became pregnant. The US put in a request for her extradition. She was arrested in Australia and was released on bail but then the US intervened and she was imprisoned. She gave birth in prison. All for a technical violation of sanctions six years ago when sanctions had been lifted in any case. She is still in prison.

We need to start dealing with hostages. But there is a larger issue. Governments in Europe say they are bound by treaty to cooperate with the US. A man charged with buying spare parts for civilian airliners in Iran, for safety purposes, was charged by Germany with buying spare parts that the US won't sell to us in. He was in prison while his mother died who he could see.

We don't mind starting negotiations, but we don't like the name of hostage attached to your special envoy. We will now name our own special envoy to discuss this matter and we will use the same name [to spite the US].

- 7 -

I hope we can start a dialogue on this matter. It is the only dialogue that is possible and I hope to get release of this person.