

Amity instead of enmity

A new Iranian approach to regional security and prosperity,

by M. Javad Zarif

Iran's vice president on how his country can make the region more secure and prosperous

As a student of international relations with decades at the forefront of global diplomacy, I write this not as a representative of the Iranian Government but solely in my personal capacity. My experiences have taught me that achieving stability in West Asia, particularly the Persian Gulf region, require more than mere crisis management. It demands bold, visionary initiatives. I propose the establishment of a Muslim West Asian Dialogue Association (MWADA) as the mechanism to achieve this transformation.

MWADA invites all core Muslim countries in West Asia—Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, (the future government of) Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen—to engage in comprehensive negotiations. Relevant envoys from the United Nations can take part too. This initiative should be grounded in the sublime values of our common religion, Islam, and on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention and collective security. MWADA, meaning “amity” in Arabic—the language of our collective prayers—ought to aim to foster peaceful coexistence and equitable partnerships.

A key priority is the establishment of immediate sustainable, permanent ceasefires in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. A non-aggression pact among MWADA states, coupled with collective regional monitoring, will help institutionalise stability and protect the region from external interference as well as from internal strife.

Economic integration is also central to the vision. The lack of interdependence within West Asia stems from fragmented trade networks, insufficient attention to the development of intra-regional banking and payment mechanisms, political rivalries and a reliance on external markets. A proposed MWADA Development Fund can finance critical infrastructure projects, particularly in devastated post-conflict areas. Additionally, governance reforms in Syria—as a basis for economic assistance—will promote accountability and lay the groundwork for a safe and stable country where women and minorities can thrive.

Post-Assad Syria presents a major challenge to us all. Unbridled Israeli aggression disregarding Syrian sovereignty, foreign interference undermining Syrian territorial integrity, horrifying scenes of violence and brutality reminiscent of Islamic State savagery, and ethnic and sectarian violence—which may lead to an all-out civil war—require the immediate attention of the proposed MWADA.

The humanitarian disaster in Palestine also remains critical for regional stability. MWADA must prioritise Palestinian self-determination and support just solutions while fully respecting the aspirations of the people. This involves not just political solutions but also economic opportunities and the recognition of Palestinian rights.

MWADA will provide fertile ground for infrastructure projects, from transport to energy pipelines and telecommunication networks. These facilitate not only the movement of goods but also the exchange of energy, information and services. We in West Asia should understand that independence is intertwined with a country's share in the global value-added chain.

Energy-security guarantees present another opportunity for interdependence. Regional energy agreements ought to be aimed at safeguarding routes and exploring sustainable energy resources. The vast untapped potential of the Iranian plateau and other terrains within the MWADA community suitable for solar and wind farms make co-operating to produce clean energy economically feasible, for the wider region and even beyond.

MWADA can also herald new regional co-operation on freedom of navigation, including joint maritime-security patrols. The region is home to strategic chokepoints including the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Iran, given its location and security expertise, is uniquely positioned to contribute to the security of waterways like the Strait of Hormuz. Others can play a leading role in securing Suez and Bab al-Mandab. The Hormuz Peace Endeavor or HOPE—introduced by Iran nearly five years ago represented a significant example of a regional initiative aimed at fostering peace and stability in the Hormuz community, bringing together many states. That proposal can be given a new life under MWADA, primarily due to the much improved relations between Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia today. A partnership between Iran and Saudi Arabia—two of the region's most influential powers—will play a crucial role. By fostering unity and brotherhood among Shia and Sunni Muslims, we can counter the extremism and sectarian strife that have historically destabilised the region.

Working towards a region free from nuclear weapons and reviving the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) are essential components of this vision. This approach should not only address nuclear proliferation but also reinforce a collective commitment to peace and stability. The MWADA framework should also prioritise co-operation on cultural exchanges, water management, counter-terrorism and media campaigns that promote coexistence.

The role of Iran

Like other participants, Iran would play an indispensable role. Over the past 45 years, my country has demonstrated remarkable resilience and self-sufficiency in security and defence, managing to survive and even thrive; not just without foreign assistance, but in spite of pressure from extra-regional powers.

The widely believed perception of Iran losing its arms in the region stems from a wrong assumption that Iran has had proxy-patron relationships with resistance forces. Resistance has its roots in Israel's occupation of Arab lands and desecration of Islamic holy sites, apartheid, genocide and constant aggression against its neighbors. It existed before the Iranian revolution in 1979 and will continue as long as its root causes persist. Trying to attribute it to Iran may sever a public relations campaign but will obstruct any resolution.

Like all nations, Iran has faced its share of challenges and missteps. The Iranian people, having endured significant sacrifices, are now prepared—with resilience and confidence—to take bold steps. This shift from a threat-centered perspective to an opportunity-driven one aligns with the vision outlined by President Pezeshkian (and myself) during last summer's presidential campaign in Iran.

MWADA challenges us to reimagine the region not as a battleground but as a hub of mwada, amity and empathy, characterised by the pursuit of shared opportunities and collective prosperity. It is essential to engage in meaningful—and indeed frank—conversations that will allow us to craft a future defined by co-operation, shared and sustainable development, social justice and welfare, and renewed hope.

Transforming West Asia into a beacon of peace and collaboration is not just an idealistic aspiration; it is both a strategic imperative and an achievable goal that requires only commitment, dialogue and a shared vision. MWADA can be the transformation platform. Let us embrace this opportunity to build a stable, prosperous, and peaceful West Asia, one where empathy, understanding and collaboration replace discord and division. Those of us in the respective governments of our states must seize the opportunity to start looking toward the future rather than remaining prisoners of the past. The time to act is now.