

Tehran, Manama set out to mend ties: *Former diplomat* **'Zero-tension strategy'** key to regional development

INTERVIEW Like most countries, Iran's foreign policy rests on a three-pronged approach: its neighbors, the region, and the wider world. Tehran has been striving to strike a balance among these three pillars, aiming to push forward both its short- and long-term interests. The interplay and mutual influence among these elements make it essential to draw the line on priorities and red lines. Shedding light on the policies shaping these dynamics and their reciprocal effects, Nosratollah Tajik, former Iranian ambassador to Jordan and regional affairs expert, provided his insights in the following interview.

IRNA: Over the past year, the Iranian Foreign Ministry has made the neighborhood policy and engagement with Arab states of the Persian Gulf a top priority. How do you assess this approach? Has it managed to build trust and dial down tensions in the region?

TAJIK: Every country's foreign policy is built on three pillars: neighborhood, regional, and global strategies. These three layers feed into each other, with each exerting influence and responding in turn. In Iran's case, the global and regional dimensions have traditionally carried more weight, which has inevitably rubbed off on its neighborhood policy. In fact, you can't break down Iran's neighborhood diplomacy without considering its regional and international relations.

Each of these levels is indispensable and cannot stand in for the others. They each operate in their own sphere and carry their own weight. To think that a neighborhood policy could take the place of a regional one, or that regional ties could substitute for global engagement, is simply misguided. They are interdependent and must move forward in tandem. Only a well-crafted strategy that brings together these three levels into a balanced triangle can roll out an effective, dynamic foreign policy that maximizes national interests.

We must recognize the unique role of neighborhood policy and how it can play out in practice, especially since each level has its own theoretical underpinnings. If we lose sight of this, then when a government, for example, puts regional policy front and center, questions would arise about the fate of global relations. You can't swap out smooth international relations for a solely regional approach, nor can you slot in neighborhood policy as a replacement. Moreover, it's not enough for a government to talk up such priorities; It needs both theoretical and practical foundations, with all sectors pulling in the same direction rather than canceling each other out.

Iran has 15 neighbors, each with diverse economic, political, social, and cultural characteristics. Our current focus is on the Persian Gulf, a region of immense geostrategic value due to its energy resources and centrality to global industry. The Persian Gulf's importance is self-evident. The current Iranian administration has made a push to bring down surrounding tensions — a wise move. If Iran can hammer out a zero-tension strategy with its southern Arab neighbors



Nosratollah Tajik

along the Persian Gulf, the region stands to reap the rewards of greater development. But this isn't something that can fall into place just because one or even all countries wish it. It requires a string of prerequisites, groundwork, and political will — or at the very least, harmony. If any country plays out of tune, that harmo-

ny will not materialize, and the region won't get off the ground in terms of development and modernization. While some countries have made headway in these areas, security remains the bedrock of progress, and not all have achieved it. Regional transformations are also shaped by broader Middle Eastern developments.

The Pezeshkian administration's focus on neighbors is a positive step, but it coincides with upheavals in the Middle East, especially in Palestine, the Occupied Territories, the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon. These tensions have set the stage for

perceptions — among both neighbors and outside powers — that Iran, having lost some of its external deterrence, is now in a weaker position. This has opened the door for Iran to draw closer to its southern Persian Gulf neighbors. Yet, it's still early days; the Middle East remains volatile and unpredictable. It's not as simple as a figure like Trump dropping in, making waves, and expecting all his ideas to take root. We all remember his first term, when he visited Saudi Arabia and joined in the sword dance. Many believed his proposals would come to fruition, but the events of October

2023 showed the region heading in a different direction.

In my view, Iran's neighborhood policy is still in its infancy. The groundwork is being laid out, and preliminary agreements have been struck. Trust-building measures between Iran and the southern Persian Gulf states are getting off the ground, though the foundation isn't yet solid and could still be knocked off course by other developments. Still, it seems that the parties involved have the will to see this through. Whether all issues are within their control remains to be seen. It will take time.

Iran's relationships with regional states are far from uniform. With some, like Oman, there's a strategic partnership and deep friendship; with others, relations are chilly. What should Iran do to step up its game and bring more countries on board?

There are many reasons for the unevenness in Iran's ties with its neighbors. The southern Persian Gulf states have widely varying histories of political, social, and economic interaction with Iran. Some, like Oman, have deep-rooted ties, while others are newer on the scene, having only emerged as nation-states since the 1970s. In short, Iran's relationships with these countries run the gamut. Yet, they are all part of a collective mechanism — the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a six-nation bloc established after Iran's



After delivering a keynote speech, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (walking) greets the top-ranking guests attending the fourth round of the Arab-Iranian Dialogue Conference held in Doha, Qatar, on May 12, 2025.

● MASHREGH NEWS



You can't swap out smooth international relations for a solely regional approach, nor can you slot in neighborhood policy as a replacement. If we lose sight of this, then when a government, for example, puts regional policy front and center, questions would arise about the fate of global relations. Moreover, it's not enough for a government to talk up such priorities; It needs both theoretical and practical foundations, with all sectors pulling in the same direction rather than canceling each other out.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (front-L) is welcomed by an unidentified Omani official (front-C) upon his arrival at Muscat, Oman, on May 11, 2025, for negotiations with US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff (not pictured).

● IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY