

**A Conversation With H.E. Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign
Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Speaker:

**Mohammad Javad Zarif,
Foreign Minister,
Islamic Republic of Iran**

Introduction:

**Suzanne DiMaggio,
Senior Fellow and Director of The Iran Initiative,
New America**

**Barnett R. Rubin,
Senior Fellow, Center on International Cooperation,
New York University**

Moderator:

**David Ignatius,
Columnist,
*The Washington Post***

Location: 60 Washington Square South, New York City, New York

Time: 10:00 a.m. EDT

Date: Wednesday, April 29, 2015

*Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
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BARNETT R. RUBIN: I'll just wait as the last people take their seats. Thank you.

Well, welcome, and good morning. As is customary, I am going to remind you all to please silence all your electronic devices for the duration.

I'm Barnett Rubin, a senior fellow at the Center on International Cooperation at NYU. It's a research center in NYU's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I'm very pleased and honored today to join with CIC's partner and co-host, New America, in welcoming all of you to this public forum with His Excellency Mohammad Javad Zarif, the minister of foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Minister Zarif is visiting New York to attend the Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty hosted by the United Nations, and also to continue the negotiations with the P5+1 on Iran's nuclear program. We are honored by his willingness to take time out from his schedule to discuss his views with both this live audience in New York and a virtual audience on the Internet.

And I would like to thank the administration of NYU for the help that it has given us and enabling us to hold this meeting.

The meeting will proceed as follows. After my remarks, I will turn the podium over to Suzanne DiMaggio, director of New America's Iran Initiative. For well over a decade, Ms. DiMaggio has directed Track II diplomatic initiatives with partners in the Middle East and Asia on regional security, terrorism, nonproliferation, sustainable development, and global environmental governance. Since 2002, she has led a series of U.S.-Iran policy dialogues which have served as one of the few venues for sustained face-to-face discussions between Americans and Iranians.

Ms. DiMaggio will then introduce Minister Zarif and our moderator, David Ignatius of The Washington Post. The two of them will then be seated, and they will have about an hour of moderated discussion on a variety of topics. Mr. Ignatius will then entertain questions for Minister Zarif from the floor by cards, which some of you have submitted, and via Twitter at #ZarifNYC, which you see up there on the screen. We ask all questioners from the floor to wait to be recognized, take one of the two handheld microphones which will be in the auditorium, identify yourselves by name and affiliation, and keep your questions brief so we can make the best use of the limited time that we have.

We look forward to the discussion. NYU has always provided a platform for many views, including controversial views, and peaceful protest, which I understand is going on in Washington Square outside this building as we speak. We welcome that. There is an accompanying standard, however, that any actions that prevent speakers from speaking or audiences from listening are incompatible with free expression. We ask all in attendance to remain respectful. Audience members, as I mentioned, will have the opportunity to express themselves during the question-and-answer session. Thank you.

Now I ask Suzanne DiMaggio to come to the podium. (Applause.)

SUZANNE DIMAGGIO: Thank you so much, Barney.

And good morning. Welcome to all of you.

On behalf of New America, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this very special event today. I'd also like to take the opportunity to extend a special welcome to those viewers who are joining us via live webcast.

So organizing a unique event like this takes quite a bit of work. (Laughs.) So first, let me extend my heartfelt thanks to my amazing New America colleagues, both in Washington, D.C. and in New York. I'd also like to thank our incredible partner, Barney and the Center for International Cooperation, particularly their phenomenal staff and leadership. And finally, I'd like to convey a special note of appreciation to Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, Ali Khoshroo, and his colleagues for the extraordinary cooperation they have extended to us to make this event possible.

Now, to preside over our discussion with Foreign Minister Zarif, we're thrilled to have with us award-winning columnist for The Washington Post David Ignatius. David's twice-weekly column is required reading for everyone who follows developments in the Middle East and beyond. And David is also a best-selling author of eight novels, the most recent of which is entitled "Director." I'm in the middle of reading it right now, and I commend you to read it, too.

So first I'm going to welcome David to the stage. So, David, please come and take your seat. (Applause.) Thanks, David.

Now I'm very pleased to introduce our guest speaker. Dr. Javad Zarif was appointed the foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the administration of President Hassan Rouhani in August 2013. Many of you here in our audience today know Dr. Zarif from the time he served as Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, from 2002 to 2007. Prior to that, he was the deputy minister for legal and international affairs for a decade, beginning in 1992.

In addition to his distinguished career as a diplomat, he is a scholar and an educator. He has been a visiting lecturer at the School of International Relations in Tehran and a member of the academic staff of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran. He began his undergraduate studies in international relations at San Francisco State University in 1977. He earned his Ph.D. in international law and politics from the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver in 1988.

In March, an Iranian poll picked the foreign minister as Man of the Year. And then earlier this month, Time Magazine included him on a list of a hundred of the world's most influential people alongside Narendra Modi, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Xi Jinping, among others.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted and honored to welcome to the stage Dr. Javad Zarif. (Applause.)

DAVID IGNATIUS: Dr. Zarif, it's a pleasure to welcome you here. I want to thank Barnett Rubin and Suzanne DiMaggio and all the people who have organized this gathering.

I'm going to ask you this morning about the nuclear negotiations. I'm going to ask you about regional issues. But I want to start with some stories that are in this morning's newspaper that are on all of our minds.

First, I want to ask about the stopping and seizure of the crew of a Danish vessel, flagged the Marshall Islands, called the Maersk Tigris in what the Pentagon has described as an internationally recognized maritime route in the Persian Gulf – within your waters, you have – you have claimed. And what I'd like to ask if your reassurance to this audience and to everyone listening that Iran respects free navigation in this most crucial and sensitive waterway.

MINISTER MOHAMMAD JAVAD ZARIF: Well, good morning, everybody. It's good to be here with all of you.

And thank you, David, for accepting to moderate this discussion. I'm grateful to two of my old friends, Suzanne DiMaggio and Barnett Rubin, for having organized this. And I see a lot of old friends in the audience. Hello to all of you. Good to be back and talking to you.

As you know, I wrote an op-ed piece in The New York Times a couple weeks ago in which I said – repeated a long-time policy of Iran on freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf. For us, the Persian Gulf is our lifeline, and nothing is more important for us than freedom of navigation in those waters. And we are committed to it, and we will respect freedom of navigation.

This ship has had some rather peculiar activity, as I hear from the lawyer of the company that filed a suit against this company, I think about some 15, 16 years ago, for evading to pay or to deliver a cargo. That's quite some time ago. And it has gone through court proceedings in Tehran, based on what I hear from the lawyer – public statement by the lawyer – for the past 14 years, and there is a final decision by the court that the ship's owners are supposed to pay the damages that are incurred on the private company that had a lawsuit against this company in an Iranian court with jurisdiction over the matter. And simply, our naval forces implemented the decision of the court.

That's a legal case and it's being followed as a legal case. It's not a security issue or a political issue. For us, freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf is a must. And we are prepared not only to respect it ourselves, but we call upon all others to respect freedom of navigation.

MR. IGNATIUS: Usually a legal matter of this sort is enforced through legal proceedings in the courts. There was a question in many people's minds whether, in seizing this ship, Iran was sending a message at a time of tension in the region, especially in Yemen.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, it has nothing to do with Yemen. In Yemen, unfortunate incidents are taking place. Humanitarian assistance is not allowed to enter Yemen. Military operation, in spite of the fact that there was an announced cease-fire, continue to take place, actually started several hours after the announcement was made. We certainly hope that cooler heads will prevail and we would move towards resolution of that issue.

As you know, we have a four-point plan that we presented publicly, and I alluded to that plan in my op-ed in The New York Times. And we're working with everybody based on that plan. I had a very long discussion with the deputy secretary-general of the United Nations upon my arrival here in New York, and we exchanged some thoughts about how we proceed with convening a meeting of Yemenis in order to find a solution and for everybody else to facilitate that. Unfortunately, in spite of the fact that humanitarian assistance was a major part of any agreement, that is being refused.

But this has nothing to do with that. This is a legal case. The ship was asked to come to port, it refused, and our naval forces took action to escort it to the port. I think we shouldn't read too much into it. Some people do try to read too much into anything that is taking place now in order to torpedo a process that is independent of all of these problems.

MR. IGNATIUS: We'll return to regional issues and specifically to your proposal for negotiations in Yemen a bit later, but I want to turn now to the subject of the nuclear talks taking place between the P5+1 and Iran. You met with Secretary Kerry here in New York on Monday for a conversation, and I want to ask you whether you were able to put together a timetable or roadmap for completion of this agreement by the June 30 deadline that's been set, and also, Dr. Zarif, just your brief summary of what are the remaining areas of disagreement and dispute that have to be resolved to get to an agreement.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, on your first question, actually we did set a timetable in order to move forward. We agreed to work basically nonstop starting right after we finish this first week of the NPT Review Conference. But tomorrow morning, our colleagues will start at the political directors and deputy foreign minister level to bring together all the elements of a draft document. We have – we've done some work last week in Vienna – again, at the political directors level – both between the Iran and the United States, as well as between Iran and the P5+1. And I believe they will continue, starting tomorrow morning, to finalize that. It will have as those involved in multilateral diplomacy would call brackets in the text – I mean, there will be parts of the text that are commonly agreed, parts that are not. But I think we have general agreement on the concepts, which we call parameters, of an agreement.

Now, how we transform that agreement into a written, in our view legally binding document which will be endorsed by a mandatory resolution of the Security Council, that is the area where we need to do a lot of work because usually in these negotiations the devil is in the detail. And we have done some detail in the – during our discussion in Lausanne, but there is some left. And it includes all areas; it's not one specific area of difficulty. We need to put down on several pieces of paper – not on one piece of paper – all the details of an agreement.

I believe it can be done. I believe it should be done. I believe it's an opportunity for all of us which should not be missed. And I expect people to start working in good faith and move forward.

MR. IGNATIUS: Could you give us some idea of what's still in brackets, what these areas that you've got to resolve disagreements in?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, I mean, what's in brackets are wording issues on almost everything. Wordings are usually – I mean, you have – you have one way of expressing some of the concerns, others may have a different way. But there are wording problems that pertain to all issues.

I don't think there are – the problems are insurmountable. I think they can be resolved and I think they will be resolved. So if you want to pinpoint one specific area where there is a problem, I'll be able to tell you – if I decide to tell you –

MR. IGNATIUS: (Laughs.)

MIN. ZARIF: – at the end of this week, when they finish this. I usually don't want to negotiate – (laughs) – in public because that's the worst thing you can do, negotiate in public. You've heard me say that several times and a lot of people in Iran have heard me say that several times, and some people are not happy with me saying that.

But we are committed to this process. We've spent a lot of political capital on this process. I think a lot of people have spent a lot of political capital on this process. This is an opportunity that should not be wasted because we try to score points at each other at this stage.

As you remember, I tweeted a couple of hours after – maybe less than a couple of hours after we reached the agreement in Lausanne that the agreement is good as it stands; nobody needs to spin it. And I believe we don't need to spin a good agreement. It's a good agreement. It's an agreement that does not reflect all the needs of everybody, obviously. If you wanted an agreement that reflected every need of every player in the – in the room, you'll never have an agreement. So everybody has to be flexible. Everybody has to compromise. And I think people recognize the significance of this opportunity to reach an agreement.

It's not a perfect agreement – it's not perfect for us, it's not perfect for the United States, it's not perfect for our European Union partners – but it's the best we can get. It's the best anybody can get. And it's balanced, in my view. Now, whether we can live with a balanced agreement only time can tell, and we have two month(s) of it.

MR. IGNATIUS: I'm going to try you on a couple of the details despite your warning. But I want to ask you –

MIN. ZARIF: (Laughs.) You're a persistent man. (Laughs.)

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, that's – people would want me to persist on this, and I will. But I want to ask you first about the timetable.

The supreme leader said in a – in a speech, and I'm quoting here, that the June 30 deadline is not unchangeable, and if this period extends there will be no problem, which seemed to, you know, stretch out the possible negotiating time. But I want to ask whether you and Secretary Kerry have committed to and believe it's possible to get this agreement by the 30th of June.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, we certainly want to finish this even before the 30th of June if it's possible. What the leader has said and what I believe anybody in their right mind would say, that if we move quite a bit and if we believe that there is a good chance of reaching an agreement, we should not kill this opportunity for a few days, more or less. I mean, no time deadline is sacrosanct, and we have all agreed that this is a human process, this is not a divine process where you have definitive deadlines. And even the divine can change its will – (laughter) – at least according to Islamic philosophy, those who study the Islamic philosophy. Even the Almighty can change its will. (Laughter.) So this is where we are, but we want to finish this way before June 30th, and we will do everything – and as I told you when we started, that we want to use every opportunity, including working around the clock, starting next Monday – starting tomorrow, actually, here in New York, and then next Monday somewhere in Europe to finalize all the elements of the agreement.

MR. IGNATIUS: I want to ask you to focus, if you will, on one area of this agreement that is especially important, I think, to countries around the world that have concerns about the Iranian nuclear program, and that is transparency and inspection. In the joint statement that you and the EU high representative, Mogherini, both read on the – on the day that the deal was announced, you said that the IAEA would receive enhanced access to Iran's nuclear program. Several days later, Supreme Leader Khamenei said that any inspections and surveillance should be limited to conventional mechanisms. Is there a discrepancy there, or is the language that was read that I quoted from you and Representative Mogherini the operative language?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, the – I mean, if you're familiar with the NPT arrangements, all members of the NPT, or at least most members of the NPT, have a Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, based on which the IAEA will be able to inspect declared facilities. Some members of the NPT have, in addition to the Safeguards Agreement, an Additional Protocol, which enables the IAEA to have, within a – within a legally defined framework – internationally legally defined framework – access to undeclared areas, provided that they have good evidence to prove that such access is necessary. And Iran, in fact, did implement the Additional Protocol from 2003 to 2005 voluntarily. It is prepared to do it again. And that is the highest level of international transparency that is available, and Iran is prepared to accept that highest level of international transparency, and that's a standard. It has not been accepted by the NPT member states as the standard of verification, and I think that's one of the issues that in the Review Conference in the next three, four weeks it will be discussed. There will be some members of the NPT who are reluctant to accept the Additional Protocol as the standard of verification, but Iran is prepared, within an agreement, to accept the Additional Protocol. And I think, with that, you will have all the transparency you need, which is legally defined. It's not arbitrary.

What the leader has said, and what we will continue to say, is that we will not accept arbitrary encroachment on our sovereignty. That we will not accept, nor will any other respectable country in the world. But we accept the standard level of transparency that is required in order to make – to provide – to remove any doubt, because we believe that there is nothing hidden in our nuclear program, that our nuclear program has been the subject of scrutiny. And you may want to know that according to the 2013 report of the IAEA – not any recent one; the report prior to the implementation of the latest agreement that we had in November of 2013 – according to the – to the report that was issued in June of 2013, after Japan, Iran had the most inspections of any country in the world for the past 10 years, most inspections. And Japan has 10 times the number of nuclear facilities as Iran does. But we had, after Japan, we – they had 170 nuclear facilities; we have only 17. But with 17 facilities, we were second only to Japan in terms of being inspected. So the IAEA has seen everything. And if you're looking for a smoking gun, you've got to wait a long, long, long time before you get one.

MR. IGNATIUS: So just so that we'll understand what this language means in practical terms, suppose that several years from now the agreement is signed, the IAEA gets information which leads it to believe that prohibited activity is taking place at Parchin or at a military base somewhere in Iran. Would the IAEA have access to that base to make sure that the suspicions are not correct? Help us understand that.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, there is a mechanism – I mean, that's what the Additional Protocol is all about – in order to investigate concerns about undeclared facilities. I mean, what is declared is declared. They have regular access to it. What is undeclared, the Additional Protocol provides a mechanism and a procedure for access.

Our agreement, if reached, provides more clarification about the procedure which, when the agreement is finalized, you will see it provides a rather clear-cut approach to checking such allegations, substantiating them, and then moving forward with resolving them. The Additional Protocol is there. Its mechanisms are there. Its procedures are there. And the agreement has, more specifically, specificity with regard to some of them.

MR. IGNATIUS: I want to turn to a question of special interest to the Iranian public, which I hope is watching on television as we're talking, and that is the question of sanctions relief. There's been some disagreement about exactly what this framework, these parameters provide in terms of sanctions relief, and I want to ask you to clarify that for everyone.

First, in – when in – under your understanding of the agreement, when will most nuclear-related sanctions be lifted? Maybe you could speak to that first.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, as our understanding stand(s) today – and I don't think there is any divergence here – if we have an agreement on the 30th of June, within a few days after that we will have a resolution in the Security Council under Article 41 of Chapter VII, which will be mandatory for all member states, whether Senator Cotton likes it or not. (Laughter.) I couldn't avoid that. (Laughs, laughter.)

MR. IGNATIUS: I'm tempted to say you'll pay for that, but you already know that.
(Laughter.)

MIN. ZARIF: (Laughs.) I mean, as permanent member of the Security Council, United States should be in the forefront of pushing for respect for the integrity and authority of the Security Council.

It will be – the resolution will endorse the agreement; will terminate all previous resolutions, including all sanctions; will set in place the termination of EU sanctions and the cessation of application of U.S. sanctions. And the reason for change in terminology is that we don't want to get bogged down into the domestic procedures in the United States. I mean, I've studied and lived in the U.S. I know enough about U.S. Constitution and U.S. procedures. But as a foreign government, I only deal with U.S. government. I do not deal with U.S. Congress. I do not deal with U.S. Supreme Court. That is the – the responsibility of bringing that into line falls on the shoulders of the president of the United States, and that's the person with whom we are making this agreement. So he will have to stop implementing all the sanctions – economic and financial sanctions – that have been imposed on Iran by executive order or by congressional decision. However he does it, that's his problem, as it will be my problem to implement certain measures. I would not be able – nobody in international law can advance arguments of domestic procedure in order to avoid implementing international obligation. That is correct for Iran. That is correct for the United States. No different. Sovereign equality is a principle of international law on which we all operate.

So this is it. On the day of the agreement, we will have a resolution in the Security Council, or a couple of days later depending on when we reach the agreement. And that would put into motion certain steps that we will take in order to prepare for the measures that we agree to take. We will have to bring down the number of centrifuges to a certain number in Natanz, to bring down the number of centrifuges to a certain number in Fordow, bring down our stockpile of enriched uranium to a certain weight, do something about our heavy water reactor in Arak so that we can design – redesign part of that reactor – not the entire reactor, because it will remain a heavy water reactor, as you know, from the agreement and even the fact sheet, so-called fact sheet by the White House. It will – but it will be redesigned so that it would address – it will be more modern. It would be more usable for our purposes, and at the same time it would reduce proliferation concerns. And it will be done in a – in a joint venture process which would both provide us with better technology and at the same time provide the other side with greater confidence.

All of these measures that we need to take, I mean, they will have to start at a point, and that point is where we take those measures, preparation for those measures, and the sanctions will be removed. How this will be done, the – I mean, we know the concept. The concept is these will be simultaneous. How much time it will take for each of these, how much time it will take for the United States, how much time it will take for Iran, how much time it will take for the EU, these are issues that are being discussed, but they have to have a time frame that would make them simultaneous. It won't take much time for the Security Council to adopt a resolution, and that's when the entire process will get into motion.

MR. IGNATIUS: The process begins, but just to be clear, is it when it's verified that the steps that are agreed – for example, the conversion at Arak and the reduction of the number of centrifuges – when it's verified that those steps have been taken, is that the moment at which the sanctions come off?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, these are steps that will take only a few weeks to implement, and sanctions are off. The time that they will be – they will take effect are the time that our steps have taken effect. So all sides will take preparatory steps, and we can't get into greater detail about this because I don't want to put anybody into any difficulty. But the time when we start, when we adopt the resolution, if we – if we reach an agreement – (laughs) – and that's an important "if."

MR. IGNATIUS: A final buzzword from the parameters agreement that you reached is the snap-back, so-called, of sanctions. This is important to the U.S. and its negotiating partners, and it basically says – and I'm quoting from the U.S. fact sheet that was released in Lausanne – "If at any time Iran fails to fulfill its commitments, these sanctions will snap back into place." And I take it the snap-back provision is part of what you've discussed, but it's reciprocal. Maybe you can explain both aspects.

MIN. ZARIF: Yeah, actually that's the problem with fact sheets. (Laughter.) Once we have the agreement, you will see the reciprocity in that even starts with if Iran believes that the other side is not implementing its part of the deal, it has, through a procedure – it's not – it's not automatic. You see, we didn't spend all this time – 16 month(s) of negotiations, the longest negotiating session of a U.S. secretary of State in probably history since 19-whatever, 1919 I was told – to prepare a document that we are going to shred once we go back home. So we didn't do this in order to simply snap back. But we have a reciprocal procedure – unfortunately, because of the mutual lack of confidence that exists – so that if each side believes that the other side is not living up to its commitment, it can, after completing certain procedures, revert back. This is reciprocal. It requires a certain procedure that has been agreed upon to be followed before it's done so that we can respect the agreement. But then we can go back and the other side can go back.

Now, one thing that needs to be mentioned here is the record. Over the past 18 month(s), the president of the United States, in addition to the director-general of the IAEA and a whole range of other people, are on record saying that Iran has implemented every single detail of its undertakings under the November 2013 Geneva agreement. Unfortunately, I cannot say that about the United States. There is a lot to be desired in the way the United States, particularly the Treasury Department, has implemented its part of the obligation. So if people are worried about snap back, they should be worried about U.S. violating its obligation and us snapping back, not Iran violating its obligations and the U.S. reverting back its sanctions. And that is a point that the United States should be seriously concerned about.

This is not a game. This is a serious exercise, and we expect the other side to be as committed to implementing this deal. This is not a voluntary, stroke-of-a-pen agreement that can be changed in another stroke of a pen. The United States is accepting a commitment – a commitment that requires certainty for our negotiating partners and for our trading partners – and

we expect the United States to live up to its commitment. And we have a provision for snap back if the U.S. failed. So if the United States wants to sell it as an achievement for the United States, be my guest. But it is a reciprocal situation.

MR. IGNATIUS: So if Iran judges that the U.S. is not complying with aspects of this agreement, Iran is reserving the right to withdraw from the agreement when it makes that conclusion.

MIN. ZARIF: No.

MR. IGNATIUS: Am I understanding you?

MIN. ZARIF: No. No, no, no. No side can just make the conclusion and withdraw. There is a procedure. We want to maintain the integrity of this agreement. We have invested a great deal in this. So there is a procedure that needs to be followed, and it takes about 60 days for this procedure to be completed. But once that procedure is completed, and if the other side – I mean, if the other side commits a material breach or what we – the terminology that we use is “significant non-performance” of the obligations, then it provides the other side with the possibility of resorting to various procedures in order to make sure that – whether they can be rectified, whether they can be corrected. And a lot of issues can be rectified or corrected because this is not sort of a situation – trigger-happy situation that everybody is looking forward to an excuse to get out of this agreement. We need, actually, to find excuses to keep the agreement alive, as we did over the past 18 month(s). I mean, there were many instances in which I took the heat when there was an apparent American at least lack of good faith in implementing its part of the deal – when they increased or added new entities to the sanctions, previous sanctions, or similar measures. But we believe that we needed an excuse to find the solution, not an excuse to break the solution. So that part of the political will needs to be predominant if we want to use this opportunity.

This opportunity is basically once – not once in a lifetime, but once in a decade at least. We had a similar opportunity in 2003 to 2005. I was a part of that. President Rouhani was a part of that. Some of friends that are sitting in this room were a part of that. And we blew it, then, because people did not – were looking for an excuse not to have an agreement rather than for an excuse to have one.

Now, this agreement is totally different from that agreement, but it rests on very similar grounds. I think it would be a travesty to lose this possibility.

MR. IGNATIUS: Let me ask you a final question about the agreement that really is a bridge to talking about regional issues and also is very much in line with this week’s theme of nonproliferation. If Saudi Arabia asked to have the same arrangements that Iran will have under the framework agreement that you’re seeking to conclude, would that give Iran confidence that Saudi Arabia’s nuclear program was exclusively peaceful? And would you object to Saudi Arabia doing the same thing that Iran will do under this agreement?

MIN. ZARIF: We would welcome it, actually. We would welcome the same opportunity for all members of the NPT.

Now, you need to know that on – was it Monday? – on the first day of the NPT Review Conference, I was the first speaker. Now, the United States claims that it represents the international community, but when it came to the NPT Review Conference I was representing 120 members of that international community. And if you read the statement that I delivered on behalf of those 120 members, you'll see that the singular biggest concern of the international community is the continued presence of nuclear weapons in the United States and other P5. So that's the single biggest threat to international peace and security, that P5 continue to have nuclear weapons. The second biggest threat is that Israel continues to have nuclear weapons, this from the point of view of 120 member states. And then the third point that I raised there – and that is the position of not only 120 members, but probably close to 180. Now in the NPT we have 191 members, and I think 188 of that 191 members of the NPT believe that every state has the right to choose its fuel cycle priorities; that is, if Saudi Arabia decides to have an enrichment program under similar monitoring that Iran does, not only I will accept it, I will welcome it because that's their right. That's their right, and rights needs to be applied across the board without discrimination. So they're welcome to do it.

Now, the United States has a discriminatory standard called 123 standard, which is a bilateral issue. We don't have that bilateral agreement with the United States, so we're OK with our own situation and we're not looking to any bilateral agreement with the U.S. in the area of nuclear cooperation. If others are not looking in that particular field, then they should have the right. What they will do in their bilateral relations with the United States is a bilateral issue on which I have no control. If they take obligations in a bilateral agreement with the U.S., then that's a bilateral agreement. That's not a multilateral issue.

MR. IGNATIUS: But, Dr. Zarif, isn't that a somewhat worrying and dangerous prospect, that over the next 10, 15 years your neighbors will be pursuing nuclear programs of their own? Is that world in which Iran is really going to be more secure?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, a peaceful nuclear program under necessary international monitoring, under necessary international supervision, is nothing to be worried about. You see, that's why you have the NPT.

In the 1960s there was a bargain. The bargain was a group of countries accepted for a brief period of time – at that time it was 25 years – for the United States and other four permanent member of the Security Council to have nuclear weapons, temporarily, and they accept not to have nuclear weapons. But the other side of the bargain was that they could have nuclear technology for peaceful use. And now, unfortunately, the United States and other nuclear weapons states are not observing their part of the bargain, not fulfilling their part of the commitment, and expect us to do more than our part.

The non-nuclear-weapons states have every right to have access to peaceful technology. And again, in my statement on behalf of 120 members of the international community, I said this distinction between sensitive and non-sensitive technology is, with all due respect, hype, pure

hype, because everything in this area is sensitive. And if you say you cannot enter the sensitive areas, you got to believe that the majority – overwhelming majority of the international community don't buy that. They don't believe that.

The problem is – it's interesting, and sometimes I find this really – I mean, it is ironic, but it's laughable that Netanyahu has become everybody's nonproliferation guru. (Laughter.) It is laughable, isn't it? He is sitting on 400 – 400 – warheads, nuclear warheads, that have been acquired in violation of NPT, in violation of NPT. Israel is not a member of NPT, but those who provided it with the technology were members of the NPT and violated the NPT to provide it with the technology, and we know who they were. And now they are the proponents of nonproliferation and Bibi Netanyahu has become the guru in this area. So we've got to become real – (laughter) – and look at this realistically.

If there is a threat, it comes from Israel's nuclear arsenal, not from Saudi Arabia having a peaceful nuclear program. We certainly won't be threatened by that.

MR. IGNATIUS: So let me continue on this track of talking about regional affairs and take as my starting point your interesting op-ed piece in The New York Times several weeks ago, in which you said it is time for Iran and other stakeholders to begin to address the causes of tension in the wider Persian Gulf region. And you called for a collective forum for dialogue, a lot of tantalizing ideas, but I want to ask you about specific pathways forward. You mentioned Yemen as an area where you'd like to see intra-Yemeni dialogue among the Houthis, the different factions. What has happened on that track? Have you been in contact with the Houthi leadership? Have you urged them to come to a meeting? Or meetings that I'm told are taking place in the UAE with some participants in this process, is that something – tell us how you'd like to see dialogue and a – and a solution in Yemen go forward.

MIN. ZARIF: Let me take you back a few years. In 1986 – that's quite a few years – as a junior diplomat, I wrote a letter that was signed by our then-foreign minister, Dr. Velayati – and Gianni Picco is sitting here, he was then at the – at the U.N. Secretariat; he was – he received it – in which we suggested that we should have a regional security arrangement in the Persian Gulf. Two years later – one year later, in 1987, Security Council adopted Resolution 598, which helped end Iran-Iraq War. Paragraph eight of that resolution calls on the secretary-general of the United Nations to convene a process leading to the establishment of a security mechanism in the Persian Gulf region. These were our suggestion. So this is not something that I invented two weeks ago when I wrote this op-ed.

Immediately after becoming foreign minister – I'm jumping because I did a lot of this. When I was ambassador here, I have written similar things during that time, but – and we said that after 1991, when Iraq – 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. We said, had you put that mechanism in place, we might not have had to go through this real tragedy that has basically engulfed our region for the past I don't know how many, 30 years – 20-some years. And then, when I became foreign minister, the first op-ed piece that I wrote was not in New York Times or in Wall Street Journal or anywhere, I wrote in Asharq Al-Awsat an op-ed in Arabic – the title was “Our Neighbors Are Our Priority” – in which I repeated this same suggestion. We are committed to

this. We want to have dialogue with our neighbors because we believe there is almost on every issue complementarity of interest between us and our neighbors.

Now, we know that they're following policies that we find totally objectionable. We do not believe that you can bombard people to submission. It won't succeed, as it didn't, and it will not create more stability in the region. We don't believe that you should create sectarian strife in the region. I think it's dangerous for everybody, detrimental to everybody's security.

So what we do with Yemen I think the concepts are clear. We have raised this in the meeting we had with the Turkish president. I raised it with others. We have a four-point plan.

First of all, I mean, the most important thing, before we get to the four point, is that the security of every country, the domestic affairs of any country, is the business of the people of that country. People outside should not set preconditions for them. I think the world has set preconditions for Syria, and we've seen the last four years. I mean, we should have allowed the Syrian people to decide, not for people outside to say this guy should not be there, this guy should be there. That was a decision by the Syrian people because we – some tried to make that decision for them, and that perpetuated a conflict. So that's a very important criteria: people of Yemen should decide what will be their future.

But how we see that we can help? We believe there should be a cease-fire. We don't have a cease-fire. We've heard lip service to a cease-fire, but we've seen that, following the announcement, almost on a daily basis we've had military operation. We've had airstrikes.

We should have humanitarian assistance. The situation in Yemen is dire. The humanitarian situation is catastrophic. And unfortunately, over the past four days, four Iranian airplanes carrying humanitarian supplies to Yemen were intercepted and returned, in spite of the fact that they had permission. They had overflight permission and we had informed our Saudi neighbors that these – that what the planes – I mean, what the cargo was. And unfortunately, they were intercepted, to the point of an overzealous pilot bombing out of existence the runway in an airport in Yemen in order to prevent our plane from landing there. This is the extent to which they have gone.

Third, an inter-Yemeni dialogue. Everybody in Yemen should engage in a dialogue without precondition. And I do not believe that is taking place in the UAE because UAE, unfortunately, became a part of the conflict. It has to take place in a place that is not a part of this conflict, and I believe the United Nations is contemplating Geneva. And I think probably is the least common – the lowest common denominator, unfortunately, but that may be the only way.

And the fourth element of our plan is to establish, by the Yemenis, a broad-based government that has friendly relations with all its neighbors, including Saudi Arabia – obviously, it's a big neighbor of Yemen – and other GCC countries and Iran and others. We are all important players in the region. We don't want to exclude any player in the region. We believe that the process of dialogue by definition needs to be inclusive. Exclusion is the problem of our – of the current paradigm. We need to include everybody – include everybody in the process,

include everybody in the outcome, and to have a broad-based government with good relations with its neighbors.

Now, it should be a Yemeni-owned and a Yemeni-operated process. We can facilitate. I have done that. Barney Rubin knows. He was involved in Afghanistan in the Bonn conference. We had a successful experience there. In Bonn, we facilitated. The Afghans talked. But we stayed there for, I don't know, two weeks. We stayed there on the sidelines. We allowed the Afghans to talk. Any time they needed our help, we were just there, ready to help. I think Yemen should be the same, and I think the United Nations has enough experience doing that. And we've been talking to them, and I hope they can do it.

MR. IGNATIUS: This idea of a forum for resolving regional disputes – specifically applied to Yemen, but we'll come to Syria in a minute – is very promising. But if your Arab neighbors were here taking part in this conversation, the first thing they would say is we need assurances that Iran is not going to send weapons, trainers, IRGC forces into our countries. Any one of those leaders would say, we look around our region and we see Baghdad, we see Damascus, we see Beirut, we see increasingly Yemen, in effect, under control of Iranian proxies. So how do you reassure them that you're not – you're not going to be meddling in their – in internal affairs in those countries?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, I think we got to be more respectful of the people of our region to believe that Iran can run all these capitals with proxies. Nobody – believe me, nobody can run Yemen – (laughter) – other than Yemenis. People –

MR. IGNATIUS: (Laughs.) That may be – that may be a different question.

MIN. ZARIF: People have tried. Believe me, people have tried in the past, and that's why we believe Yemen was a quagmire for those who got involved. Everybody in their right mind believed that Yemen was an area that you should stay away from. Allow the Yemenis to resolve their problems, help them. Yemen is not a theater for war, it's a theater for humanitarian assistance.

Iran, you see, is a force that cannot be neglected in this region, as Saudi Arabia is a force that cannot be neglected in our region. We're not trying to exclude anybody. I didn't ask Saudi Arabia not to be invited to Geneva II because they supported Daesh, because they provided arms to Daesh, because they provided financial assistance to Daesh. I didn't ask another country to be excluded because every month a thousand new recruits are crossing its borders into Syria and Iraq to join Daesh. We didn't ask it because it was impractical. It was imprudent to exclude any regional country. But I was excluded from attending Geneva II.

I think it is important for people to deal with realities. I can tell you that Iran wants peace with all its neighbors. We believe that peace in the immediate neighborhood, in the Persian Gulf region, is imperative for our security, for our prosperity. But we do not allow people to arbitrarily decide that Iran should not play a role in this region because that decision will not hold any water. It will not have any impact on the ground. Iran is a serious player in this region.

Let me give you just one very brief example. Some of my friends have heard this. After the United States changed the government in Iraq – you call it liberation, whatever – after we had the new Iraqi government – (laughter) – President Talabani came to the Security Council. I was Iran’s ambassador, a Persian, non-Arab. And President Talabani came and hugged me, and he shook hands with all the Arab ambassadors. And the Arab ambassadors came to me and say, why is it like this? And I told them: realistically, because for 30 years you supported the wrong guy and we supported the right guy. You should not forget the fact that the United States and all these countries in the region supported Saddam Hussein when he used chemical weapons against my people, against the Kurds, against others. If you want to forget it, I won’t let you. And the region made that wrong decision.

Now, people in the region feel very close to us because we were on the right side of history. And I think we will benefit from the fact that we were on the right side of history with the people of the region.

MR. IGNATIUS: So just to return to this core issue from the standpoint of your – of your Arab neighbors, in this regional dialogue that you’re proposing – which is – which is a very interesting and rich idea – would Iran be prepared to discuss limits on its involvement with groups in neighboring countries as part of this process of regional stability? Is that something you’d be prepared to discuss?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, what I have said is that the regional security mechanism should be based on principles of international law, and one of the most fundamental principles is noninterference in the internal affairs of other states. Iran is committed to that principle. Unfortunately, on our eastern borders, our people are being abducted by terrorists who are paid by certain foreign countries.

MR. IGNATIUS: So I want to switch the focus specifically now to Syria. High Representative Mogherini said yesterday, inviting the kind of Iranian role in regional problems that you’ve described, that she would favor that – a major role, she said – and she indicated that she would be interested in seeing that happen in the case of Syria. My sense is that we’re now in a period where the U.S. and Russia are trying to convene a smaller group of countries that could reconvene a kind of – a version of what we call Geneva II, a peace process for Syria, political transition process for Syria, and that Iran would then be invited as this got going. The U.S. has formally lifted its objections to Iran eventually taking part in such a – such a conference. Does that seem like an idea that’s ripe? Is it time to move toward a real discussion of political transition/stabilization, end of this terrible war in Syria?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, I guess I answered that. Iran always wanted this. There were others who were trying to exclude Iran, to their own detriment.

Now, we believe that any outcome in Syria should be Syrian-owned and then it should be facilitated by countries in the region, and there is a lot that can be done. There is a need for global involvement in terms of suppressing terrorism – I mean, financing of terrorists, recruitment of terrorists. I mean, we’re dealing with an issue of immense significance.

Daesh is no longer a problem limited to Syria. Now the recruitment of Daesh in Afghanistan is mind-boggling. And there are ideological clashes between Taliban and al-Qaida and Daesh. The joining of Daesh and al-Qaida in Yemen are, I mean, alarming. The fact that Boko Haram is pledging allegiance to Daesh, the fact that al-Shabaab in Somalia, the fact that certain Libyan faction, this is becoming a huge global threat. If anybody in our region or outside our region believed that Daesh could be used for limited, shortsighted political objectives against Iran, against Iraq or against Syria, they now should find out or should see for themselves that this monster that they created, like the previous monsters that they created – and there are quite a few of them. Saddam Hussein was a monster of their own – was a monster. Taliban, another monster of their own creation. Al-Qaida – you remember Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? – another monster of their own creation. People – as you say here, old habits die hard, and this is one old habit: to create temporary oppositions to your adversaries which live to bother you and to become a nightmare for everybody.

So we need to come to the realization that we need to fight this phenomenon. Iran and Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region have a common interest in fighting this, whether it's in Syria or in Iraq. And Syria is an important place where we need to focus upon because you cannot fight these terrorists and allow them to take refuge in Syria. This is what's happening now. There is a successful operation in Iraq, but they go back and regroup in Syria. So we need – we need to focus on Syria.

I cannot comment on a proposal that I don't know about – I mean, U.S.-Russian joint action. I think any resolution to this issue should come from the region or from the United Nations or from Syria itself. But we are not closing the door on any option to find a peaceful resolution in Syria.

MR. IGNATIUS: Any option sounds like it includes the issue of political transition. You've spoke about the growth of Daesh in the –

MIN. ZARIF: I'm talking about option, not precondition.

MR. IGNATIUS: No, no, I – well, I don't mean to say precondition here, but any person from the region, I think, who's concerned about Syria would say that the biggest recruiting poster for Daesh today is the continued presence of Bashar al-Assad as president of Syria with his campaign of barrel bombs and other attacks on civilians. So that – people would say that has to be an issue for this process you're describing. Would you agree that that's an acceptable issue?

MIN. ZARIF: I find that premise to be unsupported by facts of the last three or four years. And I believe the reason we have the continued bloodshed in Syria is because people insisted on that precondition. You have to allow a dialogue. Now, we said from the beginning that Syrian situation does not have a military solution. You need to have a similar political process in Syria, with ceasefire, with a national unity government, with inter-Syrian dialogue and reform, and finally leading to a new situation in Syria.

But the Syrians should be the ones who will decide what will be the elements of the new situation. If people from the outside want to set preconditions for the Syrians, what then should be the outcome? You see, it's as if you're negotiating about something and you want to have an agreement about the results of negotiations before you start the negotiation. This is what the negotiations is all about. The Syrians should sit down together and decide what will be their future. You cannot tell them that this person should not be a part of your future, the other person should not be a part of your future. That should – you should allow the negotiations to resolve that.

I'm not saying whether this is good or bad. What I'm saying is that this will prevent a negotiation from taking place. And unless you have a negotiation, you will not have a solution. And unless you have a solution, you will have continued bloodshed. So people who are accusing the government of Syria and who are saying that the government of Syria has the blood of so many people on its hands should go back and do a little bit of soul searching and tell themselves, what prevented the ceasefire in Syria three years ago? What prevented the ceasefire in Syria two years ago? What prevented the ceasefire in Syria last year?

The only thing that prevented a ceasefire during all that time was a precondition. What prevented a freeze? Why is the freeze in Aleppo frozen? Go ask Staffan de Mistura. Who froze the freeze in Aleppo? Was it the government in Damascus or the opposition? People should come to realize that opposition and fighting has become a business. That business should end. And we should have a peace process geared toward national reconciliation, a national unity government in Syria. And I do not arrogate to myself the responsibility of deciding what the outcome of that process will be before the Syrians sit around the negotiating table and start discussing that out.

MR. IGNATIUS: Mr. Minister, I want to ask you one more question. And it's a personal one, because it involves my colleague Jason Rezaian, who has been imprisoned in Iran for more than a year on charges of espionage that his family, his newspaper and now the U.S. government, in the voice of President Obama last Saturday, say are false. And so I want to ask you, in the – in the spirit of the moment, we're talking about momentous agreements, in the spirit of what President Obama's called mutual interest and mutual respect, wouldn't this be a good time for the release of my colleague, Jason?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, as I told you in Munich and I'm telling you again, that I hope that no one – nobody will be lingering in prison, including a lot of Iranians who committed no crime across the world but are waiting in prison to be extradited to the United States for violating U.S. sanctions, which are illegal anyway. One of them died in the Philippines in prison. So I'm not trying to make it quid pro quo, but I'm just saying that, of course – I mean, The Washington Post has a much better publicity campaign about Jason than we have about people who are lingering in prisons in Southeast Asia as well, who committed no crime.

Unfortunately, your friend and my friend, Jason, is accused of a very serious offense. And I hope that he's cleared in the court. But he will have to face a court. He's an Iranian citizen. It is unfortunate that some overzealous low-level operative tried to take advantage of

him, and I don't go into further detail because that's a pending case before the court. And I hope that he will be cleared of that charge.

But what the fact is that there are people who take advantage of the needs of some of – some people who try to get a visa to come to the United States or get a visa for their wives to come to the United States, and make demands that are illegal and dangerous and damaging to the professionalism of a journalist. But I still continue to hope that Jason will be able to clear his name before a court.

MR. IGNATIUS: As I said, in Munich when I asked you the same question, I appreciate your expressing your own personal sympathy for Jason and Jason's case.

I want to turn now to the audience for questions. And I would like to recognize first – assuming that he's here – Frank Wisner, who has been active in the Track II, the support for this process for so many years, with Suzanne DiMaggio, our host here. And I just want to note the immense role that Frank and his colleagues have played. So, Frank, a question from you.

Q: David, thank you.

Minister, if I could add my own appreciation to having you on this very important occasion be as frank as you have been. I'd like to ask you if you would take a step back in your presentation this morning to a fascinating description of your vision of the region, taking us back to 1986, and your suggestion that Iran is committed to the shaping of a new architecture of security for the region. Let me ask you to think about that and take us a bit further with two questions.

First, trust is a problem. So how do you build trust? What steps can be taken to convene the parties to that understanding? Second, what kind of understanding does Iran have in mind when it talks about new security architecture for the area?

MIN. ZARIF: Shall I?

MR. IGNATIUS: Yes, please.

MIN. ZARIF: Well, thank you, Ambassador Wisner, for that very pertinent question. I think you would not need confidence-building measures if you had plenty of trust in any region. And we had situations – I mean, my model is CSCE and then OSCE in Europe, which was built on absolute mistrust and confrontation during the Cold War, but led to a significant organization that has been able to operate for the past many years. So what's important is to take the necessary steps.

So what needs to be done? First is a set of principles that everybody should share. And I tried to allude to those principles in my – in my op-ed piece, principles that everybody accepts, but it's important for us to reiterate them: sovereign equality, independence, sovereignty, respect for borders, inviolability of international borders, noninterference in the internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes – you see the non-use (sic) of force that is unfortunately taking place. All

of this would be the starting principles, as they used – in the Helsinki process they called them tickets; for you to enter this process, you need to accept these principles.

Then there are confidence-building measures. The CBMs can include anything from promoting cultural exchanges and tourism to interaction between religious leaders. How we have a very serious problem. And that is the problem of sectarianism in our region. And there is a need for our religious leaders to start interacting in order to find common ground. This is a – this is a problem that would not be limited to one country or one area. It will be a global problem if it gets out of hand.

And there is no reason for that. You know, Islamic sects have lived together for the past 1,400 years. I mean, there have been short instances of clash, but in every case those clashes were not theological, they were political. So, political leaders have used theological differences in order to advance their political cause or their political game, in my view. And we are committed. As the minority in the Muslim world, we have an existential interest in preventing a sectarian clash. Nobody in Iran would be looking for a sectarian clash, because we will be undermined in a sectarian war.

So these are, Frank, all the measures that we can take in order to move this process forward. And I believe a vision should develop in our region. Security cannot be bought. Security cannot be imported. Security must be fostered from within. And I think that is an important understanding, maybe even self-evident to many, but it requires a great deal of soul-searching for our region to come to that conclusion.

MR. IGNATIUS: Let me just note to members of the audience, if you have a question – I see hands raised – you should write it down and give it to the people who are the organizers or tweet it to the Twitter address that's been given. And it'll be passed up to me and I'll try to get to it.

I want to begin with a question about Saudi Arabia, with which you have tried some diplomatic outreach, from what I read and what I hear. And the question – this is unsigned, but it's an interesting one: Mr. Minister, King Salman of Saudi Arabia reshuffled the government today, including changing the crown prince and foreign minister. How do you see this affecting relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia? And I guess more generally I'd ask: How is your diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia going?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, we have good bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, it has been marred in the past several weeks by this sexual molestation of two of our pilgrims in Jeddah Airport by Saudi police officers, but the Saudi authorities are promising us – including the new crown prince, who is the minister of interior – who promised our ambassador about two weeks ago in their private meeting that they would bring them to justice to the full extent of the law. And this was a very, very serious crime.

But other than that, bilaterally we don't have any difficulty with Saudi Arabia. And we are prepared to engage with them multilaterally, because we do not see a – I mean, we see that we have common challenges and common opportunities in the region. We don't see our threat –

our interests in the region to be mutually exclusive. This is our perception. I certainly hope that they have the same perception because, as you say, I'm not a dancer but it takes two to tango. (Laughter.) So I mean, I won't be able to do this alone. We require serious partners in Saudi Arabia to engage in serious discussion.

So that's what we're interested in. We respect the decisions of the government of Saudi Arabia. We recognize the government of Saudi Arabia as the sovereign government in that country. And we respect their decision. It's the decision of the kind of Saudi Arabia to change his foreign minister. We will deal with now former Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir, now Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir. We have respect for him, as we had respect for his predecessor, Prince Saud.

MR. IGNATIUS: This is a question via Twitter from Anand Giridharadas – I hope I'm pronouncing that right – who is a New York Times reporter.

And the question is a simple, direct one: Why does hatred of American have such force in Iran? And how can we – and I'd include, how can you – dissipate it?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, it's the behavior. And I believe skepticism about U.S. is widespread in Iran, unfortunately. I don't find that appealing, but it's a reality in the – in Iran. Even American polling organizations who have taken polls in Iran indicate that a large majority of Iranians want a resolution, but an even larger majority of Iranians don't trust the United States. So it's a good place to begin.

I think we have an agreement – or we will have an agreement, I hope. It's in the interest of everybody. And even the leader said that this will be a test for us whether we can in fact engage in other areas. Now, our engagement with the United States is limited to the nuclear issue. This is the easiest issue to resolve, because there are no contradicting objectives. We have very similar objectives. We want no weapons and we want to have normal relations with the West – not yet the United States, with the West.

If we reach that understanding, which shouldn't be that difficult, then we can build on it and we can see whether this provides a good foundation to engage in other areas. We haven't made that determination yet because the jury is still out. Once we have an agreement, if we have one, and once we start implementing that in good faith we will see whether we can dent that wall of mistrust that unfortunately exists between our two countries.

MR. IGNATIUS: I brought along a quotation from the supreme leader: If the other side stops its usual obstinacy, this will be an experience for us and we will find out that we can negotiate with it over other matters as well.

MIN. ZARIF: That was what I was referring to.

MR. IGNATIUS: So I want to come back to – that seems like an invitation to something broader. I want to come back to the question. This is from Tara Kangarlou from Al Jazeera

America who asks: If/when an Iran deal is reached, would you support establishing diplomatic relations with the United States?

MIN. ZARIF: It's too early and too premature to state that. We need to take one step at a time. I don't see that in the – in the immediate future. I want to be able to resolve this issue, to remove that cloud from our region and get to the region. I said in my article in Asharq Al-Awsat that our region is our priority. And I really believe that we need a stable region. That's my priority.

My priority is to move and work with our neighbors in the region to deal with these common threats – Daesh, extremism, sectarianism. These are immediate threats to them, immediate threats to us. And, if people believed it, immediate threats to the world at large. So that's where I want to focus once we move from this issue. Even as we deal with this issue, we are focusing on that.

MR. IGNATIUS: You have spoken at length and interestingly about the region, about regional stability. So there's one obvious question that hasn't been asked, and it's been submitted by a member of the audience. Would you negotiate with Israel without prior conditions?

MIN. ZARIF: No, because we have a situation where those who are directly involved have been the subject of continued violation of their most, I mean, elemental rights – the right to exist, the right to statehood. They have to resolve those problems. And it's not – it's not our land that is occupied. It's not our people who are driven from their homes. It's not our people who are being bombarded once every two years in Gaza. So they have to address their problems. They shouldn't look for scapegoats or smokescreens.

MR. IGNATIUS: So does that mean that if those problems involving the Palestinians Gaza and elsewhere, if those problems were resolved, would Iran then be willing to negotiate with Israel?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, why do we need to? I mean, it's not our problem. It's a problem that the Palestinians have faced for 60 years. And from our perspective, it's a policy of aggression, of domination that has prevented a resolution of this crisis over the past 60 years. You're looking at the wrong address. Iran is not your problem. I mean, we're not – we're not doing anything. I mean, it is the policies that have continued to simply neglect the right of an entire nation to live as a state – Palestine. And once that issue is resolved, then Iran is nowhere to interfere.

MR. IGNATIUS: Let me take a question from Carol Tuite in the audience, who is from the Franklin Street Policy Group. And she asks: if the nuclear deal proceeds as expected and sanctions are lifted, what are the possibilities for more open, democratic political processes in Iran?

MIN. ZARIF: Well, everybody can have more democracy, but I ask you, you find one state in our region for – in which over the past 34 years government administrations have

changed hands through elections and each government has presided over the election of its opposition into office. Find a single other – single – I mean, single. In every democratic – so-called democratic country in our region, you’ve had at least two coup d’etats in the last 34 years.

In Iran, every election – and I – you want me to name the elections? President Rafsanjani, elected. President Khatami, who at that time was his opposition – President Khatami, elected. President Ahmadinejad, who at that time was his opposition, continues to be – President Ahmadinejad, elected. President Rouhani, who at that time and how is his opposition. So find another single example in our region. So before preaching human rights to Iran, please preach it to your allies.

MR. IGNATIUS: But I noticed that when you came back from Luzerne to Tehran, there seemed to be a lot of Iranians who were pretty happy about what you’d done and were pretty excited by it, which led a lot of us observing Iran from afar to think that, yeah, there was a desire to move out of this period of isolation into something new, something more open. I’m not wrong about that, am I?

MIN. ZARIF: No, you’re not. The Iranian people want – I mean, the Iranian people went to the polls, trusted the polls – 73 percent of the Iranian population trusted the polls – after everything that had been said about Iran. And I was in the opposition during the last six – eight years. It was in at home most of the time in early retirement. So you don’t expect me to very friendly to President Ahmadinejad.

But the point is, Iranians decided in a free election, after all the publicity, after everybody inviting them to stay home, after every foreign radio and television station telling them that your vote doesn’t count, they said no to them and went to the polls in large numbers – 73 percent of them – and chose a president who wanted to have interaction based on dignity with the rest of the world.

Of course they’ll be happy if that reaches a positive conclusion. That’s the platform on which President Rouhani was elected, interaction with dignity. So these two words are the operative words. If interaction succeeds without dignity, I don’t think any Iranian will come to the streets to welcome me. And I believe they will choose any when – anytime I will chose dignity over interaction. If I’m supposed to sacrifice my national dignity in order to be able to interact, then I’ll stay home.

MR. IGNATIUS: So let me ask you a question – this may be our final one, we’ll see – about the subject of American politics.

MIN. ZARIF: I don’t interfere in the internal affairs of the United States. (Laughs, laughter.)

MR. IGNATIUS: I’m not asking you to.

MIN. ZARIF: That was the – that was the first ticket principle.

MR. IGNATIUS: Senator Cotton aside, here's the question, and it's an interesting one: Many of the candidates preparing to run for president in 2016, particularly the Republicans, have suggested they will take a tougher position with your government. Do you worry about this or do you believe the status quo will essentially be maintained, no matter who wins in 2016?

MIN. ZARIF: I believe the United States will risk isolating itself in the world if there is an agreement and it decides to break it. And I don't think anybody will find that decision by the United States acceptable. And I think what runs in the world today is how people perceive a decision to be legitimate. I think the United States, whether you have a Democratic president or whether you have a Republican president, is bound by international law – whether some senators like it or not. And international law requires the United States to live up by the terms of an agreement that this government enters into.

You know that – maybe Senator Cotton doesn't – but you know that 90 percent of U.S. overseas agreements are executive agreements. And that is not recent. From 1933 onwards you have executive agreements that have stood the test of decades, various administrations, even changing global environment from Cold – from a bipolar world to a whatever transitional phase – from Cold War to non-Cold War, to another Cold War – all sorts of stuff have happened in the world. And you've had executive agreements which have stayed and which have continued to operate.

You know that the Status of Force Agreement that you have with Iraq is an executive agreement. You know that the Algiers Accord that you have with Iran is an executive agreement. You know that the agreement that you have with Afghanistan is an executive agreement. None of them have been ratified by U.S. Congress, and they stand. So if the U.S. Senate wants to send a message to the rest of the world that all of these agreements that the United States has signed, 90 percent of U.S. international agreements, are invalid then you will have chaos in your bilateral relations with the rest of the world. I mean, you're welcome to do it, but I don't think that would be something that even the most radical elements in Congress want to see.

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, with that message to Congress, join me in thanking Mr. Zarif. (Applause.)

MIN. ZARIF: Thank you.

(END)