

# Iran's Zarif volunteers Tehran as US strategic partner

Keith Jones  
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In an op-ed piece published in Monday's *New York Times*, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif effectively volunteered Tehran to take on the role of US imperialism's junior partner in the Middle East.

Titled "A Message From Iran," Zarif's comment was ostensibly a plea for a "regional dialogue" among Persian Gulf and Mideast states. But the content of Zarif's "message" and his choice of the *New York Times* as the venue for publishing it attest to its true target audience—the Obama administration and the US political establishment and military-security apparatus.

Zarif's "message" is remarkable both for what it says and what it doesn't say. It declares that the entire Middle East is in "chaos" and "turmoil." It continues, "The social, cultural and religious fabrics of entire countries are being torn to shreds."

But while Iran's foreign minister asserts that it is time for the region's "stakeholders to begin to address the causes" of this disaster, he makes no mention of US imperialism, the series of wars it has waged and fomented in the region, or its fanning of sectarian divisions. There is not so much as a whisper about the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation, which killed more than a million people. Likewise the Afghan war and the regime-change wars the US has mounted were not mentioned, directly as in Libya or indirectly as in Syria, using Sunni Islamist terrorists as its principal "boots on the ground."

Nor does Zarif make any mention of the role played by Israel, US imperialism's principal ally in the region. He says nothing about Israel's suppression of the Palestinian people, its never-ending cycle of wars or its brutal policy of collective punishment.

These omissions constitute a cynical statement of intent by Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime that everything is now on the table with respect to its diplomatic, economic and military-strategic relations with US imperialism.

Zarif urges the US and its European Union allies to finalize the framework agreement announced April 2 to "normalize" Iran's civilian nuclear-program over a 15 year-period, so "we can... move on to much more important work."

To leave no room for doubt as to his meaning, Zarif adds, "The purview of our constructive engagement"—that is, Tehran's pursuit of a rapprochement with the US and its regional allies—"extends far beyond nuclear negotiations."

Already, Tehran and Washington are tacitly allied in Afghanistan and Iraq: in the former in supporting a government that was reconfigured last year under the direction of US Secretary

of State John Kerry and which continues to be defended by thousands of US troops; and in the latter in assisting the US-installed government in Baghdad in combating the Islamic State.

Zarif urges that this limited, makeshift cooperation be transformed into a permanent partnership. "There are," he declares, "multiple arenas where the interests of Iran and other major stakeholders intersect."

He claims a "regional dialogue" could lead to "security-building measures," joint action against "terrorism, extremism and sectarianism," measures to ensure "the free flow of oil and other resources," and, ultimately, "formal non-aggression and security cooperation arrangements," i.e., a US-anchored reordering of the Middle East in which Iran's Islamic Republic would be an acknowledged US partner alongside Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf sheikdoms, Turkey and Israel.

Zarif points to Yemen, under attack from a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni states, with Washington's full diplomatic and military support, "as a good place to start." This implies a readiness on Tehran's part to openly assist the US in pacifying the region.

He then touts the "peace plan" Tehran announced last week, in which Iran offered to work with Saudi Arabia and Washington to establish a "broad-based government (in Yemen) friendly to all its neighbors."

The Obama administration has initially reacted dismissively, if not derisively, to Zarif's "message." White House spokesman Josh Earnest denounced Iran for its "destabilizing activities" in the region and dismissed Tehran's Yemen peace initiative on the basis of Washington's and Riyadh's unsubstantiated (and, at the very least, widely exaggerated) claims of Iranian military support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Earnest further vowed that there would be no quick lifting of the punishing sanctions the US and EU have imposed on Iran. Any suspension of the sanctions will be phased in and conditional on Iran meeting benchmarks as regards the rollback, capping, and dismantling of much its civilian nuclear program, he said.

State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the US might be willing to "dialogue" with Tehran, but ruled out "working with the Iranians." She cited Syria as a place where there might be room for discussion between Tehran and Washington, but added that Iran's refusal to bow to the US demand that a "political solution" to the Syrian conflict be premised on the removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime meant there was currently no basis for such a dialogue.

There is a public relations element to all of this. The Obama administration doesn't want to rile Israel, the Saudis or US congressional opponents of a nuclear deal with Iran by suggesting, even before such a deal has been concluded, that Washington is moving toward broader collaboration with Tehran.

More fundamentally, the Obama administration's reaction to Zarif's message makes clear that the only type of partnership US imperialism will enter into with Tehran is one of an explicit neo-colonial character, under which Iran demonstrably accepts and supports US domination of the world's most important oil-exporting region.

While the Obama administration has indicated that it is intent on finalizing the nuclear deal with Iran, its priorities could rapidly change as it pursues an aggressive campaign to assert US global hegemony. Just in the last few days it has deployed war ships in the Persian Gulf and threatened to intercede to block Iranian ships from delivering supplies to the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Even if a nuclear deal is concluded, it will be used, as has already been demonstrated by Washington's insistence on "snap-back" sanction provisions, as an instrument to continue to bully and threaten Iran. If and when the opportunity presents itself, the US may very well cast aside any agreement, as it did with Libya's Gaddafi, and openly pursue regime-change in order to install an even more pliant regime.

That said, Zarif's offer is highly significant because it reveals the character of Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime.

For all its denunciations of the "Great Satan" and chants of "Death to the US," the Iranian bourgeoisie's opposition to Washington has always been of a limited and tactical character, aimed at increasing the possibilities of exploiting its "own" working class and arriving at a better deal with imperialism.

During much of the 36 years of the Islamic Republic, Tehran has enjoyed close commercial ties with Japanese and European imperialism. Moreover, it has repeatedly sought an accommodation with Washington, only to be rebuffed by Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

In 1991-92, Iran carried out the conditions set for it by the George H. W. Bush administration, including arranging for the release of US hostages in Lebanon and issuing a formal disavowal of terrorism and anti-western rhetoric. However, Bush balked at normalizing relations with Tehran.

In 1995, Iran offered lucrative contacts to US companies, including a \$1 billion oil deal with Conoco. The Clinton administration responded by reaffirming the "dual containment" policy directed against Iran and Iraq and supporting the tightening of sanctions against Iran.

In the fall of 2001, Tehran provided the US with intelligence to assist in its invasion of Afghanistan, only to be labeled by George W. Bush in January 2002 as part of the "axis of evil."

Similarly, the Tehran regime lent tacit support to the US invasion of Iraq, and in April-May 2003 offered a "grand bargain" to the US via back-channel talks. In an offer approved by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran said it would be ready to recognize the state of Israel, assist Washington in establishing a new pro-US regime in Baghdad, and stop all military support for Hamas, other Palestinian groups and Hezbollah in exchange for a

US pledge not to pursue regime-change in Tehran. The Bush-Cheney administration rejected the offer out of hand and instead began to set in motion plans for an invasion of Iran.

The US-EU economic sanctions have exacerbated the socio-economic crisis of the Islamic Republic, a society already marked by massive social inequality and economic insecurity. The bourgeois-clerical establishment is haunted by the fear of a working class challenge to its rule.

Through a rapprochement with Washington, the Iranian bourgeoisie is seeking to strengthen its hand against the working class. Any deal with the US would be followed by an intensification of the longstanding drive of the ruling elite to destroy what remains of the social concessions made to the masses in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution, as the mullahs were consolidating their hold on power through savage repression of the left and any form of workers' self-organization.

Zarif is himself closely linked to a faction of the elite, led by the current president, Hassan Rouhani, and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, which has long pressed for a rapprochement with Washington and IMF-supported neo-liberal economic restructuring.

This faction champions a "look West" policy in opposition to certain sections of the bourgeoisie, associated with the Revolutionary Guards, who have profited from Iran's growing economic ties to China and military-security links to Russia. The pro-West faction advocates, as spelled out by Rouhani in his January 2014 appearance at the Davos World Economic Forum, an Iran that "is open for business" to European and US capital. Its fondest hope is to revive the Washington-Tehran strategic axis that prevailed under the Shah's bloody dictatorship, which saw Iran act as regional guardian of US strategic interests in the Middle East and linchpin of its efforts to pressure and subvert the Soviet Union.



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