

The United Nations Should Be Invited to Help Broker Peace in the Broader West Asia and Northeast Africa Sub-Region

By Charles A. Cogan

In January, American leaders expressed concerns about the safety of the Iranian people as internal protests led to massive repression. In February, the US and Israel began to bomb strategic targets in Iran. They quickly killed several top Iranian leaders and expected the regime to fall. It didn't. They also accidentally killed little girls at a school near an airbase and plenty of innocent civilians. Then, on April 7, the US president said, "a whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again" on Truth Social.

Tensions are high in the Gulf of Hormuz, and ceasefire negotiations have so far failed, despite occasional claims that an agreement is near. Gradually, the needs of the Iranian people have become secondary to the need to project military strength. If the desire of the United States government is truly to help the Iranian people and prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, bombing is not the only path.

To be clear, the Iranian regime recently murdered hundreds, if not thousands, of its own citizens and has long supported violent proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Iranian drones supplied to Russia are killing Ukrainians. Iran has the materials and expertise to develop nuclear weapons eventually. However, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was developed through direct negotiations with Iran in 2015 to address this concern. Iran, the United States, and a broad coalition of nations signed the treaty. Regular monitoring showed that Iran was complying until the current president withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018.

One of the declared weaknesses of the original JCPOA negotiations is that Iran was allowed access to funds that had been seized during sanctions. The argument is that releasing these funds would allow Iran to invest in its nuclear program. The reality, as is often the case, is more complicated. While the sanctions have increased pressure on the Iranian regime and were one of the causes behind the uprisings that were recently suppressed, the lack of funding has also weakened Iran’s healthcare system, once one of the strongest in the region, leading to unnecessary suffering and deaths among the very populations we claim to want to support. If the monitoring of the nuclear program is allowed by Iran at the same level as in the original JCPOA, this helps to orient the funds toward more basic needs of the Iranian people.

In a complicated situation like this, an organization that is trusted by both parties is needed. The United Nations, where both President Trump and President Pezeshkian both delivered

addresses in late September, is one such organization. If the funds were to be delivered to healthcare, the World Health Organization (WHO) could help. If the funds were to be directed to feeding, housing, and educating Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from Iran to Sudan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNICEF could help. If the need were to separate combatants in conflict zones like Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen, then UN Peacekeepers could play a vital role. This list goes on to include the World Food Program (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and many other UN agencies that can help to support a reset in West Asia and Northeast Africa.

Diplomats are trained in difficult negotiations. Many years ago, after three years in the Peace Corps, I was a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellow at Northwestern University, a program developed to ensure that the United States government would always have people with relevant expertise when crises like this emerge. Many former FLAS fellows have gone into the foreign service, and Farsi is a strategic language. The problem is that those diplomats have often been sidelined in favor of high-profile businesspeople with political connections who do not have the training for a complex job with so many human lives at risk. Over the past thirty years, I have followed the careers of many old friends and one of them served for many years as a Conflict Resolution Officer with the UN in Sudan, South Sudan, Ivory Coast, and other hot spots. He read an earlier draft of this essay and returned it with lots of suggestions, correction, and even some encouragement.

The time has come for a reset. The United States needs to remember that it is working for the people of Iran and for peace across the region. If we can reengage with the JCPOA and reinforce its operations, that would be a good first step. If that is no longer an option, we should build another strong coalition to negotiate a new treaty. In addition to strict monitoring of the nuclear program, the United States should have open discussions about internal human rights reforms in Iran. Some of the internal conflict was exacerbated by sanctions and while hardliners in the US, Israel, and the Gulf States do not want to ease the sanctions, there are ways of directing these funds to healthcare and other sectors in need of funding. This recalibration will involve reaching out to partners who have worked with the United States in the past. Putting the wellbeing and future of the Iranian people front and center in such talks, the nature of the discussions will change. If the people of Iran sense that the United States government and its partners are working to make their lives better, it may weaken hardliners in the regime who are undermining negotiations. The recent sabotage of peace negotiations by these very hardliners was well-documented in a September 13 opinion piece by Farnaz Fasihi (https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/13/world/middleeast/iran-hard-liners-sabotaged-peace-deal.html).

The Iranians are not the only regional power with proxies in conflict zones, as observers to Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan can attest. An Israeli colleague read a draft of this paper and argued that no one can negotiate with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), citing Neville Chamberlain in 1938, who gave in to Hitler and allowed the partition of Czechoslovakia. The difficulty is clear, but negotiation is always preferable to violence.

The negotiations with Iran cannot be held in a vacuum since the activities of other regional powers (Israel, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Gulf States, and other neighbors) need to be considered as a part of any lasting solution. The entire region has become a war zone, and no one wants to be the first to lay down their weapons. There are hardliners throughout the region and in the United States and Israel, who do not wish for lasting peace. The job is to empower those who do want peace and help them to make the case for their own people.

Now is the Time for a Regional Accord, not Just a One-Off Negotiation with Iran

I have focused on the Iranian people in this essay because they are often forgotten. While Iranians were dying during the bombing attacks, Israelis and American military and civilians across the region were dying due to Iranian missiles. Over recent months, Lebanese and Palestinians have been dying from Israeli bombs and ground incursions. In Sudan, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have been massacring civilians in the Darfur region, with evidence pointing to funding and weaponry from the Gulf States. There is no hierarchy here. Every life is precious, and I do not say this naively.

Right now, the entire region is in a phase of what psychologists call Amygdala Hijack, when the fight or flight instinct overrules rational thought. I have family in Israel (my father's side), and since October 7, 2023, they have felt threatened and felt the need to project strength for their own safety. A friend who teaches at my school in Shanghai is Lebanese, and she argues that without Hezbollah, the entire nation of Lebanon would be helpless in the face of Israeli assaults.

In terms of leadership, Israel's current governing coalition includes extremist leaders who have no interest in peace. The hardest militants in Iran are equally focused on violent resistance. There are elements in the US government who are comfortable with destroying boats in South American waters on the suspicion that they might be drug traffickers. The bombing of Iran was initially conceived as a case of "Epic Fury," where a surgical bombing campaign would dispose of the regime and allow Israel and the United States government to put a more 'friendly' regime in place. At times like this, the work of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat in the Oslo Accords (Oslo I 1993, Oslo II 1995) seems like it took place in another world. Their work for peace and a two-state solution for Israeli and Palestinian coexistence has been undermined by extremists on both sides, but the principles are still in place; there are people in each nation who want peace, and there are nations around the world who would be willing to help to make peace a reality.

It is difficult for the United States government to ask for money or ships and planes to open the Straits of Hormuz because it started the war on its own initiative in partnership with the current Israeli regime. If it were a question of deepening the current negotiations to push for a lasting peace that could allow for gradual disarmament and nuclear guarantees from both Iran and Israel, there would be plenty of interest from allies. A focused program with international support to help the civilian populations throughout the region to rebuild their lives and their communities would be expensive but would cost far less than endless conflict.

It is not just time for a reset in current negotiations with Iran, it is time for a regional reset to allow the peoples of Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, the Gulf States, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories to breathe again. Real discussions, real demands, pragmatic concessions, and guarantees. My cousins in Israel would be safer, my friend's family in Lebanon would be safer, and the world would breathe a sigh of relief. Not everyone would be happy with peace, at least in the short run. Building trust takes time and perseverance. Still, it can be done, and the moment to begin is now.

At this point in the past, the United Nations would have stepped in to work to broker a peace agreement. The United States was one of the founders of the United Nations after World War II and has a permanent seat on the Security Council. At the same time, even though the UN General Headquarters is in New York City, the people of the world trust the UN to represent the best interests of the people of the world, not just its elites. At a time when peace talks are in jeopardy, now would be the perfect time for the US and Iran to bring their problems to the United Nations and request assistance in mapping out a path to peace. It would involve serious investment in the UN and yet it is hard to argue that continued conflict does not already cost billions of dollars. The choice is now before us. The mark of strong leadership is the ability and confidence to change course when changing circumstances require new approaches.

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