

Interview made by Asia Source with H.E.Dr. M.Javad Zarif, Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations

Q&A AsiaSource Interview



February 5, 2007

Ambassador Javad Zarif presented his credentials as the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran on 5 August 2002 to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Dr. Zarif is a career diplomat and has served in different senior positions in the Iranian Foreign Ministry and at various international organizations. His responsibility from 1992 until his appointment as Permanent Representative was Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs.

In the past two decades, Ambassador Zarif has played an active role in the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Most recently, he was appointed by the UN Secretary-General as a member of the Group of Eminent Persons on Dialogue among Civilizations. He has also served as chairman of numerous international conferences.

In this exclusive interview with Nermeen Shaikh at the Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN, Ambassador Zarif discusses a number of pressing issues including Iran's nuclear program, the insurgency in Iraq, sectarian violence and President Ahmadinejad's controversial comments on Israel.

Many commentators have suggested that the present rhetoric on Iran is reminiscent of the rhetoric on Iraq that preceded military intervention in 2003. To what extent is Iran's regional policy shaped by this?

Well, what we see in the US policy in Iraq is an attempt to sort of "escape forward" by creating, *fabricating* new facts to fit a policy that is dictated primarily by domestic considerations here in the United States. And a policy that has very little prospect of success even in ideal situations. The fact that this policy is clearly based on fabrications is alarming, *should* be alarming for everybody because it would be difficult to look for solutions if one side is trying to fabricate a crisis. I think this is what the US is doing with the Iranian nuclear issue and what it has done with Iraq, that it's not looking for a solution. So people must be concerned, not just in Iran but elsewhere, about the dangerous implications of policy-driven facts that are being created in Iraq. What can be done about this and what can Iran do about this is driven by the fact that the US is looking for a crisis. Now we need to take measures in order to prevent this crisis from taking shape. If the crisis that the US is trying to provoke takes shape and is actually implemented, the regional implications will be much wider than Iran.

What kind of crisis are you referring to?

The type of environment the US wants to create inside Iraq in order to find a domestic cover to justify its failures. Now I think an important component of this policy, whether the United States clearly articulates it or not, is a divide between Shi'a and Sunni in the Arab and Islamic world. And that is the primary motivation, the primary psychological factor that the US is using, and probably more than the US, Israel is using, in order to create an anti-Iranian coalition. But the implications of this coalition-building will certainly go far beyond Iran; Pakistan, India may all become victims of such a profound sectarian division. We are still recovering from the results of a sectarian division that was then also supported and sustained by the US after the Iranian revolution and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. When, as you remember, the US supported the Wahhabi movement as a force to contain Communism and to contain the Islamic revolution of Iran which was being considered by the United States and some of its allies in the region as a Shi'a revolution. We thought that after 9/11 people had learned a lesson from that. But it seems again that we see a repeat of the same old policy being rehearsed in Iraq.

Now we all remember that Zarqawi was the one who first initiated a program, a very clearly defined program, in order to create divisions between the Shi'a and the Sunni in Iraq. You remember the famous CD that was ironically discovered by the United States intelligence which showed that the entire strategy that Zarqawi and Al Qaeda were pursuing in Iraq was based on aggravating a division between the Shi'as and the Sunnis. And using all violence against the Shi'as in order to create a civil war. We thought that with Zarqawi's death, his legacy would die. But unfortunately certain elements inside the region, long before there were sectarian clashes, started using scare tactics about the dominance of the Shi'as in the region. You remember the "Shi'a crescent" and that type of nonsense that was being uttered here in the US, for ulterior political purposes. But all of that is taking hold, taking shape, becoming reality, unfortunately, or as they say, a "self-fulfilling prophecy" in the current policy. And the implications are going to be as devastating as the implications of the push for Wahhabism after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution.

So you would suggest that the allegations that the US administration has made repeatedly, that Iran is supporting Shi'a militants in Iraq, are unfounded? That they only make these claims to blame Iran for their own failures in Iraq?

It's interesting that the National Intelligence Estimate that was released today, at least the two page summary that was released today, has an internal contradiction. It states very clearly that the insurgency and the sectarian conflict inside Iraq is now unfortunately domestically sustained. It doesn't require external assistance. But then -- because the National Intelligence Estimate has to parrot official policy -- goes on to mention the role of Iran and Syria in providing lethal weapons to the sectarian movement, etc.; it's utter nonsense.

Iran does not have any interest in a sectarian divide in the Islamic world, being a minority. Iran, any minority, always wants to be live in peace with the majority. That is why Iran has always been on the record calling for cooperation not only in Iraq but in the wider Islamic world between the Shi'a and the Sunni. A number of our external policies are determined by the fact that we want to maintain Islamic unity in the region. A sectarian divide, sectarian violence in Iraq, is bound to have wider implications and those implications are not beneficial to Iran. Iran has no interest, has nothing to gain, from a sectarian conflict inside Iraq. Furthermore, what is happening in Iraq, if you want to find one country that is content with the political developments in Iraq - that is, the end of Saddam Hussein, the possibility for the majority in Iraq to have a voice in the government while the rights of the minority are respected, with a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian system coming into being in Iraq - if you want to find one country that has nothing to lose and everything to gain from this development, it is Iran. Why in the world would Iran undermine this? Why in the world would Iran undermine a government that is composed of its own friends? Now Iran is probably the only country that has a good historical record with the Iraqi opposition who are now in power in Iraq. Everybody else, because of the track record of supporting Saddam Hussein at one point or another in Iraqi history, have rather bad blood with the various people who are now in the Iraqi

government. Iran does not. So there is no reason whatsoever for Iran to be seeking to undermine the government in Iraq.

Now, as you have seen, the United States has failed to produce any evidence, will continue to fail to produce any evidence. But they are talking about, what some of them have talked about are weapons in the hands of militias which they claim may have originated from Iran. I don't know whether they have found weapons that have originated from the United States in the hands of the militia! Countries that produce weapons find their weapons in open markets. Many of the weapons that are used against Israel are actually Israeli weapons that have been confiscated or bought in the black market by either Hamas or other Palestinian organizations. So they should be serious. And they should look at serious facts. They should look at motives, and whether Iran has any motive in undermining Iraqi security.

I have to add one point, maybe in order to answer part of your question. I believe the United States has engulfed itself in a crisis; it doesn't need any help to be in crisis. Nothing can exacerbate further the crisis that the United States has created for itself. And it wasn't unexpected. I ask you to go and just read verbatim records of the Security Council two or three weeks prior to the invasion of Iraq when every ambassador from the region, myself included, said very clearly in the Security Council, I remember well, that one result of the invasion will be clear from now, everything else is uncertain, and that is the invasion will lead to greater extremism in the region. And I wasn't alone. Every other ambassador who had any knowledge of what was going on in our region said they should keep the same statement. So it's not as if the United States is meeting unexpected challenges in Iraq. These are the natural consequences of occupation -- unfortunately with great human suffering, with great suffering of the Iraqi population. This doesn't mean that anything can justify the matter of killing innocent human beings by anybody in the name of resistance or whatever. But the fact is that the United States is basically reaping the implications of its own policies.

Something that you said suggested that perhaps you would agree with the following claim, which many believe, namely that Iran has benefited the most from the US invasion of Iraq. One American foreign policy expert, for example, had this to say in an interview last year: "Which country in the world has benefited the most by events in the last five years? It is clearly Iran. They have Hamas, they have Hezbollah stronger than ever, they have \$70 oil. They have a Shi'ite government in Iraq after 400 years of Sunni rule. And they are the dominant external political influence. They have massive political and economic influence in western Afghanistan...." What is your view on this?

Well, first of all, you need to have a more long-term perspective of the realities in the region. Unfortunately US policymakers have a very short-term view, both in regard to the past as well as in regard to the future. With regard to the past, history did not start with the US invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq. History started long before that. The United States basically is reaping the fruits of its own previous policies. And Iran is also benefiting from policies that it had implemented a long time ago. It didn't start with the US invasion of either Iraq or Afghanistan. But speaking with a long-term perspective, Iran doesn't see the fact that Saddam Hussein has been removed or that the Taliban have been removed in and of themselves as benefits. Of course we're happy that these two major menaces, not only to our security but to the region as a whole, and to their own populations, are gone. But we also have to see the long-term implications. And we are now seeing the long-term implications of invasion; occupation creates resentment. Resentment leads to extremism. And extremism does not serve the interest of any country, none in the region, Iran included. So the fact that some people would come and expect Iran to be grateful for the mess that the United States has created at our doorstep with implications that will impact the long-term security and stability of the region in which we have to live - unlike the United States that can simply pack up and go - is badly mistaken. Anybody who believes that we're going to be thankful for the US who created a mess in our region, they must be talking about a different world. Of course we see a great disaster in the making in our region caused by US policies. So I ask these experts to go and restudy the past and rethink the future.

What prior policies are you referring to?

The United States, for all practical purposes, created Al Qaeda, created Taliban and bolstered Saddam Hussein.

The US, as I'm sure you're aware, is moving another aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf and is also intending to send 21,000 additional troops to Iraq. What's the Iranian government's response to this increased military presence in the region?

It's dangerous, but you see, the United States has 140,000 forces in Iraq. What good has it done for the US to increase it by another 20? The United States has had several aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf, in and out. Other than killing innocent people -- and I'm referring to the incident in which an Iranian civilian airliner was hit by one of these aircraft carriers -- what else do they do? Did they bring security to this region? Look at the past US record in the Persian Gulf and see how much security and stability this type of policy on the part of the US has brought to our region. Now in terms of being dangerous, we believe any military escalation is in and of itself dangerous. It can even lead to accidental escalations. And various US policies that have been promoted, some imposed by the political leadership in Washington on the military on the ground, are going to have disastrous implications, and are prone to creating very serious accidents with unimaginable consequences. So being dangerous is one thing. Being effective in bringing about US desired outcomes is a totally different thing. I believe it is dangerous and it will not lead to the desired US outcome.

US officials have confirmed that they reserve the right to attack Iranian targets inside Iraq but not beyond.

Do they have the right to reserve it?

You should ask them that. What is the Iranian government's response on this? Why is it that Iran has not responded to the arrest by US forces of five Iranians?

We believe that they were in Iraq on the invitation of the Iraqi government. And the Iraqi government must take measures in order to guarantee their release. This is not a jungle in which we pursue individual policies. Our people are in a country which has a sovereign government and that sovereign government has said repeatedly that these people were there on the invitation of that government and we believe that the Iraqi government should take the necessary steps in order to ensure that its sovereignty and its sovereign rights are respected by the occupiers. We are the last to believe that vigilante justice is of any use in today's international affairs.

Ray Takeyh, writing in the *Financial Times* a few months ago said, "As with China, Iran sees itself as a leading regional power that is key to the Middle East conflict. There can be a solution to neither Iraq's civil war nor the chaos in Lebanon without active Iranian participation. As such the guardians of the theocracy no longer feel compelled to offer concessions for the sake of US participation or European munificence." Do you think this is an accurate representation of Iran's position?

Well that's one reading of Iran's position. I believe Iran has exercised a great deal of restraint and has shown its readiness to be cooperative on every front. On the nuclear front, Iran went out of its way in order to provide proposal after proposal to the Europeans, to guarantee that their concerns about any possible diversion of the Iranian nuclear program into non-peaceful activity would be allayed, indeed that any possible concerns they have would be allayed. But, unfortunately, because of very seriously erroneous misperceptions that the United States and its European friends had with regard to Iran and Iranian policy, they did not reciprocate. In fact they used every sign of Iranian readiness to cooperate as a sign of weakness and now they have been proven wrong. It's not that Iran feels a newly gained might in the region that would preclude its submission to the whims and demands of the Western world. It's a fact that Iran tried to be cooperative and to provide ample opportunity for negotiations. But it was their misperception not to take them seriously. And to take the route of confrontation and imposition on Iran; Iran was never prepared to submit to this type of behavior.

Now, it's up to the other side, it's up to the West to realize the realities that always existed. This is not a new-found reality. Iran's position in the region is an old reality. It's not new. And the West had its own misperceptions. It must come to understand the realities which existed long before the war in Lebanon, long before the problems that the US has in Iraq. Simply because of Iran's size, population, natural resources, its geo-strategic location, Iran has a weight. And they simply wanted to disregard that. Also Iran has a very long and proud history and the Iranians will not accept imposition. This they didn't understand either. Now the combination of these miscalculations on the part of the West has led to the current stalemate. I believe they should revisit the previous calculations and bring them in line with the real realities of the world, of the 21st century, not the world of the 19th century, and act accordingly.

Why do you say 19th century?

Because that is when they were predominant. And that was, in all seriousness, the time when the use of force or threat of use of force was considered as a prerogative of sovereignty. Now we live in an era where the use of force has been outlawed by the Charter of the United Nations. And these people still say that they're not removing the use of force from the table which is rather ridiculous for countries who claim to be based on the rule of law. As if, in an internationally lawful environment, there was an option of use of force on the table which they could either keep or remove from the table. They don't have that option. Now the law of the jungle, the law of the 19th century in which they seem to continue to be living, allowed them to use force under certain circumstances. It doesn't allow them any more. So now they should bring themselves to understand the realities of the 21st century, taking lessons from their own experience. Now they see in Iraq, the greatest superpower on the face of the Earth, with a military might that is not comparable to the military might of every other power on the face of the Earth *combined*, is stuck in a country which was the subject of twelve years of sanctions, was basically *destroyed* to pieces before the war. And this greatest power is not capable of bringing stability to that country, even protecting its own soldiers in that country. I don't want to be sarcastic but what I'm saying is that, legally, the use of force or the threat of use of force is no longer an option on the table; this follows a political reality as law always follows politics. And the political reality is that the use of force or the threat of use of force are no longer conducive to the implementation of foreign policy. And I think it is important for these people to come to realize this. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

Given the instability that you describe in the region, quite accurately, I think, wouldn't it be in Iran's interest to develop nuclear weapons?

No, we believe that nuclear weapons will not augment anybody's security. With all due respect, we don't believe that nuclear weapons augmented either India's security or Pakistan's security. We believe that if Iran wanted to enter into nuclear deterrence sort of calculations it would be foolish for Iran to even consider that because Iran will not be able - I mean nuclear deterrence calculations would require first- or second-strike capability and Iran simply cannot even imagine having this type of capability against its extra-regional or within wider-region adversaries and competitors. So it doesn't make sense for Iran to have nuclear weapons. And that is why after India and Pakistan had their test explosions in 1998, what Iran did was to go to the conference on disarmament and ask for universalization of the NPT because that is how we define our national security. We define our national security in terms of preventing a nuclear arms race and hopefully one day eliminating all nuclear weapons all together.

Could you confirm the report out of Vienna today that hundreds of technicians and laborers have been busy at the Natanz facility over the past few weeks setting up pipes, wiring, control panels and air conditioning, in order to install additional centrifuges?

I don't know. That I think has to be asked from people who are engaged in the running and operations of Natanz. We have made it clear that we are going to implement our legal rights with regard to enrichment. And that resolutions imposed for exterior political reasons on the

Security Council or on the IAEA board will not deter Iran from exercising its right. That does not mean that we have any desire to see confrontation but we simply believe that this is the wrong approach to a very important international legal and political issue.

What is the position of the Iranian government on the State of the Union address delivered by Bush in which he said, "The world will not allow the regime in Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons"? And I should modify that because you have said the regime is not interested in making nuclear weapons. If your argument is that the US is fabricating evidence against Iran, how does the government respond to the State of the Union address in which Iran was invoked many times?

Well, I think President Bush hardly represents the American people, let alone the world. The degree of support for his policies inside the US is at an all-time low. Not that I want to interfere in the domestic affairs of the US but since they make it a habit of interfering in the domestic affairs of others maybe they want a taste of their own pill! But also he enjoys very little support in the countries which are allied to the US. I think it would be very wise for the US to stop claiming to represent the international community. Now what I see as the international community or the majority of the international community is reflected in the statements that came from the heads of state of 118 non-aligned countries, which supported Iran's right, including to fuel cycle, and rejected any attempt to exert pressure on countries to curtail their peaceful nuclear program based on arbitrary thresholds that are being imposed by the United States. So that's one point.

Secondly, President Bush has been fluctuating so much in his State of the Union addresses. In last year's address, he spoke of democracy many times whereas now, he showed total disregard for any mention of democracy, so he would be better advised to stop interfering in the affairs of other countries and simply deal with the problems that the US is facing.

Lastly, we would gladly join with President Bush in ensuring that Iran will never develop any nuclear weapons if that is actually his intention because that is our intention as well. But the intention of President Bush is not preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons because the United States is itself a known proliferator as its recent agreements with countries that have proliferated nuclear weapons demonstrate; I'm referring to an old agreement with Israel. The United States has allowed Israeli scientists to take advantage of US nuclear facilities based on an agreement that was reached some time ago much prior to this much celebrated agreement with India. So I don't think the concern is proliferation. But if the concern is proliferation, if the concern is to ensure that the Iran nuclear program would never become a military program, then Iran wants to cooperate and has presented proposals that would in fact ensure that. But the proposals that are pursued by President Bush would never ensure that proliferation would not take place. So his policy as represented in the State of the Union is simply a policy of pressure and intimidation that won't work.

How do you respond to the widespread anxiety generated after the comments made by President Ahmadinejad about wiping Israel off the map? There are now some who think that Iran's nuclear program presents an *existential* threat to the state of Israel?

Well, President Ahmadinejad and the government of Iran have repeatedly stated that we're not threatening any other member of the United Nations. We've never used force against any country.

We will not use force against anybody else. We're not threatening to use force. I know that some people have tried to take political mileage out of certain statements that have been presented out of context. But the fact is, Israel, the United States and even the United Kingdom, have made official threats of use of force against Iran. Instead of making so much noise about Iranian threats, they can simply reciprocate and state what I'm stating - that Iran will never use force against any other member of the United Nations. Let us ask whether any of those three countries can repeat this very simple statement which is not a big deal; it's simply a repeat of paragraph 4 of article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations.

But what do you mean that the statement was quoted out of context or that it's been used out of context?

Iran never threatened to use force against Israel. And the President has been clear on that.

Wiping Israel off the map?

You see, if you want to deal with rhetoric, rhetoric has been made by others long before President Ahmadinejad came to office. And even Israeli officials such as Shimon Peres have said that Iran can also be wiped out from the face of the Earth. But unfortunately there was very little reaction to that.

How hopeful are you that there will be a peaceful resolution to the nuclear question?

If there is an attempt to find a peaceful resolution then there will be a peaceful resolution. In objective, real terms, there is a possibility, more than a possibility. There is a certainty that there can be a peaceful resolution. But if people are looking for confrontation then you cannot achieve peace through confrontation.

Who do you think is not interested in confrontation? Who do you think is pursuing a peaceful resolution?

Iran is certainly not interested in confrontation. We have said it. We have presented options; several options are on the table that Iran has presented that, from any objective assessment of realities, would make it impossible for Iran to develop nuclear weapons. So if they're seriously interested they can look into it. And with regard to Iraq, Iran has made it very clear that it is prepared to help in stabilizing Iraq, in securing Iraq. It has been cooperating with the Iraqi government and will continue to do so.

Is Hamas a terrorist organization?

No.

Is Hezbollah?

No. Let 's stop here. The majority - you don't need to ask me this question - the majority of the international community does not regard these two organizations to be a terrorist organization. Now the question that can be asked from the United States is why is *it* cooperating with organizations that it considers to be terrorists? Now the majority of the world do not believe that Hezbollah or Hamas are terrorist organizations. Hamas and Hezbollah are official political parties with seats in the parliament. Hamas won the majority, which the United States did not like and the United States has boycotted Hezbollah ministers in the Lebanese Parliament simply because it doesn't like them. Now the US or Israel labeling an organization "terrorist", that organization which is involved in legitimate resistance to foreign occupation, that organization does not then automatically become terrorist. Go look at the international community. This is the problem of the US equating itself with the international community again and again. But the question that needs to be asked is the behavior of the United States vis-à-vis organizations that it considers to be terrorists. Why is it cooperating with them?

Which organizations are you thinking of?

I'm referring to MEK [Mujahideen-e-Khalq], for instance, in Iraq that the United States is actually supporting and signing agreements with. Would the United States accept any country providing the fourth Geneva Convention protection to Al Qaeda which is another universally recognized terrorist organization? So terrorism should not become a label, a convenient label for dealing with your adversaries. You've got to have objective criteria. Apply those objective criteria and deal with them accordingly.

I was going to ask and you've answered the question partly: how then do you think the representation of these parties, Hamas and Hezbollah, in the governments of Palestine and Lebanon respectively, should be perceived in the US?

I think the US should simply accept what it claims to be championing and that is *democracy*. Why is it that when the Palestinian people vote one way, in what even US observers believed to be free and fair elections, the United States will go and punish the entire Palestinian population for the way they exercise democracy? Why is it punishing the Lebanese for exercising democracy or for wanting to exercise democracy? So if for the United States democracy is the victory of the people who support the United States, then they should call it that. Let's call a spade a spade.

What is the basis for the bilateral relationship that Iran has been pursuing with Venezuela? What other bilateral relationships are most important to Iran? And on what common values are they based?

Well, Iran is interested in bilateral relations with every country. And we've been very clear on that. Now there are commonalities in perceptions between Iran and a lot of other countries. We've had traditionally good relations with Latin America. We probably have the largest number of diplomatic representations of any Middle Eastern country in Central and South America.

Why is that?

Because Iran is big - Iran has always been a major country. And we have very large diplomatic representation in many countries. Now there are certain policies that Iran and Venezuela are following that are similar, certain perceptions of the global environment, of US adventurism, that Iran and Venezuela share. And these, in addition to the fact that we both produce oil and have similar interests in those areas, provide good grounds for cooperation between the two countries.

Why is it that Iranian President Ahmadinejad denies the Holocaust?

He never has denied the Holocaust. He has said why is it that Palestinians have to pay the price for a crime that was committed somewhere else? Did the Palestinians have any role in it? The Holocaust was an atrocity, it was a genocide, and not the only genocide. Genocides are taking place in today's world. We had the genocide in Rwanda. We've had genocide, ethnic cleansing, in Yugoslavia. But did anybody else become the victim of these genocides, who had nothing to do with them, in order to address the wrongs that were done to the victims? Why is it that the Palestinians have to pay the price for a horrible crime that was committed against the Jewish people by the *Europeans*. *Not* by the Muslims, *not* by Middle Easterners.

This is a question. Now some people do not like to answer this question so they use sentimental statements of Holocaust denier and statements of the sort. The question that needs to be asked is whether crimes that have been committed can in fact be the basis of committing other crimes. If the slogan is, "Never again," then it should be "Never again for anybody" not just for one group. Never again for Palestinians. Never again for Rwandese. Never again for Bosnian Muslims. Never again for Jews. Never again for anybody. And I simply do not understand why so much acrimony is being built around this simple question: What did the Palestinians have to do with the Holocaust?

Interview conducted by Nermeen Shaikh