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Status, Emotions, and US-Iran Nuclear Politics

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The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015, or the “Iran deal” signed between Iran and the five United Nations Security Council powers plus Germany was heralded at the time as President Barack Obama’s signature foreign policy achievement. The deal was structured primarily around three key issues of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, transparency regarding inspections by international regulatory agencies, and sanctions relief in exchange for cooperation.¹ However, in May 2018 President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal. The Trump administration had shown hostility toward the agreement and Iran in general since entering office, and has since ramped up sanctions on the Iranian economy.

Despite years of repeated US National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and testimonies from defense and intelligence officials, Iran continues to hold a prominent place in American discourses of threat. In 2010 and 2012 successive NIEs maintained that although Iran had hastened its uranium enrichment, “there is no hard evidence that Iran has decided to build a nuclear bomb” (Risen and Mazzetti 2012). A later 2013 US intelligence community report also stated that Iran had not yet decided whether to build nuclear weapons (Clapper 2013). Despite the lack of evidence of a nuclear weapons program, US policymakers and elites

¹ See full text of the agreement at <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>.

nevertheless evidently *believe* that Iran desires to build nuclear weapons. Even if they do not “genuinely” believe it, they publicly articulate that they believe it. A number of International Relations (IR) theoretical perspectives would offer a variety of explanations, such as realist balances-of-power, leader psychologies, misperceptions, historical mistrust, and antagonistic identities – all of which have important roles here. However, one factor that has been surprisingly absent from scholarly analyses of the Iran-US relationship is emotional concerns about status. Emotions have been neglected in scholarly analyses of US-Iran nuclear politics specifically. This display of belief in Iranian nuclear weapons and/or intentions in spite of evidence points towards what Mercer (2010) terms “emotional beliefs.” That is, “feeling is believing because people use emotion as evidence” (Mercer 2010: 1). Feeling, in spite of evidence, points towards the key role that emotions have played in this case, and how they often underpin what are typically seen as geostrategic concerns.

This chapter aims to remedy these oversights by spotlighting the underappreciated role of emotions within the context of the negotiations that resulted in the 2015 JCPOA. Specifically, it links together issues that have so far been viewed separately, often under different conceptual registers. Although the emotional aspects of the Iran nuclear deal have been downplayed, issues of status and hierarchy have been explored in relation to both nuclear proliferation in general (Hymans 2006) and Iran in particular (Sanadjian 2008). Research on Iran’s nuclear efforts have long suggested that the country’s pursuits in many ways reflect symbolic concerns about its standing on the world stage (Dabashi 2016). Although strategic and material concerns such as sanctions are also key issues, Iran’s

motivations for purportedly seeking nuclear weapons (or at least civilian nuclear energy capacities) relate to concerns over status. Status, in turn, is typically loaded with emotion. While status has long been identified as an important aspect of states' behavior in world politics (Gilpin 1981: 31), the relationships between status, language, emotion, and power have too long remained under-examined. As Koschut (Introduction) explains, these strands of work too often do not speak to one another: those who focus on the expression of emotions in language do not explore how status is implicated as such, and those who study status too often downplay its specifically emotional and discursive dimensions. Status is usually defined in terms of one's rank in a particular social group or society at large (Forsberg et al. 2014: 263), and although this may exist on a number of dimensions, its underappreciated emotional side is examined here. Higher status (however defined) is typically associated with positive emotions (such as pride, satisfaction, or honour), while lower status is often associated with more negative emotions (such as shame, humiliation, or resentment). (Mis)recognition with regards to status and hierarchy concerns can have significant effects on a relationship. Not recognizing an actor as holding the status that they believe they have or deserve often contributes to anger, tension, and other ill will in a relationship, which often casts shadows over other more material concerns. Narrative expression of emotions produce discourses of (mis)recognition that give meaning to material factors at stake in the debates over the Iran nuclear deal. Examining the "feeling structure" (Koschut, Introduction) that envelopes Iran and the US via the interlinked issues of status, emotions, and narratives helps to paint a more comprehensive picture of the myriad of dynamics at play in the Iran-US nuclear relationship, both in terms of

scrutinizing how each party attempted to legitimize its position, and more generally in complicating the factors that help constitute each states' perceptions of its interests.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The next section reviews current work on US-Iranian nuclear politics, which largely focuses on the strategic and material aspects in contention, such as the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons, Iran's rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and sanctions relief. Yet, arguably, the significance of these cannot be fully understood without accounting for the status narratives that constitute the issues in particular ways. The second section develops a theoretical outline of the links between the main issues at stake in this volume: feeling structures, power, and status. I suggest, following Koschut (Introduction), that the power politics of status is often underpinned by "feeling structures" that produce particular kinds of emotional subjectivities, which in turn shape the issue in certain ways. Third, building upon recent research on narratives on the US-Iran relationship, the penultimate section draws upon official statements, news sources, and wider cultural resources to examine the emotional politics of status that are bound up in ways that Iran and the US represent each other. Beyond discourses of threat, emotional and power concerns over status are evident in a wide array of narratives between the two.

Interests and identities in Iran-US nuclear politics

Much of the debate surrounding the JCPOA rests upon strategic and material assumptions about both states' motivations and interests. As structural realism argues that states are most concerned about their security and the balance of power (Waltz 1979), many analyses

take American and Iranian interests as pre-given and materially-based. Through this lens, Iranian and US interests will naturally be at odds – Iran will strive towards regional hegemony to ensure its security, and the US will aim to keep access to a strategic area as a major resource base. Several scholars find that states’ policies toward Iran stem from similar material interests, such as the strategic value of oil (Talmadge 2008; Wagner and Onderco 2014), or strategic reactions to Iran’s latent nuclear capability and “hedging” (Bowen and Moran 2015). For Sanati (2014: 126), most of the US’s and Iran’s behavior toward each other “stems from the interplay and ultimate collision of their core national interests, posited in the shifting power changes in contemporary history.” Stephen Walt (2013) succinctly offers a realist perspective, and argues that “the real issue isn’t whether Iran gets close to a bomb; the real issue is the long-term balance of power in the Persian Gulf and Middle East . . . If Iran ever escapes the shackles of international sanctions and puts some competent people in charge of its economy, it’s going to loom much larger in regional affairs over time.”

Other work focuses on role of socially constructed identities and perceptions in producing US-Iranian tensions. Through this lens, antagonistic US-Iranian relations are less material facts than they are products of a particular shared history, normative ideas, and identities that have developed in contingent ways. For example, Tirman (2009: 536) emphasizes the role that narratives play in that “perpetual distrust [is] deeply rooted in the two national narratives and [is] reinforced by the actual actions” of both Iran and the US. Similarly, Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013) demonstrate that representations of Iran in American media overwhelmingly portray an “enemy” image that defines the production of knowledge and

meanings given to Iran within US culture. Adib- Moghaddam (2009) further shows how US-Iranian relations are not merely the conflicts of material national interests, but rather have deeper roots in discursive contexts and symbolic politics that produce antagonistic identities. For him (2009: 512), a key task is to explore “representations of Iran and the United States, and how the fundamental friend-enemy distinction setting the two countries apart has come about.” A key theme of these studies, then, is that US-Iranian relations are less the product of naturally opposed material interests but instead are socially-produced through narratives that shape shared understandings of the relationship in particular ways.

Both accounts are useful in illuminating competing geostrategic interests and in uncovering the socially constructed identities constituting antagonistic politics. Yet, each account suffers from key weaknesses. What accounts for the *prominence* of the US political obsession with Iran despite the fact that most analyses suggest that it poses little material threat to the US itself? As constructivists have long noted, realist conceptualizations of interests and threats as materially-based and pre-given do not give adequate explanatory weight to the power of narratives to shape shared understandings, and to explain how interests and perceptions of threat can change over time (Thrall and Cramer 2009). While constructivism, in this sense, remedies some of realism’s shortcomings, it also has trouble explaining a key issue. Constructivism’s contention that identities (and therefore interests) are socially constructed helps to explain the variability of threat perceptions. Yet constructivism falls short in understanding the driving forces behind the articulation of particular identities. Such forces may indeed sometimes be strategic, yet to suggest that all identity construction is strategic is likely to miss their often visceral and felt dimensions

(Sjoberg 2016). Emotional motivations are a necessary component of more fully understanding both the strategic *and* the publicly resonant and felt aspects of national identity. Moreover, as identity politics are often overtly concerned with status (Larson 2017), both materialist and identity-based approaches tend to mirror each other's shortcomings in this regard: realism often focuses on power politics, yet not the power concerns related to status and identity, while constructivism focuses on the latter yet tends to overlook the former. Consequently, the following section develops a framework which draws together emotions, status, and power to better understand these closely linked issues in the Iran-US nuclear dispute.

Feeling structures, status, and power

Status concerns were central to both how Iran and the US attempt to narrated and legitimized themselves within the discursive parameters of the nuclear dispute. For years, the US represented itself as acting not only for itself, but on behalf of the "international community." As President Obama stated in 2014 during the negotiations, there were "still significant gaps between the international community and Iran and we have more work to do" (Obama 2014). Likewise the US typically represented Iran as an international pariah defying not just the US, but the world. As President Bush (2006) stated just a few years prior, the "Iranian government is defying the world with its nuclear ambitions, and the nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons." Iran, in turn, often represents itself as legally abiding its international obligations by developing peaceful civilian nuclear energy while resisting bullying from the US, as it "would stand

firm against [the] sanctions and not give up its inalienable rights” (Fars News Agency 2013), as well as seeing itself unfairly tarnished as a “rogue state” comparable to North Korea, Syria, and others. Emotional concerns about status are key aspects of these discourses, and there is a clear need to parse their relationships.

These expressions of status concerns must also be contextualized within the broader context of US-Iran relations over the past several decades. The long and complex history between Iran and the US since at least the US and British-orchestrated coup of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953 has resulted in a highly fraught relationship. A series of high-profile events since then has progressively served to deepen feelings of antagonism, perhaps most notably the US embassy hostage crisis of 1979-80. Additionally, the 1985-86 Iran-Contra affair, the 1988 US shooting down of an Iran Air flight, and George W. Bush’s declaration of Iran as part of the “axis of evil” in 2002 all have worsened relations and entrenched mistrust between the two countries. While the 2013-16 warming of ties with the Obama administration was significant, under the current Trump administration both states have reverted back to some of the embedded suspicions.

As it is necessary to grasp these historical traumas in order to more comprehensively understand the complexities of the relationship, we should ask whether these historical trajectories are more important in explaining the politics of the nuclear deal than emotions and status. This is particularly relevant given the deteriorating of the relationship during the Trump administration. However, I suggest that these are complementary, rather than competing explanations. Following Linklater’s (2014) call to historicize the meaning of

emotions over time, we can conceptualize emotional concerns over status at least partially through the lens of the legacies of historical antagonisms. While much of the politics driving the relationship between Iran and the US is historical mistrust, this overlaps with emotional status anxieties when it comes to contemporary concerns over nuclear politics. As status is often part of the motivation for status to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons or at least nuclear capabilities (Hymans 2006), it is reasonable to suggest that a state's memory of traumas in a historically antagonistic relationship will in numerous ways shape the state's self-perceived identity regarding security issues. As such, an analytical perspective is developed here that recognizes the entrenched trauma on both sides yet also sees contemporary status concerns as an important and particular expression of those historical trajectories.

As Koschut (Introduction) outlines, one of the key questions concerning the power politics of emotions is to consider how "socially constructed ways of feeling and expressing emotions represent a key force to sustaining or challenging hierarchies and social order in world politics." Given the links that have been developed in recent years between emotions and identity (Fattah and Fierke 2009; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Leep 2010; Lupovici 2016; Ross 2014; Solomon 2015), it is plausible that Iranian and American expressions of status concerns are driving at least in part by emotional concerns. Moreover, as narrative strands of identity are subject to contestation, those aspects of identity that relate to status concerns may be particularly susceptible to discursive power politics.

Status has received rapidly increased attention in IR (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Larsen et al. 2014; Renshon 2017; Wohlforth et al. 2018; Zarakol 2017). While much of this valuable work details the various social-relational aspects, costs and benefits, and markers of status, there has been somewhat of a gap in exploring the emotions underlying these dynamics. Status itself can generally be defined as an actor's standing or rank within a particular community (Renshon 2017: 4). Positionality is key: status is one's place within a hierarchy, which is dependent upon both the actor's own perception of his/her position as well as the perception of others within the particular status community. Hence status is simultaneously positional, perceptual, and social (Renshon 2017: 4). Status-seeking, then, occurs within particular social contexts often with commonly understood forms of social capital. Markers of status may be material (wealth or nuclear weapons, for example) or social (such as honour or prestige), yet the aim of most status-seeking behavior is to enhance one's social place in a perceived hierarchy. In this sense, when states seek status, they are also seeking to shift their place in international politics, which is also part and parcel of the process by which they are known and recognized by other states. Status seeking, therefore, "a subcategory of state identity politics" (Wohlforth et al 2017). While status is not constant across actors, most actors pay clear attention to and attempt to enhance status through a number of different dimensions (material, strategic, economic, social, affiliations, alliances, human rights, etc), which may feed into one another. Of particular interest here is research which argues that despite its frequent strategic or instrumental benefits, actors also seek status for intrinsic or self-esteem reasons (Lebow 2008; Wolf 2011).

Status is, consequently, inevitably bound up with emotions. Many simply *enjoy* winning contests, receiving accolades, respect, and deference by others they deem to be important, and enjoy being a member of a high-status group (Forsberg et al. 2014: 264). While status enhancement in global politics is often associated with gains in material power and influence, such gains also have significant emotional dimensions.² Positive emotions are often expressed when perceived equals acknowledge positive or highly prized qualities, while anger is expressed when status is not recognized or confirmed by others (Forsberg et al. 2014: 264). In light of such common desires, it is clear that status and attempts to enhance it often lead to a range of behaviors and outcomes. Status concerns may lead to conflict, and victors attain significant degrees of influence beyond material spoils. More often, however, states tend to pursue status enhancement via acknowledgement, approval, and recognition from other states (Lindemann and Ringmar 2014). Some may seek access to high status groups such as the United Nations Security Council, or look to acquire similar markers of high status, such as “when they strive to have the most destructive weapons, acquire more clients than the other, display advanced weapons in parades, intervene militarily against a weaker power, prevent the other state[s] from achieving particular goals or act as a spoiler to block collective efforts to restore regional stability” (Larson and Shevchenko 2014: 271). Even if such efforts fail, actors may continue to seek admittance to prestigious groups or communities, or alternatively may creatively develop new status attributes and behaviors (Forsberg et al. 2014: 264).

² Following Sasely (2011), I suggest that if we conceive of states as composed of various social groups with broadly shared emotions, then we may also argue that such groups/states share emotional concerns about status.

Status, in these senses, is usually inextricably bound to an actor's sense of their identity. Status politics is identity politics. When actors seek status, they aim to acquire that which they believe they are entitled to based upon who they are within prevailing common understandings of the appropriate status attributes. As Wolf (2011: 116) explains with regards to the closely related phenomenon of respect, "being respected . . . is experienced as a dutiful social affirmation of one's subjective sense of importance and worth in relation to wider society. Disrespect, on the other hand, is always seen as an unjustifiable denial of social rank, as a symbolic attack on an actor's self-perceived place in and meaning for society." Status, then, is closely tied to ontological security, or security of the self (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). As phenomena such as status, respect, honor, and humiliation are core aspects of how actors see themselves and how they perceive others to see them, perceived "essential" aspects of one's identity felt to be threatened can provoke intense reactions. Steele (2008: 40), for example, argues "a state's sense of both self- and collective identity is integral to understanding its sense of honor," and Mitzen (2006: 344) contends that states seek a secure sense of self in addition to traditional physical security concerns.

Since attention to status is often so tightly bound to fundamental ontological concerns, reactions to threats to status are often intense. As both social status and identity are relationally understood and defined, their legitimacy, enhancement, and deterioration are subject to the flux of social interaction. Identity, status, and respect are "attitude[s] we expect others to show by the way they treat us" (Wolf 2011: 113). Anger frequently results when one feels that s/he has not been adequately or properly recognized, that is, when status recognition has been denied. Anger due to perceived status denial may be expressed

as verbal outrage or protest, rather than actual threatening behavior. Such outrage may be the result of impulse, symbolic rejection, or calculated maneuver, and aims at taking action against the other, to alter the situation in a way that the status denial is downplayed, or retreat from social interaction (Heller 2014: 335). Moreover, different emotions typically result depending upon the perceived threat or loss of status or respect. When an actor or group perceives that they are responsible for loss of status, they may feel shame or embarrassment (Larson and Shevchenko 2014). When others are seen as responsible – through humiliation, by withholding approval or deference, or denial of expected forthcoming benefits – the group will likely display anger, which is accompanied by expressions illegitimacy (Larson and Shevchenko 2014: 335). In sum, “states can be expected to be especially ‘touchy’ and act accordingly when their status appears to be under threat, for instance, when others try to dress them down or fail to treat them in accordance to the status position which they already hold, or to be more precise: believe they hold” (Forsberg et al. 2014: 264).

Within the Iran-US relationship specifically, these concerns play out within a particular “feeling structure” that has historically emerged between the two states. A feeling structure can be understood as “an institutionalized set of emotions that show a regular pattern that constrains and compels the affective experience of subjects, thereby producing and solidifying hierarchies” (Koschut, Introduction). Moreover, such feelings are “constituted by sociocultural and historical structures, [and] are embedded in cultural institutions” (Koschut, Introduction). In this sense, the politics of status (including threats to, and efforts at undermining others’) is tightly bound to power politics of discourse

(Epstein 2008; Krebs 2015). Feeling structures operating via discourse have the capacity to shape agents' self-understandings and perceived self-interests. Such a view recognizes that since status is produced relationally between actors, analysis must trace the interactions between each actor involved, both the "aggressor" and the "victim" of assaults on status, as "victims" or stigmatized states can respond to and negotiate such efforts in innovative and self-serving ways (Adler-Nissen 2014). When Iran asserts that its "inalienable rights" to nuclear energy are being violated by the US, and the US derides Iran as a "rogue state" that "defies the international community," both actors are operating in a particular historically-rooted feeling structure and are engaging in status claims and counter-claims involving expressions of anger, frustration, perceived transgression, and perceived intimidation. These practices stem from historical grievances, but are also status contestations that operate with a broader feeling structure between the two states. Exploring status contestation, then, involves both strategies of *interpreting* emotional status claims in particular historical and interactional contexts through explicit articulations of emotion terms, metaphors, connotations, and analogies, as well as *contextualizing* emotions via their intertextual relations, such as othering, stigmatization, and shaming (Koschut, Introduction).

Iran, the US, and the Feeling Structures of Nuclear (Mis)Recognition

As discussed above, most mainstream analyses of the Iran-US nuclear issue adopt (explicitly or implicitly) geostrategic frameworks emphasizing balance-of-power politics or material threats. In contrast, narrative-based research emphasizes the discursively-

produced identities that shape how “threats” are interpreted and what policies are “made possible” or thinkable. In this vein, work by Duncombe (2015), Moshirzadah (2007), and Hayes (2009) exemplify the value that narrative approaches bring to what are ostensibly material and geostrategic concerns. Duncombe (2015) in particular demonstrates how narratives and representations are the primary means through which Iran and the US (mis)recognize each other and how this exacerbates the nuclear dispute. As she argues (2015: 623), being “represented in a way that is counter to how a state desires to be recognized produces an emotional response that frames foreign policymaking through the ‘struggle for recognition’. Recognition plays a crucial role in the process because inadequate or failed recognition quickly becomes perceived as disrespect. Disrespect acts as a trigger for foreign policy that is, in itself, an emotional response to particular representations.” This chapter follows Duncombe’s insights, yet focuses more tightly on the status contestations involved, and their accompanying emotional reactions. What kinds of emotional reactions and potential motivations are found alongside recognition and misrecognition between the US and Iran?

Representations of Iran within the US

Elite and diplomatic discourses offer one route of inquiry into this question. As both Iran and the US approached agreement on the 2015 nuclear deal, the harsh rhetoric from both sides notably lessened and was replaced by increasingly accommodating language. Yet, during Obama’s first term (2009-2013) and certainly during the tenure of George W. Bush (2001-2009), both administrations deployed harsh language toward Iran. This both fell squarely within the longstanding feeling structure between both states since the 1979

revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, as well as extending beyond the language of threat and terrorism. Illustrative of the continuing designation of Iran not only as a material threat (via its inclusion in the “axis of evil” by Bush in 2002) but also as a state not part of the “civilized” community of nations, Bush (2005) declared that

Iran is ruled by men who suppress liberty at home and spread terror across the world. Power is in the hands of an unelected few who have retained power through an electoral process that ignores the basic requirements of democracy.

A year later, Bush (2006) reiterated that Iran was

Held hostage by a small clerical elite that is isolating and repressing its people. The regime in that country sponsors terrorists in the Palestinian territories and in Lebanon – and that must come to an end. The Iranian government is defying the world with its nuclear ambitions, and the nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons.

Other administration officials continued with similar themes, such as Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice in 2005 stating that “challenges like that of Iran are fundamental tests for the United Nations” (Rice 2005).

A number of themes run through such discourses. There are clear practices of othering here, as well as producing Iran as a threat to the US and its interests. Yet the manner in which US officials represent Iran through practices of othering are, in another sense, specific kinds of recognition being projected to Iran. Iran, in turn, rejects such representations. As Duncombe (2015) helpfully explains, such practices of (mis)recognition contribute to exacerbating tensions between the two sides, and a range of emotional framings underpin such representations.

Moreover, these emotional framings focus on status issues – declaring the US’s own status, relegating Iran to a lesser status vis-à-vis both the US and other states, and in setting the terms by which Iran might improve its status. Positioning Iran outside of the “civilized” community of states (since power is not in the hands of the people but an “unelected few” which ignores basic democratic norms) express meaning via their emotional connotations (Koschut, Introduction). A leadership that “holds hostage” its population (in contrast to democracies), run by a “small clerical elite” (as opposed to secular elected leaders), and which “defies the world” with its nuclear ambitions – these articulations not only create an opposition of self and other, but produce a hierarchy in which Iran is clearly of lower political, developmental, and moral status than the US. This positioning carries negative emotional connotation through elicitation to contempt and anger. In contrast, appeals to “nations of the world,” of which Iran is positioned outside, are framed with positive connotations, as the US/Western subject is elevated to a position of power as the sole agent capable of forcing Iran to cease “defying” the international community. A number of other emotional appeals are part of this framing, namely shame and irritation. By separating Iran as outside the “international community,” US discourses attempt to shame it as an irresponsible actor with an illegitimate government, and portrays its unwillingness to agree to the international community’s standards as irritating and unreasonable defiance.

Although the Obama administration came into office on a foreign policy agenda expressly changing course from the previous administration, US official discourse maintained largely the same tropes. Even as the Obama administration expressed early on a willingness to

open negotiations with Iran, it (re)produced the hierarchies that had long been staples of American discourses on Iran. Early in his administration, Obama (2010) declared:

I offered the Republic of Iran an extended hand last year, and underscored that it has both rights and responsibilities as a member of the international community . . . Now let me be clear once more: the United States and the international community seek a resolution to our differences with Iran, and the door remains open to diplomacy should Iran choose to walk through it.

A year later, he again reiterated the tentative opening to Iran, with the same caveats:

There's a future of greater opportunity for the people of these nations if their governments meet their international obligations. But if they continue down a path that is outside international law, they must be met with greater pressure and isolation (Obama, 2011).

What is key here is that at the same time Obama makes overtures to Iran that the Bush administration never did, it does so while (re)producing the respective international status positions that are favorable to the US. At the same time that Obama tentatively includes Iran within the community of nations (as it has “both rights and responsibilities as a member of the international community”), he also positions it as standing apart, different from the rest of the group (as the US/international community are both clearly of a different/higher status than Iran, who chooses to remain outside the community by choice [“should Iran choose to walk through the door”]).

These same sorts of status representations also circulated in the broader feeling structure toward Iran across US culture. Work examining recent trends in representations of Iran within American media find that not only is Iran consistently “othered” as distinct from the “good” US, but that status often factors quite centrally to these representations. In popular weekly newsmagazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, dominant discourses depict “the political

behavior of Iranians on the basis of essentialized notions of Persian and/or Islamic civilization, while very often emphasizing the taken for granted superiority of the West” (Fayyaz and Shirazi 2013, 53). One example of this is the circulation of the term “mullahs” to refer to the entirety of the Iranian government, despite many internal differences. These popular American newsweeklies deploy “mullah” to “denote the consummate ‘bad’ Iranians who cannot be reconciled with modern civilization” (Fayyaz and Shirazi 2013, 59-60). Such civilizational discourses rely on implicit but often explicit assumptions and declarations about the relative status of each society. Backward, rigidly theological, and insufficiently modern underpin these discourses of othering through status differentiation.

These representations also circulate in American popular culture as well through humor. For example, after reports of an Iranian missile test in 2008, the *New York Times* and other US sources reported that nine missiles had been tested, although the accompanying image only showed four missiles. It soon became fairly clear that one of the missiles had failed to launch, and that Iran had manipulated the photo to add it as having launched (*New York Times* 2008). As Särmä (2015, 113) recounts, numerous parody and satirical images quickly circulated in the aftermath of the story.³ The “images mainly made fun of Iran’s failures, which were multifaceted. On the one hand, Iran was technologically inept because it could not launch all the missiles; on the other hand, it was not even capable of mastering quite simple technology, such as photo manipulation” (Särmä 2015, 113). Practices of status differentiation are clearly on display here: Iran as technologically incompetent, unskilled, underdeveloped, and perhaps even naive for so poor an attempt at fooling the

³ See some of the images at <https://www.wired.com/2008/07/attack-of-the-p/>.

international media. This is perhaps indicative again of the broader feeling structure within the US regarding how images of Iran circulate across the culture.

Iranian representations of the US

Much of the American discourse on Iran is mirrored in Iranian discourses on the US. Just as there were some notable differences between the Bush and Obama administrations, there were differences between the governments of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-present). Ahmadinejad was widely seen in the US and Europe as much more hardline than his predecessor Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005). Rouhani, in turn, is widely seen as much more moderate both in tone and policy than both Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khatami. Practices of othering and denunciation of the US have, of course, long been a staple of Iranian foreign policy discourse since 1979. This is one of the two main commonalities between the discourse of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani: they both operate largely within the broader feeling structure prevailing between Iran and the US since 1979. To varying degrees of intensity, both have continued the longstanding practice of denouncing the US, yet they both do so frequently in terms of status concerns. As Duncombe (2015: 634) discusses, Iran “represents itself as Shi’a, progressive and triumphing over adversity. On the other hand, Iran represents the US as a bully, deceitful and threatening.”

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s discourse frequently revealed contestations over status with the US:

Those hegemonic Powers... have misrepresented Iran's healthy and fully safeguarded technological endeavors in the nuclear field as a pursuit of nuclear weapons... [Iran] is presenting in good faith its proposal for constructive interaction and a just dialogue. However, if some try to impose their will on the Iranian people by resorting to a language of force and threats against Iran, we will reconsider our entire approach to the nuclear issue" (Ahmadinejad, 2005).

That same year Ahmadinejad expressed anger at the "nuclear apartheid" that had been imposed by more powerful states, and that nuclear energy was the "right of all countries" (CNN 2005).

Rouhani succeeded Ahmadinejad on an explicitly moderate platform, yet continued with many of the same tropes and themes regarding the nuclear program. These tend to center around Iran's rights as a signatory to the international Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In 2013 speaking on the most recent rounds of sanctions imposed upon Iran, Rouhani stated that "despite all these pressures, the Iranian nation has shown that it would stand firm against these sanctions and will not give up its inalienable rights" (Fars News Agency 2013). Also speaking on sanctions, Supreme Leader Khamenei assailed the "arrogance" of the US:

The unreasonable behavior of global bullies towards the Islamic Republic correlates with our weakness and our power. Whenever we manage to stand on our own feet and become strong, they will have to behave in a polite and reasonable way. Paying attention to this truth is the key to solving all the problems of the country (Brookings 2013).

Rouhani also continued with this theme, writing to Khamenei in 2013 that early success in initiating negotiations over the nuclear program with the Western states "highlighted the fact that it is possible to offer views of the Iranian nation to the world public opinion in a logical and reasonable manner and with respect to the country's red lines, in a way which

will make the big powers respect the rights of the nation (President of the Islamic Republic 2013). A year later Rouhani expressed opposition to sanctions in firmer terms, and that Iran “should resist such aggression with all might and power,” and that “we consider some of the sanctions crimes against humanity” (CNN 2014).

Iranian discourses on the nuclear issue thus illustrate a number of themes through often charged emotional language about its disputed status. One might ask as a counterfactual here, absent this particular feeling structure, would the relationship surrounding the nuclear issue have turned out differently? If we adopt a hypothetical “rational” perspective⁴ this might suggest that both sides might actually see little reason to engage in such conflict: Iran would have little incentive to provoke US fears about expansionary ambitions in the region, and the US would likely be able to maintain a system of alliances and resource access without threatening and provoking Iran. Yet, the starting point for both states differs significantly, and are instead largely rooted in the prevailing feeling structure enveloping both states. The anger and frustration expressed here reflect Iran’s starting point in the negotiations: that as a signatory to the NPT, it has “inalienable” rights to possess and enrich uranium for the purposes of civilian energy needs. The US, in Iran’s view, ignores its rights under the treaty, and as such views the sanctions as unfair “bullying” to which other states are not subject. Iran sees itself as having equal legal, if not moral, status in terms of its nuclear rights, yet these rights are not recognized and are treated suspiciously by the US. “Nuclear apartheid” is a highly emotionalized expression of anger and frustration which recalls the historical injustices embodied by the term. Iran’s

⁴ Critiquing the classical “rational-emotional” binary has been a key focus on the emotions literature in IR and across many other fields (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014).

leaders also express frustration at the “misrepresentation” of Iran’s position and forthrightness in its approach to negotiations and nuclear rights. This anger (rather than humiliation) stems from the unfairness of the status recognition denied to Iran by others, rather than Iran itself being responsible for it (Forsberg et al. 2014: 264). Moreover, it is through Iran’s unique qualities as a respectable and morally upright state that it will best combat the unjust status denial from others. When Iran “stands on its own feet and become strong,” and displays “good faith and a just dialogue,” this will compel others to offer Iran the recognition it is entitled to. While expressions and connotations of anger, frustration, and defiance are most frequently expressed in discourses on the nuclear negotiations, these are arguably embedded in a much more extensive history and feeling structure with not only the US, but past eras of Iran’s own history. Humiliation is often paired with righteous anger in such discourses. For example, in 2014 Supreme Leader Khamenei discussed Iran’s advancement during Europe’s middle ages, yet later lamented how the “plundering West dominated the economy, politics, and social issues of Iran because of the sense of humiliation” of past Iranian leaders (Office of the Supreme Leader 2014). Humiliation by the West ended, of course, with the 1979 revolution, and Khamenei argues Iranians should continue to “rely on their knowledge, intelligence, dynamism, innovation, and firm determination” in their interactions with the West (Office of the Supreme Leader 2014). This combination of the memory of past humiliation paired with contemporary unjust denials of status by others who have no moral grounds to do so contribute to the varied emotional framings and expressions found in Iranian discourses on its nuclear program.

These same sorts of status representations also circulated in the broader feeling structure across Iranian society toward the US. An interesting aspect of this can be seen in Iranian film responses to American films depicting Iran. As Duncombe (2019) details, the 2012 American film *Argo* (depicting the rescue of six diplomats from the Canadian embassy in Tehran during the hostage crisis) portrays Iran largely via images of radical students and soldiers. This film is only one of the most recent in a long line of American films depicting Iran in a harsh light as backward and brutal, with recent films including *300* (2007) and *Prince of Persia* (2010). Alternatively, Iran itself has in recent years more proactively contested these representations with its own series of films aimed to offer contrasting images of itself to world audiences. *Persepolis* (2007), *A Separation* (2012), and *Tehran Taxi* (2015) are examples of Iranian-produced films which gained global attention. *The Separation* in particular won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film in 2012, and in his acceptance speech director Ashgar Farhadi raised several themes related to the perceived international status of Iran:

At this time, many Iranians all over the world are watching us and I imagine them to be very happy. They are happy not just because of an important award or a film or filmmaker, but because at the time when talk of war, intimidation, and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country Iran is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics. I proudly offer this award to the people of my country, a people who respect all cultures and civilizations and despise hostility and resentment.⁵

Farhadi's statement grapples with Iran's global status in several senses. First, he is proud that an Iran is, now, rightly receiving the status recognition it deserves with this award. This recognition stands in stark contrast to "talk of war, intimidation, and aggression exchanged between politicians." Second, such "heavy dust of politics" unfairly tars Iran

⁵ <https://slate.com/culture/2012/02/asghar-farhadi-s-oscar-speech-the-best-of-the-night.html>

with a status image that it does not deserve, which erases the “rich and ancient culture” that it is rightly proud of. Finally, the resentment expressed focuses on how despite Iranians being respectful of others, Iran continues to be confronted with hostility. Iran’s global status image, with its ancient culture worthy of respect, does not receive the status and respect it deserves. Iranian concerns about status, then, are as apparent here in the global politics of film as they are in official state discourses surrounding nuclear capabilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to explore a question that has continually been at the center of US-Iranian nuclear politics, that is, despite the lack of evidence of a nuclear weapons program, why US policymakers and elites nevertheless *believe* that Iran desires to build nuclear weapons? While traditional theories focusing on the material and strategic dimensions of the relationship, such perspectives neglect the affective dimensions of emotional beliefs that pervade US-Iran relations, which have directly shaped the course of interactions surrounding the nuclear issue. The particular feeling structure shared between the two states helps to explain the particular animosities in this relationship that arguably extend beyond strategic and material concerns. Status concerns on both sides are often a particular expression of this prevailing feeling structure, and efforts and practices at imposing and resisting status discourses is evident from the Iranian and US sides at both elite and cultural levels.

One question this chapter leaves open regards potential changes to the current feeling structure between both states. It is evident that despite an overall climate of hostility, there have been times when cracks in this feeling structure have appeared. Iranian expressions of solidarity with Americans in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, and 2015 agreement negotiated by the Obama administration are two such instances. While much of the popular commentary and scholarly work on these have rightly focused on technical and strategic details, a broader examination might consider at least two questions about such potential openings. First, presuming that shifts in policy are preceded by movements in feeling structures, what accounts for these broader changes in feeling structures? Second, how might such shifts in feeling structure allow for corresponding changes in feeling rules guiding both states' reactions to the other? If feeling rules are "rules about the verbal and non-verbal expression of appropriate emotions in a given situation" (Koschut, Introduction), then future work might consider how openings in feeling structures might allow for new kinds of feeling rules allowing for different sorts of emotional expressions and discourse to shape Iran-US nuclear relations, and how these may open broader possibilities moving forward.

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