Middle East war

Former Iranian foreign minister floats plan for peace with US

Mohammad Javad Zarif is first prominent regime figure to put forward detailed suggestions on what Tehran could accept

Destroyed buildings in the town of Vahdat in Karaj, Iran, on Friday © Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images

Andrew England in London and **Najmeh Bozorgmehr** in Tehran

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A former Iranian foreign minister has floated a “comprehensive peace” plan to end the US-Israeli war against Iran, in which Tehran would accept strict limits on its nuclear programme and reopen the Strait of Hormuz in return for sanctions relief and compensation.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, who served as Iran’s top diplomat from 2013 to 2021, also said that the US and Iran should agree to a non-aggression pact and initiate “economic interactions”, including Iran inviting American companies into its oil sector.

It is the first time a prominent regime figure has floated such a detailed outline suggesting what Tehran could accept as part of a deal to end the conflict and what it could be willing to offer the US since the war erupted five weeks ago.

Former president Hassan Rouhani this week urged Iran to find an “honourable” end to the war, arguing that it was “the realisation of Israel’s dream to drag the US and the west into a war with Iran”.

Zarif — who, along with Rouhani, negotiated the 2015 nuclear accord that Iran signed with the Obama administration and other world powers — has no official role and has been on the periphery of power for the past five years. He is part of the marginalised reformist camp within the ruling establishment.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, right, with then US secretary of state John Kerry in 2015 © Rick Wilking/AFP/Getty Images

Since the war erupted, hardline factions, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have extended their hold over power, analysts say.

A regime insider said that Zarif was expressing his personal views and it would be the military leadership that determined the direction of the war. Some hardliners criticised the former diplomat for floating a peace plan.

“Diplomacy with Trump is meaningless,” the insider said. However, he suggested Tehran could engage with European governments, saying “they can give the European Union a mandate to talk to Iran on behalf of European and Persian Gulf states”.

Writing in Foreign Affairs magazine, Zarif repeated the Islamic regime’s claim that Iran was “winning” the war, despite the US’s and Israel’s massive bombardment.

He said some Iranians wanted to “continue fighting until the aggressors are adequately punished, rather than to search for a negotiated ending”.

But he said that while continuing to fight “might be psychologically satisfying, it will lead only to the further destruction of civilian lives and infrastructure”.

Iranian leaders have repeatedly said they will not end the conflict with a ceasefire — a stance echoed by Zarif — and want a comprehensive agreement that finishes the war and assures Tehran that neither the US nor Israel would renew their attacks.

They have also said Tehran would want compensation for war damage.

A damaged bridge in Karaj, Iran © Vahid Salemi/AP

Over the past two weeks, President Donald Trump has said Washington and Tehran were close to a deal after the US passed a 15-point plan to Iran to end the conflict.

Iran responded with its own proposals, with diplomats saying both sides presented maximalist conditions.

Tehran has denied that there are formal negotiations, but Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi this week said he had communicated with US envoy Steve Witkoff. Messages are also being exchanged between Tehran and Washington through mediators.

However, Trump warned this week that the US would escalate the conflict, saying it would hit Iran “extremely hard over the next two to three weeks” and “bring them back to the Stone Ages”.

He has said he wants to prevent Iran from ever acquiring nuclear weapons and wants it to give up its ability to enrich uranium. Tehran denies seeking a weapon but insists it has a right to enrich as a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty.

Zarif said Iran could commit to never seeking nuclear weapons and to down-blending its stockpile of enriched uranium to below 3.67 per cent purity — the level agreed in the 2015 accord, which Trump abandoned in his first term.

The US would have to simultaneously lift all sanctions on the republic, while Iran would place "all its nuclear facilities under permanent international monitoring," he said.

The US and Iran were holding talks on the nuclear programme days before Trump and Netanyahu launched the war.

Zarif said that to start the peace process, all parties should agree to stop fighting and take reciprocal steps.

"Iran, in co-operation with Oman, would have to ensure the safe passage of commercial vessels through the Strait of Hormuz.

"But American officials must permit the Strait of Hormuz to be open for Iran, too," he said, referring to the US allowing the republic to trade freely.

Iranian attacks have slowed the flow of traffic through the strait — through which about a fifth of the world's oil and gas normally passes — to a trickle, and struck energy facilities across the Gulf.

Zarif made no mention of Iran accepting curbs on its missile programme or support for regional militants, something that Gulf states — which have borne the brunt of the regime's attacks — would want included in any agreement.

He said Iranian opposition to talks was "understandable" and any diplomatic push faces huge challenges. But Zarif said the republic would "ultimately be better off if it can end the war sooner rather than later".

"Prolonged hostility will cause a greater loss of precious lives and irreplaceable resources without actually altering the existing stalemate, particularly as the United States and Israel keep targeting Iranian infrastructure," he said.

"If the United States packs up and leaves before the two sides reach a deal, Iran will not be able to cash in on all the proceeds of its valiant resistance to Washington's aggression."

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