

Iran's voice at UN speaks with American accent

By Warren Hoge

UNITED NATIONS, New York: Javad Zarif has appeared at universities, public policy forums and social and political clubs so often that Lisa Anderson, dean of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, recently asked him wryly if he was thinking of running for office.

The joke is that Zarif is the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations and Iran has had no diplomatic relations with the United States since 1980.

Zarif, 47, has spent most of his adult life in the United States and speaks colloquial English with an American accent. His ability to strike cordial relations with many U.S. leaders and with the crowds of Americans he frequently addresses while defending a country whose leadership they have little or no sympathy for is being much commented on now that his five years of service at the United Nations are ending.

He has bachelor's and master's degrees from San Francisco State University and a doctorate from the University of Denver, and his American-born son and daughter now study in the United States.

Though he dresses in austere Iranian style with a high-buttoned collarless shirt and no necktie and follows the Iranian practice of not shaking women's hands, he is disarmingly informal and punctuates his comments with chuckles and grins.

Zarif has combined this beguiling ease with U.S. habits with communications tools like video- and telephoning-conferencing and Web site postings (www.zarif.net) to make the most of his limited space to influence the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Yet he represents a country that is locked in a contentious standoff with the West over its nuclear program, has harassed and recently jailed a prominent Iranian-American academic, Hales Esfandiari, and is led by a president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has declared that Israel should be "wiped off the map" and that the Holocaust should be questioned.

"It's a dilemma for any diplomat to bring the right balance between defending his government and not defending the indefensible," said Dimitri Simes, president of the Nixon Center. "I think he was able to find such a balance."

His position as his country's chief



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Javad Zarif is a tough advocate for Iran, but one who says that he does not see "any problem in establishing genuine communication with a whole lot of Americans."

representative in the United States occurred by accident, and he traces it back to U.S. officials.

Zarif was born into a well-to-do family in textiles and trade in Tehran and his wife's family had extensive real estate holdings, some of which it lost in the 1979 revolution. But neither family was politically involved, he said, so they faced no further consequences.

When he came to the United States on a student visa in 1976, he was preparing for a teaching career in Iran. But just after he passed his comprehensive tests for his doctorate in Denver in 1985, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service withdrew his visa, curtailing his chances to pursue the degree.

Still wanting to remain in the United States legally, he went to New York and took a job in the Iranian Mission. He fulfilled his degree requirements long distance during the ensuing three years and by then he had proved his worth to the Iranian government, which asked him to join its foreign service.

"So I'm a diplomat both by default and by the decision of the INS," Zarif said.

He lives in Manhattan in an elegant French-neo-classical Fifth Avenue townhouse built in 1912, which Iran purchased in the 1960s and was the site of lavish parties during the time before

the Iranian revolution.

"We may not serve Champagne anymore," Zarif said, "but we make up for it with very good Iranian food."

One of his dinner guests last year was James Baker 3rd, the former U.S. secretary of state and co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group, which soon after recommended that Washington establish direct communication with Iran.

During his years in New York, Zarif says, he has been so busy making speeches that he has had little time to experience the city or join the diplomatic party circuit.

"Also, however I am seen here in New York," he said, "I am a religious person, and my wife and I have certain religious limitations on the food we can eat, on the company we can entertain, and we observe those, both personally and officially."

On weekends, he grocery shops with his wife and takes walks through Central Park.

"If I want relaxation, that's how I get it," he said.

In his public appearances he is listened to respectfully and often applauded warmly.

"I know that what I am saying is not exactly what they want to hear," he said, "but I do not see any problem in establishing genuine communication with a

whole lot of Americans."

In his speeches and interviews, however, Zarif is a tough advocate for Iran.

On the Holocaust, Zarif argues that Ahmadinejad was not questioning whether it had occurred but merely saying that the Palestinians wrongly bore the consequences of it.

"The Palestinians had nothing to do with this crime — and it was a crime, it must be condemned, it should never be repeated — this is what I say to audiences here," he said.

He also says he believes the United States is fabricating evidence to support its accusation that Iran is sending bombs and weapons into Iraq.

As for the nuclear impasse, he says that the West refused to negotiate during the two years that Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment and that Tehran had lost faith in the negotiations.

Asked if he would also fault the Iranian approach, Zarif acknowledged only that "we might have contributed to the misunderstanding by not explaining our case in the best possible way."

Commenting on the coming departure of Zarif, James Dobbins, director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the Rand Corporation research institute, said, "The potential for establishing a dialogue with a very competent and quite candid professional has largely been foregone, and it will now be harder."

Critics of Iran, like John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, say that the charm of Zarif is an unreliable barometer of Tehran's true intentions.

"The Foreign Ministry of Iran is the last place that is going to know," Bolton said, "and it makes it easier for Zarif to tell untruths with a completely straight face because he doesn't know."

As for reports that hard-liners in Iran view him suspiciously, Zarif said, "Some people would consider that my vocabulary is inappropriate and they attack me for my tone and say I try to be too accommodating."

As he heads off to realize his original wish to be a teacher at Tehran University, does he think his effort here to bridge the gap had been successful?

"I would be satisfied if I have helped in the creation of just a dent in the misunderstanding," he said. "And I think I have."