

Book Review

Mr. Ambassador: Conversation with Mohammad Javad Zarif – Former Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations

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Abstract

Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, former Iranian Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the United Nations (New York), is now the Foreign Minister, and quite a celebrity, inside the country and at the international level. Mr. Ambassador: Conversation with Mohammad Javad Zarif – Former Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations is a book written by Mohammad Mehdi Raji, and is a product of more than 40 hours of exchange. Zarif's detailed and patient replies to the interviewer's numerous questions, portrays a good picture of the personality, line of thinking, the ever-present smile and even frequent hearty laughs. "Mr. Ambassador" contains a rich litany of substantial material in a number of fields and at several levels. At the most rudimentary level, it lays out the life journey of Javad Zarif, and in deeper levels, it focuses on his multilateralism. Zarif's objective and candid is extremely educational. For sure he is a go-getter, you may disagree with him, but he is a man to respect and even love; a man for all seasons for Iranian diplomacy in an age of the supremacy of individual-collective human failings and even sheer lunacy. This article reviews the book Mr. Ambassador on a more personal level, and gives deeper insights both on the narrative, and on Javad Zarif's real life.

Keywords: Javad Zarif, Mr. Ambassador, UN, Iran

** Retired career diplomat, former ECOSOC Ambassador to the UN.

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**Mr. Ambassador: Conversation with Mohammad Javad
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Introduction

Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, former Iranian Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the United Nations (New York), is now the Foreign Minister, and quite a celebrity, inside the country and at the international level. The ever-smiling chubby Minister, usually referred to as Dr. Zarif or otherwise called, in full Californian style, by his first name –Javad – by close and friends and colleagues, including his peers and counterparts, as far apart, politically, as British Baroness Ashton and American John Kerry, has also been a highly popular Facebook frequenter among Iranians of all walks. His Tweeter Page, since he took the ministerial portfolio in August 2013 as a member of President Rouhani’s team, has

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also lent a helping hand. He has been the first Iranian Minister to appear on Facebook and Tweeter. He used to post, for quite some time during the protracted nuclear talks with the 5+1 countries, reports on his high-wire political-diplomatic missions and talks. Early on during his ministerial portfolio, such Facebook and Tweeter activism, gave rise to quite noisy campaigns in Iran, in political circles as well as in the conservative/fundamentalist press and news outlets, by a host of colorful detractors, whose unhappiness with the successful launching of the nuclear talks could hardly be disguised as the real source of ire and fault-finding. It has to be admitted, though, that some conservative circles in Iran oppose use of Facebook and Tweeter services on “genuine” ideological grounds and fundamental difficulties with the modern world and its manifestations and means – even if simultaneously derided and found outdated and anachronistic by a host of other circles, currents and forces within the extant political and power structure, let alone the bulk of the society at large.

The “Conversation” with the former envoy and the current minister came out a month or so before the presidential elections in June 2013 produced the totally unexpected victory of Dr. Hassan Rouhani with a tally more than the total votes of the other five conservative/fundamentalist contenders put together. That surprise outcome brought in its wake, by August 2013, another almost equally surprising outcome; then retired Ambassador Zarif who had been out of political limelight by choice and had preoccupied himself with teaching at the School of International Relations (SIR) and writing on multilateral diplomacy ** was nominated as the President’s choice for the all-important and much-coveted foreign ministry portfolio. His well-prepared and analytical statement, on his proposed platform and program of action, at the Parliament (Islamic Consultative Assembly) during confirmation process ***, matched with an equally forceful and charming oratorical art of speaking – a hallmark of a seasoned diplomat turned politician – all at once gave the previously quiet former envoy national, and also international, high profile – which has been kept on the news forefront ever since. The successful completion of the nuclear talks back in early summer 2015, and all through the bumpy roller-coaster drama of the deal’s endorsement by the United Nations Security Council, confirmation by the US Senate, acceptance by the Iranian government, IAEA verification, and finally its implementation, not to mention the equally

nerve-racking ups and downs in the process of actual implementation of an intrinsically difficult and multi-faceted agreement with both somewhat expected as well as totally unexpected complications, have kept him in the limelight.

The Book, as indicated in the introduction by Mr. Raji – the interviewer/author – is the product of 40 hours of exchange, spanning a period between Winter 2011 and Spring 2012, at Dr. Zarif’s office at the School of International Relations, associated with the Iranian Foreign Ministry. The few-page, short introduction provides a rich, succinct picture of the pages to follow. I have to admit, quite upfront, that reviewing a book of this genre, especially if not organized in chapters on specific topics or periods of time, is very difficult. There is a huge reservoir of interesting – and also important – information, and even exciting stories, that is practically impossible to get a good grasp of in the inevitably limited space of a book review of sorts. That said, the very first point to register is to point out is I have personally known and worked with Dr. Zarif – Javad – since November 1982 at the Permanent Mission in New York – buddies, let’s say - when we both worked as “local employees” – or otherwise referred to as “advisors”, a more respectable title which carried some “diplomatic” status and weight in those early days of the post-revolutionary period when “young blood” – in this case, graduates from well-respected American universities – had found their way into the totally unfamiliar diplomatic life in the Big Apple and the dizzying world of international diplomacy.

Zarif’s detailed and patient replies to the interviewer’s numerous questions, starting with his years of adolescence in a traditional well-to-do religious family up to the time of conversation at SIR, as underlined in so many words in the introduction by Mr. Raji, portrays a good picture of the personality, mood, pattern and line of thinking, professional conduct, and of course, the ever-present smile and even frequent hearty laughs, which all of his close associates and colleagues – buddies – are so intimately familiar with. His family background and upbringing and personal traits since he took office have received wide media attention and coverage, especially in commercial Western press, and also in some more serious reports – or even in pieces by serious reporters. In my personal estimation, curiosity in such traits and behavior of celebrities – of all walks,

including diplomats and politicians – is not totally insignificant or even irrelevant but certainly not of central concern to the observers – much less – actors in the realm of politics, diplomacy, and international relations. One has to go beyond what easily meets the eye, dig deeper in the narrative, and even perhaps keep an eye on the finer nuances and implicit messages. As it always happens, the “un-said” might be of more import than the “said”!

“Mr. Ambassador” contains a rich litany of substantial material in a number of fields and at several levels. At the most rudimentary level, it lays out the life journey of Javad Zarif up to a few months before unexpectedly becoming foreign minister – as much a surprise to himself as to the Iranian body politic, thanks to the rather weird outcome – if that is the right adjective to use – of the June 2013 presidential elections, which as I heard later from pundits and analysts was not deemed within Rouhani’s reach, much less secure grasp, perhaps except for the last few days of the election campaign when his unexpectedly bold and scathing attack on the murky platforms of his rivals polarized the situation and mobilized the largely apathetic segments of the populace still under the long shadows of the controversial June 2009 elections.

At a second level, the book unfurls the story of how a young run-of-the-mill anti-Shah, pro-Khomeini Muslim student activist in his early twenties in the States enters the post-revolutionary diplomatic apparatus; it also traces his rather rapid rise from the “non-diplomatic” status of an “advisor” in 1982 to the rank of the New York Mission’s charge d’affaires in 1986-88, to deputy permanent representative as of 1989, to deputy foreign minister for international and legal affairs in 1993, and finally to the post of permanent representative in 2002 – from which he returned home in 2007 during Ahmadinejad’s tenure and applied for early retirement; itself an interesting part of the book laying out the stark differences between Zarif’s outlook and analysis with the dominant raw, un-diplomatic, and aggressive rabble-rousing official discourse and policy at the time. The “Conversation”, as already indicated, takes place during the latter part of his post-retirement period. The details of this 25-year period of diplomatic work provides an interesting read, not only for the general readers, both Iranian and others, but also for those directly engaged in the activities of the Iranian foreign service, including myself who have

been closely cooperating with him for many long years in various fields, on different issues, and in a number of international fora and arenas. There is so much to be learned - primarily for the general readers and also pundits interested in research and history – from the personal account of an insider about the nitty-gritty of diplomatic work at the Mission in New York, and more importantly, at the United Nations, especially in the post-1980 difficult and eventful times of the 8-year-long Iraq-Iran War. His memories of the hard times then, under the circumstances of “feeling lonely at the UN” – unjustly though – and international ostracism and pressures of all sorts, including a decidedly pro-Iraq Security Council, sound quite bitter, even if peppered at times with a sense of wit and even humor. “This too shall pass” was the feeling then among us - as so beautifully reflected in a famous Persian poem – and it did, for us at the UN and for all of us in a whole lot of other ways in the bigger situations, which Zarif recounts in a retrospective look with a touch of cool-headed analysis and yet a perceptible trace of diplomatically-suppressed uneasiness and discomfiture at the high prices paid for misperceptions, wrong judgments, misguided policies, and what have you, and during different periods. His harshest criticism, as would be expected, relates to the years Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was in office, which, among quite serious damages emanating from wrong and childish outlooks and policies, the most experienced and capable cadres across the public service institutions, including at the Foreign Ministry, were either simply driven out or pushed to the margin. Zarif’s return from New York, at a time that the Mission and work at the UN needed a man of his caliber, is just one example – now narrated in detail in the “Conversation”.

Zarif’s objective and candid, and yet measured, account of the wide gamut of challenges he has had to address and deal with, on mission and at the headquarters, working with a number of ministers of differing colors, disposition, professional competence and conduct, and needless to say, performance sheet – yet to be written - is extremely educational, whether talking about a routine, daily matter at the Mission or matters of policy to be pursued at the UN and the inescapable usually nerve-racking job of effective coordination with the headquarters known so well to diplomats everywhere – and I presume, of all times. The usually subtle and brief allusions to these challenges, and sometimes quite detailed discussion of issues and

situations in front of the country's foreign relations and policy, throw eye-opening light on the crux of the diplomatic *métier* in general and multilateral diplomacy in particular, especially once put in the context of a still unfolding revolutionary state and the cold requirements of how to do business in the tumultuous days of the 1980s – and the decades to follow with their own developments and peculiarities. This, in my view, is the most important aspect of the “Conversation” with the former envoy. Through a generally in-depth discussion of his personal involvement – in different capacities and diplomatic levels – in so many situations and issues in Iran's foreign relations and policy, mostly in the multilateral field, and also even in regional crises, Zarif depicts a realistic picture of the dynamics of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and its challenges and ups and downs during a 25-year period. As pointed out by the interviewer, Zarif had made it clear to him that he would not discuss any and all issues, on the nuclear dossier or otherwise, that he considers a matter of national security.

The picture, put together in this personal account and analysis, is neither rosy nor black; rather, a blend of a narrative reflecting the reality of the actual policies along with a not-so-subtle critical outlook of positions, policies and measures at odd with his own expert analysis. On discussing this particular aspect, he has not minced words; he alludes on numerous occasions to the differences between his analysis as an expert – graduate and professor of international relations (IR) - with the official position and policy, and hastens to underline his commitment to faithful pursual and execution of the official line and policy - as a loyal career diplomat is expected to do. What he told the Majlis (Parliament) in August 2013, which he has repeated on a number of similar occasions since, was to drive the point home that notwithstanding his personal analysis, position and preference as an academic and expert in the field – which he has had the practice of offering while the policy is being made – he feels politically obliged to faithfully follow the official line and policy once decided upon by the state apparatus, which I might venture to add after the ultimate position, preference and view of Ayatollah Khamene, the Supreme Leader, has been pronounced on the matter. Subtle, unspoken moral reservations and trepidation, I am afraid, is a different matter, and goes all around for public servants everywhere, especially in Iran where, due to deeply-embedded cultural traits and

also extant political ambiance, politicians tend to remain tight-lipped even after leaving office – somehow a quite differing practice from many other countries, especially in the West.

Another aspect one would detect in Zarif's generally straightforward – and at times, tongue-in-cheek - narrative concerns the analysis, by a nuanced insider, of how the Islamic Republic's foreign policy in various fields and areas has taken shape, developed, and executed. The details he puts forth on so many issues, situations, and policies is indeed rich and panoramic; it shows the gradual growing understanding and appreciation of real situations in foreign relations over time, and gaining maturity in making policy and its execution – with the obvious exception of Ahmadinejad's 8-year tenure. He does not shy away from criticizing rusty bureaucracy, inept administrators, archaic, inflexible structures, and even admitting, in so many words, that “we are still in need of much improvement.” His rather extensive expose, in response to different questions, on various phases of the Iraq-Iran War and how it played out at the UN/Security Council adds much more nuance to what is already in print in Iran on the conflict. This is particularly true about the critical stage towards the end of the war, when he was the Mission's charge d'affaires (1986-1988). As an expert at the time at the headquarters dealing with the situation and in full picture of the liaison with the Mission – including what Javad and the colleagues in New York had to deal with on a daily basis - almost after 26 years I still find the narrative of interest – even some interesting new pieces of data, here and there. His side of the story, at least in certain respects, brings out enlightening fresh insight into the process of why – and how - the Security Council resolution 598, with somewhat differing provisions than the other seven resolutions prior to it, took shape. He is also quite candid about the rationale for the twists and turns in policy and official pronouncements until its acceptance by late Ayatollah Khomeini a year after its adoption, and how its various provisions were – or were not – implemented.

The same approach is visible in his discussion of numerous other issues and situations while he was deputy minister for international and legal affairs for a whole decade. The catalogue of measures introduced at the international department during his tenure, both of structural-bureaucratic nature or more importantly in the area of substance of multilateral activity in various fields– some of which have been criticized by a spectrum of political lines; right, left and

center – is impressive. Zarif’s account in this regard shows the growing complexity in the department’s technical comprehension of the wide gamut of issues involved as well as of growing technical expertise in assisting the process of policy-making at the national level as well as in effective pursual of the adopted policies at the relevant international/multilateral fora. The limited space here, and the limited scope of the review, would not allow an expansive elucidation of the examples in the book – let alone sharing the personal story in some of them. That will be left to the keen, curious reader to fish around. I have no doubt Persian-speaking non-Iranians, diplomats and pundits in particular, will enjoy reading the book, will learn a whole lot about the Iranian psyche, political culture, ins and outs of diplomacy in action, and much more unknowns to look into and explore. Zarif’s story of the ups and downs and twists and turns in foreign policy-making and execution in the Islamic Republic during the period under review – the larger part of the post-1979 period – should be considered a good contribution to a much-needed veritable narrative on so many issues and situations. As already observed in my review of his earlier academic/theoretical work, the real, juicy part of the diplomat’s full story can be related either in a “post-retirement memoirs and certainly in less challenging times” or more probably perhaps never!

The fifth, and the final, aspect I turn to in the book relates to multilateralism proper – which, in my personal estimation, as a former multilateral diplomat – represents the most significant dimension of the 40-hour discussion. Zarif, the envoy in the book and subsequently the minister, is a converted multilateralist to the core. A quarter of a century direct engagement with the multilateral world, supported by a good, solid theoretical (academic) understanding of international relations and international law, have produced a man with very a large bag of theoretical and practical experience, on which he has been drawing lavishly since he assumed the ministerial portfolio, as best manifested in the course of the 22-month-long nuclear negotiations. In so far as multilateralism and multilateral enterprise are concerned, I consider the “Conversation” as a practical sequel to his previous academic work in the field (mentioned above). In the earlier work, Zarif (and his co-author) had laid out the book’s mission as trying “to present a realistic picture of both theoretical and practical aspects of multilateral diplomacy in international institutions and organizations,

and also tries to answer the key question of how to make sense of multilateral diplomacy – in both aspects – in international relations.” The book under review shows how Zarif, as a career diplomat of the Islamic Republic, has tried, in action, and while haggling in various ways and forms with a host of challenges and constraints, to make sense of multilateralism and multilateral diplomacy and pursue the national interests of his country to the best of his ability. It is not only the book that attests to his success in his enterprise, a multitude of friends, colleagues, students, peers, and counterparts, in Iran, at the UN, inclusive of the 38th Floor, and elsewhere across the world, do not but have praise for a knowledgeable, experienced, seasoned diplomat who appears, by all accounts, to have brought all this to “Getting to Yes”! – where his brilliant performance is on record, as much while sitting at the Chair of the General Assembly’s Sixth Committee/Legal Committee (1991-92) as in so many other engagements under national hat or intergovernmental stewardship.

In my review of Zarif’s earlier academic work **** - which I characterized as a “celebration of cherished multilateralism beyond sheer illusion and far removed from debilitating cynicism” – it was observed that the central message of the book was that we in the world, all of us, on both sides of the development divide, “are better off with the UN and multilateral diplomacy than without them.” Looking at the state of the dangerous world we are living in, at least in our neighborhood stretching from North Africa all the way to the Indian Sub-continent, I believe, the imperative of collective search for our common problems and predicaments – the very crux of what multilateralism/multilateral enterprise stand for – is more acute than ever in the past. Looking at the marathon nuclear negotiations, of course from afar and simply as a curious observer, all I can add here is that, all along the bumpy process, I tended to reassure myself that my dear friend/colleague Javad - the ever-smiling tough negotiator/consensus builder diplomat turned politician - with his principles and commitment, realism, objectivity, selfless dedication, impeccable discipline, and hard work, was destined to lead the intrinsically difficult negotiations to ultimate success. And, he did. For sure he is a go-getter, you may disagree with him, but he is a man to respect and even love; a man for all seasons for Iranian diplomacy in an age of the supremacy of individual-collective human failings and even sheer lunacy

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- ** **Amb. M. Javad Zarif (PhD) and Amb. S. M. Kazem Sajjadpour (PhD)**, *Multilateral Diplomacy: Theory and Practice of Regional and International Organizations* (2009, Tehran, in Persian, 3 Volumes.
- *** Dr. Zarif's article in the May-June 2014 issue of *Foreign Affairs – What Really Iran Wants: ...* - is based on his presentation at the Majlis.
- **** *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs (IRFA)*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 181-196 (accessible at www.csrjournals.ir)

