



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

How Iran Sees the Path to Peace

The Islamic Republic Is Open to Negotiations— Including With America

BY MOHAMMAD JAVAD ZARIF December 2, 2024

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On July 30, Masoud Pezeshkian was sworn in as Iran's new president. Mere hours after the ceremony, Ismail Haniyeh, the former prime minister of the Palestinian National Authority and chairman of the Hamas political bureau, was assassinated by Israel in a guesthouse near the presidential complex. Haniyeh had been invited to attend the inauguration, and his killing on Iranian soil cast a shadow over the proceedings. It also previewed the challenges Pezeshkian will face in pursuing his foreign policy ambitions.

But Pezeshkian is well prepared to handle all the difficulties that will arise over the coming years. Pezeshkian recognizes that the world is transitioning into a post-polar era where global actors can simultaneously cooperate and compete across different areas. He has adopted a flexible foreign policy, prioritizing diplomatic engagement and constructive dialogue rather than relying on outdated paradigms. His vision for Iran's security is holistic,

encompassing both traditional defense capabilities and the enhancement of human security through improvements in the economic, social, and environmental sectors.

Pezeshkian wants stability and economic development in the Middle East. He wants to collaborate with neighboring Arab countries and to strengthen relations with Iran's allies. But he also wants to engage constructively with the West. His government is ready to manage tensions with the United States, which has also just elected a new president. Pezeshkian hopes for equal-footed negotiations regarding the nuclear deal—and potentially more.

Yet as Pezeshkian has made clear, Iran will not capitulate to unreasonable demands. The country will always stand up to Israeli aggression. And it will be undeterred from protecting its national interests.

POLITICS IS LOCAL

This is a historic moment for stability that the world should not let slip. Tehran certainly won't. After over two centuries of vulnerability, Iran—under the leadership of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—has finally proven that it can defend itself against any external aggression. To take that achievement to the next level, Iran, under its new administration, plans to improve relations with neighboring states to help create a regional order that promotes stability, wealth, and security. Our region has been plagued for far too long by foreign interference, wars, sectarian conflicts, terrorism, drug trafficking, water scarcity, refugee crises, and environmental degradation. To tackle these challenges, we will work to pursue economic integration, energy security, freedom of navigation, environmental protection, and interfaith dialogue.

Eventually, these efforts could lead to a new regional arrangement that reduces the Persian Gulf's reliance on external powers and encourages

stakeholders to address conflicts through dispute resolution mechanisms. To do so, the region's countries may pursue treaties, create institutions, enact policies, and pass legislative measures. Iran and its neighbors can start by mimicking the Helsinki process, which led to the formation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. They can use the never-implemented mandate that the United Nations Security Council gave to the UN secretary-general in 1987, under Resolution 598. That resolution, which ended the Iran-Iraq War, called on the secretary-general to consult with Iran, Iraq, and other regional states to explore measures that could enhance security and stability in the Persian Gulf. The Pezeshkian administration believes this provision can serve as the legal basis for comprehensive regional talks.

Of course, there are obstacles that Iran and its neighbors must overcome to foster a peaceful, integrated regional order. Some differences with its neighbors have deep-rooted origins, shaped by varying interpretations of history. Others arise from misconceptions, mainly rooted in poor or insufficient communication. Still others are political constructs implanted by external forces, such as allegations concerning the nature and objective of Iran's nuclear program.

But the Persian Gulf must move on. Iran's vision aligns with the interests of Arab countries, all of which also want a more stable and prosperous region for the sake of future generations. Iran and the Arab world should thus be able to work through their differences. Iran's support for Palestinian resistance could help kick-start such cooperation. The Arab world, after all, is united with Iran in its support for restoring the rights of the Palestinian people.

HITTING RESET

After more than 20 years of economic restrictions, the United States and its Western allies should recognize that Iran does not respond to pressure. Their intensifying coercive measures have consistently backfired. At the height of Washington's most recent maximum-pressure campaign—and just days after Israel assassinated Iran's leading nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh—Iran's parliament passed a law directing the government to rapidly advance its nuclear program and reduce international monitoring. The number of centrifuges in Iran has increased dramatically since 2018—when U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal—and enrichment levels have skyrocketed from 3.5 percent to over 60 percent. It is hard to imagine any of this would have happened if the West had not abandoned its cooperative approach. In this regard, Trump, who will take office again in January, and Washington's partners in Europe have themselves to blame for Iran's continued nuclear progress.

Instead of increasing pressure on Iran, the West should pursue positive-sum solutions. The nuclear deal provides a unique example, and the West should look to revive it. But to do so, it must take concrete and practical actions—including political, legislative, and mutually beneficial investment measures—to make sure Iran can benefit economically from the agreement, as was promised. Should Trump decide to take such steps, then Iran is willing to have a dialogue which would benefit both Tehran and Washington.

On a broader scale, Western policymakers must acknowledge that strategies aimed at pitting Iran and Arab countries against one another by supporting initiatives such as the so-called Abraham Accords (which normalized ties between various Arab countries and Israel) have proven ineffective in the past and will not succeed in the future. The West needs a more constructive approach—one that takes advantage of Iran's hard-earned confidence, accepts Iran as an integral part of regional stability, and seeks collaborative

solutions to shared challenges. Such shared challenges could even prompt Tehran and Washington to engage in conflict management rather than exponential escalation. All countries, Iran and the United States included, have a mutual interest in addressing the underlying causes of regional unrest.

That means all countries have an interest in stopping the Israeli occupation. They should realize that the fighting and fury will continue until the occupation ends. Israel may think it can permanently triumph over the Palestinians, but it cannot; a people who have nothing to lose cannot be defeated. Organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas are grassroots liberation movements that have emerged in response to occupation and will continue to play a significant role as long as the underlying conditions persist—which is to say until the Palestinians' right to self-determination is realized. There can be intermediate steps, including immediate cease-fires in Lebanon and Gaza.

Iran can continue to play a constructive role in ending the current humanitarian nightmare in Gaza and work with the international community to pursue a lasting and democratic solution to the conflict. Iran will agree to any solution acceptable to Palestinians, but our government believes that the best way out of this century-long ordeal would be a referendum in which everyone living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—and Palestinians driven to diaspora in the twentieth century (along with their descendants) would be able to determine a viable future system of governance. This is in line with international law and would build on the success of South Africa, where an apartheid system was transformed into a viable democratic state.

Constructive engagement with Iran, coupled with a commitment to multilateral diplomacy, can help build a framework for global security and stability in the Persian Gulf. It can thereby reduce tensions and foster long-term prosperity and development. This shift is crucial for overcoming entrenched conflicts. Although today's Iran is confident that it can fight to defend itself, it wants peace, and it is determined to build a better future. Iran can be an able and willing partner, so long as its partnerships are based on mutual respect and equal footing. Let us not miss this opportunity for a new beginning.

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