

Overcoming Regional Challenges in the Middle East: An Iranian Perspective

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Richard Dalton

A warm welcome to you all. My name is Richard Dalton. We're extremely fortunate to have an hour in the company of His Excellency, Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif. I'm not going to introduce him to you – I think we've gotten to know his persistence, his dedication to the cause of finding diplomatic solutions to intractable problems. There are times in history when it does come down to the qualities of individuals, and this story of the last few years has owed so much to you. So on behalf of the Council and Director of Chatham House, and the staff of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, we are very pleased to see you here.

You may tweet in the course of the meeting using #CHEvents. Dr Zarif will talk for 15 or 20 minutes, if his voice holds up. Not only is this one of the hottest tickets in town today, but you have had to make several speeches already and I don't think this is the last one. So we shall do our best to assist you.

It's the first visit by an Iranian foreign minister for 12 years, I think. We look forward to further progress in the years ahead. Dr Zarif?

Mohammad Javad Zarif

Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim. A very good evening to all of you. It's a great pleasure to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you. Thank you, Sir Richard Dalton, for your gracious introduction. I'm pleased to be able to engage. I cannot continue without saying that it's interesting that I'm in Chatham House, but Chatham House Rules don't apply here. Anywhere we go, we say 'Chatham House Rules', and now we have something on the record.

Let me just try to put in perspective how we believe a change in approach may be able to address our problems in the region. We tested it once and it worked. Maybe it can work again.

Let me preface that by simply saying that we live in a different international environment, an international environment that we so readily call a globalized world. But we never seriously think about what it means that we live in a globalized world. From my perspective, living in a globalized world means that we can no longer enjoy benefits while others are suffering. As we cannot build a long and tall wall around our country so that we can protect our environment, but everybody else is producing greenhouse gases and warming the atmosphere, we cannot live in a prosperous situation when our neighbours are dying of poverty. We cannot live in security where everybody else is insecure. If anything, 11 September proved that even the greatest power on the face of the earth cannot guarantee the security of its citizens, if insecurity prevails and persists elsewhere in the world.

I think that's an important consideration that we should all have: that we either live in security together or perish in insecurity together. If we go beyond simply making a proclamation about globalized goods and globalized threats, and accept that as a change of paradigm, and then define problems with this new perspective rather than the old so-called zero-sum perspective, then we have opened the road to a resolution.

I think we did that in the nuclear case, albeit reluctantly, and albeit after having tried all the wrong options. Finally, we made ourselves believe that we needed to redefine the question. Since 2002, when the Iranian nuclear issue became a source of international concern, we've been trying to resolve the problem. But Iran insisted on its rights, so we wanted to have a full enrichment programme. The West wanted zero enrichment. The United States, President Obama, said it very honestly: his wish, if he could exercise his

wish, he would have removed every nut and bolt in the Iranian nuclear programme. So that was the wish, and our wish was to have a peaceful but unlimited enrichment programme.

The outcome was we went for a zero-sum game when we started these negotiations. I was a part of the original negotiations which went in 2005. When we started the process, Iran had less than 200 working centrifuges. The zero-centrifuge option gave the United States and the West 20,000 centrifuges. When we started this process, we had a +7 growth. We ended up in -6.8. Everybody lost. That is what we gain if we try to gain at the cost of the other side, at the expense of the other side.

We then started – I take a bit of credit for having proposed that we need to start defining our problem as a common problem. We did that in New York in 2013, in September, at a meeting, when we decided to consider the Iranian nuclear problem as a joint effort, not as an effort between two rivals. At the end of the day, we were able to address something that people believed was intractable, something that people believed could never be resolved without a war.

Unfortunately, some still do. Some still believe that this is not a resolution that they like to see, because their mindset is so basically, dogmatically focused on win-lose. So they cannot see the possibility that you can have an outcome in which nobody loses, in which everybody can claim a victory. Sometimes people ask the question: why is everybody celebrating? If they are celebrating, we should be mourning. That comes from that mentality – a win-lose, zero-sum mentality that if there is something that the other side can in fact be happy about, we must be worried about it.

But we made it. We made it work, we made it possible. We implemented it. Very few people believed that it would be implemented, on both sides. Very few Iranians believed that sanctions would be removed. At least, they have been removed on paper. I hope they will be removed in practice too. It may take some time. Ours was easier. The IAEA has verified it. But I think it is a good investment.

If we see this in a zero-sum perspective, it will not be a lasting solution. If we see this in a positive-sum perspective, then any effort that is put by the United States in complying with its commitments, even though it may not derive immediate economic benefits from it, is an insurance policy for the agreement. If they see it in that way, it will again become a mutually gainful exercise rather than a lose-win situation.

We had hoped that the new paradigm could also apply to our region. We still believe that particularly the situation in Syria and in Yemen and in Iraq and in Bahrain and in Lebanon can be viewed from a positive-sum paradigm, from a win-win scenario. Because we have tried the lose-lose scenario and hundreds of thousands of people have died or become homeless, or are coming to Europe as refugees, in addition to the neighbouring countries. Five million are internally displaced. In Yemen, almost 11 months of senseless bombardment has produced almost no results, except for aggravation of animosity and hate.

Is it possible to look at it from a non-zero-sum perspective? Is it possible for us to seek accommodation rather than exclusion? We believe that our interest in the region is not contradictory to the interests of other regional powers. I mean, Saudi Arabia. We do not believe that Iran and Saudi Arabia necessarily need to define their interests in the region as mutually exclusive, unless we decide to do so ourselves. That's a problem for which we can only blame ourselves. If we define the situation in the region, if we define our interests in the region – which in my view is unfortunately the case, for Saudi Arabia – that the interests of Saudi Arabia is for Iran not to be an active participant in this region, then you cannot have accommodation, because that's a zero-sum perspective.

But if you have serious interests, there are a lot of negatives, unfortunately, that can bind us together right now. I believe ISIS, as much as some may consider it a bargaining chip, unfortunately – a leverage – is a disastrous enemy for everybody. That is something that can unite us all. An enemy that we can all see our interests entwined to contain and to hopefully eradicate soon, which is not going to be easy.

There are a lot of other possibilities. I have written for many years about a security and cooperation arrangement in the Persian Gulf area. Common principles that can bind us. We all need the free flow of oil, freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf. That's a common good that binds us together. We all need security in the region. We all need prosperity in the region. Even coming to technical issues, the Persian Gulf – both on the northern shores as well as on the southern shores – is coming up with a huge number of nuclear reactors. Nuclear safety can be something that can bind us together. We can all redefine the problem, redefine the paradigm, and look at this from a positive-sum perspective. Then you can see that issues, problems that seem to be impossible, hurdles that we thought were insurmountable, will become possible targets for collective achievement.

I think that change of paradigm is a necessity for our global community. We need to understand that although people may differ, we can resolve difficult issues through diplomacy. And we did. With 37 years of baggage between Iran and the United States, we were able to at least resolve this particular issue, which was probably keeping the two sides in a confrontational situation, which had the possibility of getting even worse. If we could resolve that with a country that we have been estranged from for 37 years, we can certainly resolve it with people we call brothers and sisters.

That will only require us to change our perspective, to change our paradigm. I believe that is doable and we in Iran are prepared to do it, sooner better than later. Thank you.

Richard Dalton

Perfect. Thank you very much indeed.