# How looking at language, not stockpiles, helps explain the latest dispute over Iran's ballistic missile program.

*Despite the success of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, Iran-US relations continue to follow a well-worn acrimonious path as demonstrated by the latest dispute over Iran's ballistic missile program. What is preventing the full normalization of relations between the two states?* **Constance Duncombe** *writes that underneath the international, domestic and personal dynamics feeding into opposing US and Iranian positions on the ballistic missile program, binary representations of Self and Other continue to contribute to misrecognition, exacerbating tensions between the two countries.*

Last month, the US Treasury Department blacklisted two Iranian companies for their involvement in Iran's ballistic missile program. These sanctions followed several ballistic missile tests by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), causing US concern about the threat posed by Iranian missile development. In response, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated last week that discussions about Iran's missile program were off the table. Countering US claims about the danger of such tests to the Middle East and international community as 'baseless and threadbare allegations', Zarif suggested the US look to its allies to explain the growth of Islamic State and regional instability. So far, so normal for Iran-US relations. However, this latest stoush has come at a time when relations between the two states had been more cordial, following the historic nuclear deal in July 2015. Despite positive moves on both sides in implementing the nuclear deal, why do we continue to witness persistent retreats from normalized relations?

An important clue to this complex problem can be found in the language used by both the US and Iran to talk about each other. Since the 1979-81 Hostage Crisis, pejorative representations have continued to permeate communication from both sides, such as 'Great Satan', 'rogue state', 'terrorist'. Any dialogue between the two states, initiated and managed by third party representatives, has been subject to deep and mutual feelings of mistrust and suspicion that emerge from the representations each state has of the other, affecting how Iran recognises the US and *vice versa*.

'Emad' ballistic missile, Tasnim News Agency (CC by 4.0)

Why is language important? Binary representations of Self and Other (where groups or individuals centre themselves compared to a different person or group which they see as being unlike or antithetical) inform the identity narratives of each state and how they are recognised. These representations are deeply embedded in Iran-US relations. Representations of Self and Other contribute to misrecognition and restrict what foreign policy options are available to both states. They exacerbate tensions between Iran and the US, fostering a feeling of disrespect as the states engage with each other.

Overall US representations of itself imagine the state as a world leader and a force for good, while Iran is represented as dangerous and irrational. Comparatively, Iranian representations of itself produce an image of a strong, progressive Shi'a state. Its rhetoric challenges the US representation of Iranian inferiority and instead paints the US as a bully focused on undermining Iran.

Take one representation the US employs about itself: that it is acting with the support of and on behalf of the international community. In doing so, it normalises the representation of Iran as the irrational, isolated Other. This representation stems from a cost-benefit logic taking into account the sacrifices Iran had made to continue its nuclear program. The US has imposed rounds of sanctions on Iran, restricting US investment in or transfer of technical knowledge to Iran, including the sale of refined petroleum. That Iran continued to assert its right to enrich uranium under Article IV of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), sacrificing significant elements of its state welfare in the process, supported the US belief that the Islamic Republic was not behaving rationally.

One way the rational US vs. irrational Iran representation evolves within foreign policy was through US preoccupation with preventing the Iranians from building nuclear weapons. The US has been convinced that the Islamic Republic would eventually produce a nuclear weapon, despite US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) reports from 2007 and 2011 confirming there was no irrefutable evidence Iran had nuclear weapons. Nevertheless the US believed the Iranian nuclear program posed an '**urgent and potentially very dangerous challenge**' to international security. Even the argument that was run by 'perfectly sane Ayatollahs' failed to dissuade representations to the contrary. For instance, on the eve of the nuclear deal US Senate Republicans issued an open letter to Iran stating any executive agreement between Obama and Khamenei relating to the nuclear negotiations could be 'revoked with the stroke of a pen'.

Meanwhile Iranian representations of the US follow the Self-Other pattern, however the main representative schemas are split between provocative religious images and those that represent the US as a master manipulator. With the former, Iran uses the sobriquet 'Great Satan'. With the latter, the US is represented as a hypocritical bully. Here the historical grievance of the 1953 Mossadegh Coup arises. The 1953 *coup d'état* saw the popularly elected Prime Minister Mossadegh overthrown by the British and the CIA. Iran thus discursively resists US dominance by challenging the US representation of itself as leader of the international community as it has acted outside the framework of international law. Instead it represents the US as hypocritical.

Such representations suggest Iran feels pressured by the US and is resisting this pressure through affirmations of revolutionary Shi'ite identity. This is built up in two ways: firstly, through the suggestion that US power allows the state to behave towards Iran without consequence, such as its continued imposition of sanctions against Iran. Secondly, Iran resists US dominance through its own actions, such as continuing its enrichment activities despite increasing sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Although Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has pushed for greater dialogue between the two states, representations of the US as a fraudulent, self-imposed leader remain strong.



Khamenei Twitter post, 25 July 2015

It is remarkable how powerful the representations are that exist within Iran-US relations. Representations have influenced not only how each state recognises the other, but also what foreign policy options each believes are available as a result. Both Iranian and US experiences of these representations act to securitize notions of 'threat' or 'danger', reinforcing mistrust in the foreign policy choices of each state. Most importantly, these representational dynamics suggest that both US and Iranian actions – including the recent dispute over Iran's ballistic missile program – may be better explained in terms of a struggle for recognition. Until these representations are challenged more forcefully, they will continue to disrupt efforts towards Iran-US rapprochement.

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