

Iran to Hit Israel Hard with Smart Power

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*Amidst the cascading tensions in the Middle East following the assassination of Hamas leader **Ismail Haniyeh** by Israel and vows of 'revenge' in Tehran, the new government under **President Massoud Pezeshkian**, sworn in on Tuesday, made its first move on Thursday. **Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif** was appointed as the '[Strategic Deputy](#)' of the Iranian president entrusting him with the responsibility of the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS).*

The CSS is the research arm of the president's office. Zarif's appointment signifies his return to the foreign policy arena and Pezeshkian's high estimation of his unique credentials to chariot Tehran's Track 1.5 diplomacy.

Zarif's long exposure to the American policymaking circles during his extended tenure as ambassador to the UN and his active social networking in New York are his strategic assets. Zarif is a familiar face and is highly regarded in the western capitals.

Pezeshkian prioritised Zarif's appointment; he's yet to announce his choice of foreign minister. Zarif's return to the diplomatic circuit cannot but be seen as a signal to the Western powers. There is a paradox here. While Iran factors in that the US would lose heavily from any direct military confrontation, the fact remains that it is only the Americans and the Europeans who are able to stop a full-fledged war in the region in the developing crisis situation.

Image: Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



This also seems to be Moscow's line of thinking. In a phone conversation with Iran's **Acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani** on Thursday, Russian **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** "called on **all parties without exception** that could influence the situation in the Gaza Strip and in the Middle East in general to avoid actions that could result in further destabilisation of the situation and new casualties among the civilians" — per the [Russian readout](#). [Emphasis added.]

In [remarks at the Majlis on Tuesday](#) after the swearing-in ceremony, President Pezeshkian reaffirmed that his government's foreign policy will strive for constructive engagement with the world while upholding Iran's national dignity and interests.

Pezeshkian's election victory suggests that reformism has transformed as a major current in Iran's mainstream politics. The Iranian dialectic is fraught with consequences for Israel and the US insofar as their old calculus to fuel dissent and trigger social unrest in Iran won't work anymore. To be sure, the spectre of a constructive engagement between the West and Iran haunts Israel.

Israel will view Zarif's return as emblematic of a renewed Iranian push for negotiations for a nuclear deal that might open a pathway for the removal of western sanctions as well as a vista of broad-based cooperation. In this context, in a veiled reference to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Pezeshkian made it clear in his remarks at the Majlis that "we have been and will remain committed to our obligations."

Against such a promising backdrop, the IAEA **Director-General Rafael Grossi** has [sought an urgent meeting with Pezeshkian](#) "at the earliest convenience." In a letter to Pezeshkian, Grossi wrote,

"Cooperation between the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been at the focal attention of the international circles for many years. I am confident that, together, we will be able to make decisive progress on this crucial matter."

Again, another sub-plot playing out here is that Israel can no longer hope to get the Gulf countries — Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular — to align with it against Iran. Times have changed in Iran and the region as well as internationally, including the US where for the first time, open resentment and disapproval of Israeli policies is being voiced.

The Saudi **Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman** congratulated Pezeshkian by phone on his election victory last month to express his satisfaction with the strengthening of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in various fields, and stressing the need to strengthen the relations as much as possible. The Saudi move registered the hope and expectation that they can do business with the new government in Tehran.

Similarly, the [Arab League delisting of Hezbollah](#) recently would speak to the extent to which Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are moving away from Washington's anti-Iranian positions. The regional states are increasingly accommodative of Iran and are trying to find ways to "share the neighbourhood" with Tehran — to borrow the famous words of then-US President Barack Obama.

Hezbollah is the crown jewel of Iran's Islamic revolution. Therefore, Arab League's signal that Hezbollah is an essential player conveys a big message from Riyadh of decreasing

regional support for US policies aimed at squeezing Iran and Tehran-aligned actors in the Arab world.

In fact, on Thursday, Saudi Minister of State **Prince Mansour bin Miteb bin Abdulaziz** personally handed over to Pezeshkian a [letter from King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud](#) expressing hope for more constructive steps in developing bilateral relations with Iran and for the continuation of coordination and consultation to promote regional peace and security.

All in all, in the rapidly evolving regional security balance, the Gulf monarchies, which watch Iran closely, are sensing a paradigm shift. The bottom line is, Pezeshkian's call for regional unity to counter extremist influences. He said,

“Radical voices should not drown out the voices of the nearly two billion peace-loving Muslims. Islam is a religion of peace.”

Forty-five years after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Islamic Republic speaks up as the voice of moderation and reason! Of course, this does not mean that Iran and the other members of the Axis of Resistance will moderate their response to the recent actions by Israel. Iran's retaliation to the killing of Haniyeh is certain to be more severe, more painful than anything Tel Aviv experienced so far.

A war with Iran will be very unlike Israel's previous wars with the Arab states. It will be open-ended until Israel allows the creation of a Palestinian state. Israel's capacity to retaliate will steadily get depleted, as happened vis-a-vis Hezbollah. The medium and long-term advantage lies with Iran, a much bigger country than Israel, since it will be [a war on multiple fronts with non-state actors](#).

On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that Israel acted on its own to attack Iran's sovereignty, which is tantamount to an act of war, without [some sort of US approval](#). It is this 'known unknown' factor that makes the situation very dangerous. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei has already ordered a direct strike on Israeli territory.

The [Washington Post](#), citing Pentagon officials, has written that keeping in view a possible escalation, the US Navy has already concentrated 12 warships in the region. Among them is the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, which is located in the Persian Gulf with six destroyers. There are also five US warships in the Eastern Mediterranean. Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that Israel “faces difficult days” and is “ready for any scenario.”

Netanyahu is confident about US support, which was manifest in the warm welcome he received during his recent trip to Washington. Possibly, it was this support that allowed Netanyahu to cut short his visit to the US, return home and forthwith venture into such an aggravation of the situation.

If so, the US is coordinating the situation, but then, US-Israeli history is also one of the tail wagging the dog, more often than not. Clearly, Netanyahu is trying to create a new reality in the Middle East and is writing scenarios of these events directly for himself. Suffice to say, he is both the director and the screenwriter, while the other protagonists, including the US and Europeans, are forced either to play along with him, or to make a good face at a bad game.

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Featured image: People gather at the Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Mosque in Doha for Friday prayers before the burial of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh [Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera]

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