

**Keynote Speech by Dr. Javad Zarif**

**at the 63rd Pugwash Conference**

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Dear Friends,

It is a profound honor to stand before you today at the 63rd Pugwash Conference here in Hiroshima. I extend my deepest gratitude to the organizers for inviting me to address such a distinguished gathering of scientists, policymakers, civil society leaders, and thinkers from around the globe. Today, I speak not in any official government capacity—indeed, I hold none—but in my personal capacity as a professor and founder and President of the PAIAB Institute, a non-governmental organization dedicated to architecting inspiring future possibilities. Together with all of you, I hope we can explore pathways to construct a safer and more humane future.

Being here in Hiroshima, eighty years after the first and hopefully the last use of nuclear weapons, evokes a deep sense of solemn responsibility. This city, once utterly devastated by the horror of atomic bombs, stands as an eternal testament to both human folly and human resilience.

Hiroshima is far more than a site of unimaginable tragedy; it has transformed into a powerful symbol of humanity's ability to rise from the ashes of destruction and to advocate for a world liberated from the nightmare of nuclear annihilation.

As Iranians, we too understand the unspeakable horror of weapons of mass destruction and the enduring human suffering they unleash. Our people experienced this barbarity firsthand. During Saddam Hussein's war against Iran, his regime, with ruthless impunity, systematically deployed chemical agents against our combatants and innocent civilians and even against Iraqi civilians.

Walking through the horrifying images of some of the 140 thousand fatalities and nearly 650 thousand *Hibakusha* at the Hiroshima Peace Museum last night, reminded me of receiving Kurdish victims of Iraqi use of chemical weapons at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York in 1988. They had come for treatment and as a small sample of tens of thousands of Iranians murdered by chemical weapons and many more left to grapple with lifelong injuries that continue to torment survivors and their families to this very day.

Thus, for us Iranians, weapons of mass destruction are not relics of a distant historical past; they are demons that persist in eroding the lives and dignity of their victims long after the guns have fallen silent.

It is a bitter irony that the very countries that falsely accuse Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons today, were the same ones that actively supported Saddam Hussein during those dark years. They armed him extensively, including with chemical weapons,

financed him and turned a blind eye to his atrocities. Even when presented with overwhelming evidence, they dismissed it—choosing geopolitical convenience over any semblance of moral responsibility.

And they went to great lengths to deny the victims of even the most rudimentary means of self-defense.

Allow me to share a different personal memory that captures the depth of that betrayal. As a young student, turned part-time diplomat in the mid-80s, I approached the President of the United Nations Security Council at the time—a French ambassador—to inform him that chemical weapons were being used against Iran. His response was chilling: “I’m not authorized to talk to you about this.” According to the New York Times, Pentagon was not so horrified about their use. It was just another way of killing people.

Seven UN investigations confirmed the use of chemical weapons against Iran. Yet not a single resolution condemning Saddam was ever adopted by the Security Council during the entirety of his aggression against us. Of course, everything changed when he invaded Kuwait.

It is precisely because of this painful history—not in spite of it—that Iran has maintained a resolute stance against weapons of mass destruction. In my view, Iran’s opposition is not rhetorical; it is strategic.

Over the past three decades, Iran’s nuclear program has been viewed through two dominant lenses. Adversaries have portrayed it as a clandestine effort to develop nuclear weapons. Many of you remember that since the mid-1990s, Netanyahu has repeatedly engaged in fearmongering, claiming that Iran was mere weeks or months away from acquiring a nuclear bomb. Others have viewed Iranian activities as a lawful pursuit of advanced technology, stopping short of actual weaponization. Both perspectives share the same flawed assumption that Iran’s nuclear program is ultimately about weapons.

Let me suggest my understanding of Ayatollah Khamenei’s insistence on continuing the nuclear program, although he has a religious decree that nuclear weapons are prohibited, and in spite of the fact that the program proved to be of no deterrence value. For him, it has always been about something far more profound and enduring: **dignity**. He has been adamant about pursuing peaceful nuclear program *precisely because Iran was told not to* – through threats, sanctions, and intimidation. For him — and many Iranians, this endeavor has never been a quest for domination. It has been a test of resistance to submission.

Consider this: four decades of sanctions, cyberattacks, and assassinations have not forced Iran either to capitulate or to build a bomb. What sustains the program is not military ambition or deterrence; it’s self-respect. Even the recent unprovoked aggression by two nuclear powers could not alter this reality.

I hope that the United States has drawn two critically important conclusions from its collaboration with Israel's failed aggression. But, while it is essential to learn from history, it should not become a prison that limits the possibilities before us. The past can serve as a guide, but it must not define our destiny. So, I also hope that the U.S. can muster the courage to learn and move forward.

First, the aggression did not achieve its intended objectives. Israel recklessly miscalculated the fact that Iranians always unite against intruders and defend their country.

Moreover, this conflict demonstrated that Iran possesses both the capability and the will to inflict significant harm on two nuclear powers. I am not a war monger nor am I happy about anyone being killed. But the facts are undeniable: Iran has proven capable of inflicting damage across Israel, while in Iran itself, 22 of 31 provinces never even heard the sound of a single bullet. In stark contrast, every corner of Israel experienced the impact of Iranian missiles, underscoring the asymmetry in vulnerability.

The second lesson U.S. must internalize is that Iran's nuclear capabilities cannot—and will not—be “obliterated,” as Trump delusionally dreamt. The real capabilities lie not in physical assets like centrifuges or stockpiles of enriched uranium, but in the intangible realm of scientific knowledge, technological expertise, and innovative know-how embedded in the minds of Iranian scientists. They tried to kill the best of them. But the technical and scientific infrastructure cannot be “obliterated”.

It is thus in the best interest of the United States to set aside the illusion of demanding Iran's unconditional surrender and instead pivot toward genuine negotiations. The goal should be to forge agreements that ensure this advanced capability remains transparent and exclusively peaceful.

The impasse that culminated in this unprovoked and failed aggression in the midst of diplomatic negotiations stems from a “cognitive deficit”. At its heart lies a “dignity gap”: a disconnect between how the West perceives Iran and how Iranians view themselves.

Any sustainable solution requires treating Iran not as a perpetual threat to be contained or coerced but as an equal partner in global affairs, with legitimate interests and contributions to offer. This shift demands constructing a new framework for engagement, one firmly grounded in mutual respect, transparency, and shared prosperity.

Iran must also break free from the confining “threat paradigm”. After two hundred and twenty years of repeated humiliations at the hands of external powers, Iran has now decisively demonstrated that, whatever the human and economic costs (and I am not here to justify or minimize those costs), the era of “hit and run” is over. The world knows today that Iran is no easy prey. A superpower that spends over \$800 billion a year on its military could not humiliate Iran which allocates less than \$10 billion to defense.

In fact, that superpower was compelled to evacuate all personnel from its military bases surrounding Iran before daring to launch reckless bombings against Iran's safeguarded facilities.

Equipped with this hard-gained confidence, Iran can now engage the world. It is time for all of us—Iran, the region, and the broader global community—to transition from a “default future” shaped by the mistakes and grievances of the past into a “generated future” deliberately crafted from the boundless possibilities that lie ahead.

I have already outlined some of what the West needs to do. Now, let me suggest concrete steps that Iran can take, leveraging the newfound confidence.

### **First: Empowering Iranian People:**

Iran's citizens are its greatest asset. Through decades of war, economic sanctions, and international isolation – and through several millennia before that – Iranians have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, turning adversities into opportunities. To build a brighter future, Iran must prioritize nurturing this human capital not through the lens of external threats but through the expansive paradigm of internal potential and global contribution.

### **Second: Enhancing Defense:**

Shifting to a “possibilities paradigm” does not imply naiveté about real threats; Iran will remain vigilant. Iran continues to spend far less on defense than any other major player in our region. To maintain security, we should bolster our defense, while simultaneously advocating for regional caps on military expenditures.

### **Third: Building a Strong Region:**

Iran's unique geography positions it as a natural hub for fostering integration across West Asia and the Caucasus. President Rouhani proposed the *Hormuz Peace Endeavor*, or HOPE. In my capacity as Vice President last winter and in an essay for the Economist, I proposed the Muslim West Asian Dialogue Association (MWADA), designed to replace enmity with amity through cultural and economic ties leading to a regional non-aggression pact.

These proposals often encountered resistance due to entrenched zero-sum mentalities. Yet, recent events have reshaped the region's psychological landscape. Israel's attacks on Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, and even Qatar in a span of only six months have engendered a shared sense of vulnerability, which could paradoxically become the foundation for cooperation.

Imagine the transformative possibilities: interconnected energy grids; joint nuclear research centers; desalination projects; economic corridors linking Central Asia's resources to the Indian Ocean's trade routes; and cultural exchanges celebrating shared heritage. Under the auspices of the United Nations, these ideas can evolve from concepts into a robust architecture for regional peace.

#### **Fourth: Reviving Global Diplomacy:**

Iran's deep-seated skepticism toward the West is not unfounded; it is a product of a long, painful history of betrayals—from the 1953 coup to the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, and Europe's subsequent failure to uphold their commitments. Most recently, diplomacy was met not with reciprocity but with bombs, and engagement was rewarded with violence. Trust, painstakingly built, has too often been casually betrayed.

Yet, despite this disheartening record, Iran and the West share an existential, mutual interest in averting perpetual confrontation. The JCPOA demonstrated that negotiations work. Its collapse, however, illustrates how fragile peace becomes when one party treats agreements as disposable political tools.

To break free from these endless cycles of crisis, we must collectively construct new mechanisms—both regional and global—that prioritize institutionalizing trust.

One practical step that I proposed in a recent Foreign Policy essay could be a U.S.–Iran non-aggression pact.

Another initiative that a colleague and I proposed in the Guardian a couple of months ago is the Middle East Network for Atomic Research and Advancement, or MENARA—a term that in Arabic means “beacon.” MENARA envisions a collaborative regional network dedicated to non-proliferation while harnessing peaceful nuclear cooperation. This network should include an enrichment consortium, bringing together existing capabilities into a collective peaceful and transparent effort. Crucially, the network would also incorporate robust oversight mechanisms, including mutual inspections to foster trust through transparency. Open to all Middle Eastern countries willing to renounce nuclear weapons and adhere to strict safeguards, its mission is to reframe the nuclear question from a source of tension into a platform for collaboration.

Imagine scientists from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey working side by side in shared laboratories – turning suspicion into synergy, competition into cooperation.

Dear Friends,

We must liberate ourselves from the shackles of past failures, grievances, and incompletions that have long blinded us to these realistic, achievable possibilities. It is time to recognize a fundamental truth: our security is inherently interdependent; no nation can attain security at the expense of the insecurity of others. Security cannot be purchased, nor peace can be guaranteed by the abundance of imported weapons. It requires the nurturing of trust.

As we gather here in Hiroshima, we are reminded that destruction is not our destiny. The renowned scientists gathered in this hall prove that the same human mind that split the atom possesses an even greater capacity to heal the wounds it has inflicted.

The future will not be shaped by those who weaponize fear, but by those who dare to imagine and inspire.

The recent news is troubling. Trump's order to resume US nuclear weapons testing – following Russian development of nuclear missiles – lays bare what can only be called Trump's apocalyptic hypocrisy. We should not be bystanders. There is no place more appropriate than Hiroshima for us to resolve to replace the *MAD*ness of **M**utually **A**ssured **D**estruction with the enlightened wisdom of *MEND* which can stand for two mutually reinforcing objectives:

“**M**utual Engagement for **N**uclear **D**isarmament”

and

“**M**utual Engagement to **N**urture **D**evelopment”.

So, let us *MEND* our relations with the aim of *MEND*ing the world to be worthy of our shared humanity.

Thank you.