



LUND UNIVERSITY

Review: Mr. Ambassador, A Dialogue with Mohammad-Javād Zarif

Behravesht, Maysam

Published in:
Iranian Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/00210862.2017.1286711](https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1286711)

2017

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Behravesht, M. (2017). Review: Mr. Ambassador, A Dialogue with Mohammad-Javād Zarif. *Iranian Studies*, 50(4), 642-647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1286711>

Total number of authors:
1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

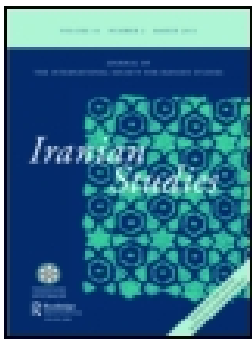
Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



Review

Maysam Behravesht

To cite this article: Maysam Behravesht (2017): Review, Iranian Studies

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1286711>



Published online: 03 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Review

Āqā-ye Safir: Goftogu bā Mohammad-Javād Zarif, Safir-e Pishin-e Irān dar Sāzemān-e Mellal-e Mottahed [Mr. Ambassador: A Dialogue with Mohammad-Javād Zarif, the Former Ambassador of Iran to the United Nations], Mohammad-Mehdi Rāji (ed.), Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 2013, ISBN 978-964-185-298-8 (paperback), 368 pp.

One of still predominant subjects in the academic treatment of international relations, or what has more specifically come to be known as “foreign policy analysis” (FPA), is the continuity or change a given state actor experiences in terms of formulating or constructing its ties with other actors and the agential as well as structural factors that prompt such developments and trends.¹ While elements of continuity and change are usually present simultaneously in the foreign policy trajectories of states, few actors maintain a foreign policy as prominently characterized by a unique combination of paradoxes, ambivalences, antinomies and ambiguities as that of Iran.

In this light, *Āqā-ye Safir* is an insightful work, accessible to the average reader but particularly suitable for an interested observer who has some basic background knowledge of the subject in question. It is not a “memoir” or “oral history” work seeking to narrate a key politician’s memories, successes or failures, but rather a dialogical attempt to put the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy into historical perspective and understand its dynamics within the wider context of Iran’s historical experience as a nation-state. In total, the book constitutes a forty-hour-long interview with Mohammad-Javād Zarif, Iran’s

foreign minister under President Hassan Rouhani, that took place in fits and starts in his faculty office at the Iranian foreign ministry's School of International Relations from early 2010 to early 2012. Despite lacking a table of contents or even an index of names at the end, it consists of two major parts: first, the reconstruction of events and memories with a "pathological" attitude, and second, the discussion of relevant "theoretical" issues in international relations and foreign policy making (p. 11). Finally, the work seems to have been informed or otherwise influenced by a university course on "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy" taught by Sayyed Mohammad-Kāzem Sajjād-pur, a former Iranian diplomat and close colleague of Zarif's who has interestingly co-authored a book in Persian with him on multilateral diplomacy.²

The author places Zarif on a par with such renowned and progressive politicians of pre-revolutionary Iran as Mirzā Hossein Khān Sepahsālār (1828–81), Mohammad-Ali Forughī (1877-1942), Ahmad Qavām (1876-1955), and Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882-1967), who in his words "owe the bulk of their political fame to their prudence and achievements in the realm of diplomacy and foreign policy making" (p. 7). While such a comparison may sound premature, as the long-term impact of Zarif's attainments in office including the landmark Iran nuclear deal of July 2015 has yet to be seen, it is not totally irrelevant given the mere scale and scope of the job he did, namely engaging Iran as a theoretically revisionist actor on the one hand with six world powers on the other and finally managing to make the whole venture somewhat meaningful. It is a kind of comparison where historical symbolism matters more than political reality. Thus, investigating Zarif's professional conduct and career trajectory as a diplomat, he claims, is "one of the best methods of understanding Iran's foreign policy" (p. 8). Rouhani's foreign minister is described as a "serious, principled, organized, and persistent" diplomat (p. 8), while the author also makes a point of his friendship with Henry Kissinger—a former US secretary of state and acclaimed "realist" theoretician of international relations—and in particular of the latter's famous note "To a respected adversary" on a copy of the book *Diplomacy*³ he gave the Iranian diplomat as a gift upon Zarif's departure from the UN in 2007. "I conducted the conversation to educate myself, so I did not try to persuade him of any particular approach, except my basic theme was that, on the basis of national interests, there is no conflict between Iran and the United States. Everything beyond that is ideological," Kissinger recalls of their meetings.⁴ Also, Zarif's tribute to his mother's "authority" and exaltation of the extent to which his views have been influenced by his wife (pp. 53-54) may be of particular interest to those FPA scholars focusing on the role of women and gender norms in international politics.⁵

He started his foreign policy career as a "non-official and local employee" in Iran's delegation to the United Nations in New York while pursuing a master's degree and later a PhD in international relations at the University of Denver, which he completed in 1988 with a thesis on "Self-Defense in International Law and Policy".⁶ During that stint, he played an important role in "reclaiming Iran's rights" (p. 9) as part of the negotiations that led to the 598 UN Resolution, ending the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Later on, having successfully facilitated talks between bitterly contending parties during the 2001 Bonn Conference on the future of Afghanistan—after the US-led overthrow of the Taliban—Zarif served as Iran's ambassador at the UN for

almost five years. After resigning the post in 2007, he withdrew to his academic corner in north Tehran and devoted most of his time to research, lecturing, and supervising students. In fact, two years into Ahmadinejad's presidency, he had almost been rendered politically ineffectual in the face of an unsympathetic government at home, and could also jeopardize his international image and successful track record as a well-reputed diplomat trying to defend the excesses of a hardline administration.

Some parts of the book might appear superficial and unsubstantial. Zarif speaks in the capacity of a "former official," but quite obviously restrains himself on a number of occasions when it generally comes to scrutinizing the egregious foreign policy mistakes of the past, not simply because he is a veteran diplomat and thus very diplomatic by training, but also in anticipation, it seems, of getting back into office and having to work with those very detractors in power, which he ultimately did in mid-2013 as the foreign minister and top nuclear negotiator in Rouhani's "centrist" administration. Among these mistakes, one may single out the 1979 US embassy takeover in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis, Iran's maximalist decision to persist with the war after the tide turned in its favor around 1982-83 and despite good opportunities to end it victoriously, the assassination operations of the 1990s on European soil that targeted overseas opposition leaders, and more recently Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust as well as his triumphalist and reckless treatment of the nuclear dossier until it culminated in several rounds of massive sanctions against the nation. While the book succeeds in taking "a pathological and critical look" at a myriad of foreign policy issues and developments (p. 9), the spirit of substantive and systematic critique does not seem to run very palpably through the work. Pertinently, Zarif's prerequisite to accede to the interview is avoidance of broaching "confidential documents and state secrets," an issue which, according to the author, manifests itself more strongly in the case of discussions on Iran's "nuclear negotiations" (pp. 10-11).

Nonetheless, *Āqā-ye Sāfir* sheds useful light on some of the more decisive twists and junctures of Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy. Speaking on the aftermath of the 1979 embassy hostage crisis, Zarif distinguishes himself from a group of Iranians in the US who had a "very revolutionary" approach to protecting the newly established Islamic Republic's interests despite having "no considerable relation to the Islamic Revolution," such as Saeed Emami—later a linchpin in Iran's security apparatus and a prime culprit in the "Chain Murders" of political opponents and critical intellectuals during the 1990s. "It was at that time that I was labelled a liberal" (p. 34). Along parallel lines, he criticizes the unprofessional behavior of inexperienced Iranian officials including himself at the UN, whose burning zeal for defending or promoting the nascent revolutionary state upon a trivial provocation or even a passing mention often proved counterproductive, helping to catapult Iran into the focus of negative attention with adverse implications for the country (pp. 39-43). Elsewhere, he criticizes the stubborn refusal of incumbent officials and administrations to draw on "our [past] organizational experiences" or to "transfer" valuable information to colleagues, "which ultimately causes permanent breaks in our bureaucracy" (p. 63).

A notable section of the discussion is devoted to delineating Iran's efforts on the diplomatic front during the war with Iraq, how it was treated by the United Nations, especially

the UN Security Council, and how Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 helped further Tehran's national interests, including its full recovery of remaining Iraqi-occupied territory. Zarif refers to "that famous report" by the then UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, where Iraq under Saddam Hussein is officially recognized as the aggressor, as the "greatest political victory of the Islamic Republic during the war" (p. 102). Once again the whole discussion confirms the notion, as demonstrated already by a number of political analysts and military historians,⁷ that Iran's war effort was determined to a remarkable extent by ideological considerations, internal divisions and "affective" politics rather than primarily by realistic and *realpolitik* calculations, which helped prolong an otherwise shorter conflict, making it the longest war of the twentieth century, a contentious issue that is barely touched upon in the book. The interview also covers such diverse developments and Iran's foreign policy towards them as the release of American hostages in Lebanon during the George H. W. Bush administration (1989-93), the Bosnian war, the Chechen conflict, the 1992 Mykonos incident in Germany, the 1994 AMIA bombing in Argentina, the former Iranian President Mohammad Khātami's initiative "Dialogue among Civilizations" and the challenges hampering his policy of "détente," and the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and their strategic implications for Tehran.

Finally, Iran's nuclear venture and the tensions with the outside world, particularly the US, over it constitute another central subject of the book. In this context, two points sound of special import. He mounts a thought-provoking, albeit essentialist, theoretical argument about the identity of the Islamic Republic as a regime "whose nature is such that other states—so-called friend and foe—are not interested in it" basically because it has propounded a "new model of governance" which "takes us beyond the level of a simple actor in the confines of our geopolitical size and scope." Accordingly, he posits that "direct engagement" with the US will not serve as "a panacea for our problems" and, moreover, "I believe our relations with the United States will never be friendly" (p. 153). Lending credence to those FPA scholars primarily keen on "leadership in context," he also confirms that all Iran's nuclear decisions were ultimately made with the consent of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. "Throughout my stint of responsibility [as a top nuclear negotiator], no word was uttered without the permission of the Leadership" (p. 240). It is noteworthy, however, that leader-centric theory of foreign policy has been questioned by some researchers who maintain that state behavior cannot be reduced to the person of the leader or even the elite leadership group, not least in such complex and heterogeneous cases as that of Iran.⁸

The aforementioned flaws and shortcomings notwithstanding, *Āqā-ye Safir* is a theoretically useful and empirically rich work of scholarship that deserves to be read by a much wider audience than Persian-speakers only and thus merits translation into English amongst other languages.

Notes

1. Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy*; Webber, and Smith, *Foreign Policy in a Transformed World*; Smith, Hadfield, and Dunne, *Foreign Policy*; Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*; Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*.
2. Sajjadpour and Zarif, *Diplomasi-ye Chand-Jānebeh*.

3. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*.
4. Cited in Wright, "The Adversary."
5. Towns, *Women and States*.
6. Zarif-Khonsari, "Self-Defense in International Law and Policy."
7. Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*; Farzaneh, "Shi'i Ideology"; Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*; Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War"; Johnson, "Mustazafin and Taghutti."
8. Behraves, "State Revisionism."

Funding

The author acknowledges the financial assistance of the foundation Stiftelsen Lars Hiertas Minne in Stockholm, Sweden, which was used in course of producing this work.

Bibliography

- Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin. *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Behraves, Maysam. "State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, forthcoming.
- Farzaneh, Mateo M. "Shi'i Ideology, Iranian Secular Nationalism and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7 (2007): 86–103.
- Goldmann, Kjell. *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy: The Problems and Possibilities of Détente*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Hudson, Valerie M. *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Johnson, Rob. "Mustazafin and Taghutti: Iran and the War, 1980–1988." In *The Iran–Iraq War: New International Perspectives*, edited by Nigel Ashton and Brian Gibson, 56–74. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Karsh, Efraim. *The Iran–Iraq War, 1980–1988*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002.
- Kissinger, Henry A. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Sajjadpour, Seyyed Mohammad K., and Mohammad J. Zarif. *Diplomasi-ye Chand-Jānebeh: Nazariyeh va Amalkard-e Sāzmānhā-ye Mantageh-yi va Beinolmelali* [Multilateral Diplomacy: Regional and International Organizations in Theory and Practice]. Tehran: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Publications, 1389/2010.
- Sargent, Daniel J. *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in 1970s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Smith, Steve, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne. *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Takeyh, Ray. "The Iran–Iraq War: A Reassessment." *The Middle East Journal* 64 (2010): 365–383.
- Towns, Ann E. *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Webber, Mark, and Michael Smith. *Foreign Policy in a Transformed World*. New York: Routledge, 2002/2013.
- Wright, Robin. "The Adversary." *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/26/the-adversary-2>.
- Zarif-Khonsari, Mohammad-Javad. "Self-Defense in International Law and Policy." PhD diss., University of Denver, 1988.

Maysam Behraves
 Research Fellow, Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)
 Lund University, Sweden
 © 2017, Maysam Behraves
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1286711>