

*John Bell explores how reciprocal recognition of US and Iranian needs could help resolve the explosive nuclear issue.*

# ‘Axis of evil’ versus ‘the great Satan’ – or needs unmet?

“THE trouble with Herodotus ... is that he never knew enough about [Persians] to give a balanced picture ... and it’s the same with other Greek authors: they never saw the things they described with their own eyes.” So said a postal worker interviewed in *Mirrors of the Unseen*, an excellent travel book on Iran.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the attitude imputed to the Herodotus of antiquity is still alive today, as tensions over Iran’s nuclear programme create one of the outstanding geopolitical challenges facing the world. Iran and the US have been at odds for more than three decades, with little actual exposure to each other, creating large gulfs of misunderstanding.



At the heart of the issue is a struggle to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, which US, Israel and Western allies view as a threat to themselves (most particularly, to Israel) and likely to destabilise the Middle East region. Iran has denied this ambition. As the use of force by the US or Israel to contain Iran’s nuclear capacities remains an ‘option’, the consequences for the Middle East and beyond could be considerable. However, negotiations to defuse the issue and find an acceptable solution have as yet been unsuccessful.

In January this year, the *New York Times* carried an opinion column written by two Iranians familiar with the nuclear issue.<sup>2</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian diplomat and spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the European Union, is currently a research scholar at Princeton University, focusing on options for improving US–Iran relations and resolving the Iran nuclear programme crisis through diplomacy. Mohammad Ali Shabani, a graduate of the School of Oriental and African Studies, is the editor of Iran’s leading foreign policy journal and a political analyst for Iranian, British, American and Swedish media.

In an attempt to improve American understanding of Iran, they clarified two simple and significant concepts in Iranian culture: *maslahat* and *aberu*. *Maslahat* means ‘interest’, which traditionally drives state policy and negotiations, while *aberu* means ‘saving face’ or dignity. In human givens terms, the latter might be seen as the need for status and legitimacy within social groups, and for a sense of belonging to a wider social community (in this case, the international community) – two basic human givens that need to be met. As is well understood by readers of this

journal, when needs are not met, conflict and suffering may ensue.

Mousavian and Shabani clearly make the argument that Iran will never put *maslahat* before *aberu* – interest before dignity. It is Iranian/Eastern understanding that the emotional state of a people, indeed of a whole culture, is more important than the material interests involved. “If there is to be any resolution of the nuclear standoff, Western leaders must grasp these concepts,” say these experts.

Iran is an ancient civilisation and culture. It has a pride and honour in its history, which translates into a demand that it be treated with a certain respect by other nations (again, the human givens of status and belonging). But there is also a third, often unstated but critical need at play, and that is the need for attention. The Iranian need for the proper kind of attention from the US is a crucial piece of the puzzle. As Mousavian and Shabani indicate, these needs not only drive Iranian behaviour they are the keys to unlocking a solution over the nuclear issue.

Decision-makers in the US, on the other hand, give short shrift to these needs, putting them way down on their list of priorities. This blind spot in classical Western diplomacy, long focused on material interest and ‘rational’ negotiations, is a ‘missing piece’ in successful management of international relations today.<sup>3</sup> The American administration continues to pursue a “significant turning of the screw”<sup>4</sup> against Iran by isolating it, hoping pressure through economic sanctions and threats will work. It wants Iran’s leaders to be forced to choose between their nuclear programme or their oil revenue, “the country’s economic lifeblood”<sup>4</sup> (*maslahat*). Thus there remains a continued focus on material interest and on the use of threat to make the enemy bow in defeat – the exact opposite of status and legitimacy, as sought by the Iranians: as Mousavian and Shabani put it, “placing *maslahat* over *aberu*, even temporarily, leads to nothing good”.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, discussions with Iranians close to the negotiations indicate that the problem could be solved relatively simply. Put in a nutshell, without the intricacies, Iran would be transparent about its nuclear programme, permitting the West knowledge of whether it is attempting to build a bomb or not, in return for a recognition of its right to enrich uranium and a removal of the economic sanctions currently in place against the country.

Such an approach would actually meet the needs of both sides to some degree, and put the relationship on a different footing.

The right to enrich uranium is seen by Iran as the prime indication of its status and belonging in the international community – a position it feels it deserves, given its grand history. Indeed, as a group of former European ambassadors to Iran has pointed out, “Nothing in international law or in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) forbids the enrichment of uranium”.<sup>5</sup> Iran looks around the globe and sees that Pakistan, India and North Korea have not only enriched uranium but have also developed nuclear bombs without the threat of military strikes against them which the US and Israel publicly make against Iran. Yet the US insists that the first step should be the suspension of enrichment because they perceive Iran as the culprit that must demonstrate its good faith. It is no surprise that Iranians conclude that “the nuclear case is just another pretext for trying to keep us down”.<sup>6</sup> As Mousavian and Shabani point out, this gets neither side anywhere: “Western leaders need to grasp that it would be devastating for Iran’s *aberu* to take the first step solely in exchange of promises.”

### Who is the victim?

There are, however, other factors that must be taken into account, and these concern the equally important needs of the US. The Americans have their own need for status with regard to Iran, never having forgiven it for the hostage crisis of 1979–80 and other acts that, over the past decades, have made the superpower feel humiliated (lowered in status) by a lesser power. It also has unmet needs in terms of security, with the hostage crisis and the later bombing of the American embassy and the Marine compound in Beirut by Iranian-related groups naturally contributing to the American perception of Iran as a threat in that respect. Iranians do not recognise this and instead hark back to British interference in their country in the 19th century, the coup that removed elected Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, and Western support for the brutal Shah until 1979.

Thus, both sides have traumatised each other in the past, and the resulting fixed mindsets of fear and distrust do not permit either to see the basic needs of the other. These historical grievances have fuelled profound suspicion, creating assumptions that the other side is always manoeuvring to take advantage. Americans believe little of what Iranian negotiators put forward, suspecting that all their actions are ruses to buy time to build a bomb. Iranians are sure that Americans are not sincere about negotiations, and are merely using the nuclear issue for regime change, ie to end the era of the Mullahs. Each sees the other as insincere and themselves as victims with incontrovertible rights. The unmet basic emotional needs of both are playing havoc with their capacity to act rationally, and therefore

successfully, to conclude complex negotiations.

This dynamic has fuelled a series of missteps, based on unrealistic perceptions and demands, that are a sad testament to how human actions can go wrong if they are not based on a realistic foundation such as that described in the human givens paradigm. For instance, “Both sides want to trade a horse for a rabbit”, as a former American ambassador Thomas Pickering put it,<sup>7</sup> believing their case more important or valid than the other, and therefore legitimising giving less to the other side. Both sides are also perpetually seeking a ‘game changer’ in the talks that would shift the momentum to their side.<sup>8</sup>

American refusal to recognise Iran’s needs has led only to an increase in Iran’s nuclear capacities, the exact opposite of the intended goal. In 2004, America insisted that Iran not enrich uranium at all, and the result is that Iran, in attempting to achieve its status in unilateral ways, now has 12,000 centrifuges.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this American error may duplicate itself: a military strike on Iran, rather than preventing that country from going nuclear, may be the one action that ensures Iran develops a nuclear bomb, in what it sees as its only defence against future attack.

Iranians’ blindness towards the US takes the form of top leadership viewing American attempts at closer inspection of Iranian nuclear sites not as a legitimate international concern and demand but as a foot in the door for intelligence gathering. “The Americans will constantly want more from us,” a very senior Iranian leader has said.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this mentality leads to missed opportunities when more sincere gestures aimed at opening up relations are presented, such as at the beginning of President Obama’s first term, albeit without follow-through.

### The skewed pursuit of needs

In sum, each side is seeking to have its basic needs met without doing so in a proper and effective fashion. For Iran, the desire for status, legitimacy and attention, buttressed by an imperial history, drives it to seek ways to achieve that, even through means perceived internationally as pernicious and untrustworthy: ambiguity in the nuclear programme, loud and threatening rhetoric, and attempts at exerting influence throughout the Middle East. For the Americans, the need to maintain status as an unrivalled superpower leads to readiness to punish or refuse to compromise with any party that has either done it damage in the past (Cuba is another example), or that attempts to put itself on equal footing. These hidden needs, combined with the political habits and cultures in each society, result in destructive and confrontational policies veering off in directions that only make sense to people who happen to share the same ‘logic’.

Ironically, the largest losers in this situation are not the decision-makers. While the elites on both sides wallow in their sense of victimisation, the real victim in Iran is a “burned generation, because they feel they lost out on the natural evo-



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lution of life".<sup>11</sup> There are also real gaps between the people and the government in both countries: citizens on both sides have different attitudes from their elites, who are consumed with a need never to show weakness. Americans are generally ignorant of any matter related to Iran,<sup>12</sup> and some make the case that, if the American public were more educated about the Iran issue, its government would not be able to continue its current policies. On the other side, American nationhood and culture are very popular among very many Iranians,<sup>13</sup> even if critical of American actions against Iran: one is quoted as saying "our leaders have lost their marbles".<sup>14</sup>

## REFERENCES

- 1 Eliot, J (2007). *Mirrors of the Unseen: journeys in Iran*. Picador.
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- 3 See "The missing piece: new approaches for understanding and addressing the problems of the Middle East." <http://missing-peace.blogspot.com> for more ideas regarding this approach.
- 4 Edbrink, T and Sanger, D (2013). *US increases pressure of economic war on Tehran*. New York Times, February 6.
- 5 Dalton, R et al (2011). *Nuclear proliferation: engaging Iran*. Los Angeles Times, June 9. All the authors were former ambassadors to Iran for Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK.
- 6 Quote from Aziz Shah Mohammadi, expert connected with Iran's National Security Council, New York Times, May 14, 2012.
- 7 Thomas Pickering, former senior American official, in panel discussion in Madrid, October 2012.
- 8 Parsi, T (2013). *Washington and Tehran's perpetual search for the upper hand*, Feb 7. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/02/07/washington-and-tehran-s-perpetual-search-for-the-upper-hand.html>

## Complications abound

Talks between Americans and Iranians are also hostage to other factors that demonstrate the dysfunctional state of politics in general today, and the desperate need for new paradigms, such as the human givens, to make political actions more coherent.

The domestic political dynamics in both Iran and the US, and the crucial role of Israel in influencing American policy, are also major drivers of today's standoff. In the US, demonstrating weakness on the issue of Iran serves as bait for political attacks in the media and, inside Washington DC: a president cannot afford to look weak or duped because he represents a 'superpower'. Furthermore, the American electoral calendar constrains debate, in terms of time as well as substance. These aspects of American political culture limit dialogue with Iran, as well as the options for a solution.

In Iran, the system is equally complicated. Iran's Revolutionary Guards, an ideological force that is mandated to protect the Islamic revolution, cannot be ignored in the decision-making process even though it is not, strictly speaking, a political force.<sup>12</sup> Iranians are also known to be tough negotiators, bred by millennia of practice in the bazaars of their cities. Their tactics can be perceived as obstructive by Westerners.

These are the political realities inside both countries, driven by cult thinking.<sup>15</sup> Such dynamics make compromise with an outside group, especially a perceived enemy, that much more difficult. Although we are all inured to these cult-like processes, and take them for granted as the only possible political reality, they are far from conducive to the kinds of intelligent decisions required today for issues such as climate change, spread of disease – or the rise of a nuclear Iran.

The position of Israel is also a critical piece of the puzzle. The Islamic Republic of Iran is Israel's stated enemy and statements by Iranian President Ahmadinejad denying the Holocaust or predicting the end of Israel have played on Israel's understandable fears. However, this Israeli fear is so powerful and Israel's links inside Washington so strong that American policy towards Iran ends up heavily skewed. Black and white thinking abounds, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu describing the Iranian lead-

ership as a "messianic apocalyptic cult".<sup>16</sup> Although President Ahmadinejad's leadership has some of these qualities, this very much misses the greys and contradictions in the large remainder of Iran's politics.

Instead of Iran being seen as a complexity with legitimate rights and a need for international status and legitimacy, it has been consigned to the dark corners of the Axis of Evil – and, as former American Vice-President Dick Cheney once stated, "We don't negotiate with evil". Ironically, talks held in good faith by Americans less through the prism of Israel and its historical traumas and more through *what Iran needs* would be more likely to defuse the tensions and to lead to conditions of security for Israel. Furthermore, it is not out of the question for Iranians to provide Americans privately with assurances regarding Israel's security – privately because, for internal ideological reasons, Iran cannot currently change the nature of its outward relations with Israel.<sup>17</sup>

As with Iran and the US, if the Israeli need for security, arising from the terrible historical traumas of the Jewish people, is badly pursued, it compels destructive policies from which there is no useful exit. The American (or Washington DC) view of Israel as an almost sacred cause prevents clear thinking about how relations between that state and its neighbours, including Iran, can be improved. Hard though it is for some to fathom, Iran, Israel and the US all share the same basic needs, unmet to various degrees.

## A successful process

It has to be heartening that there is the possibility for a successful negotiation on the Iranian nuclear issue. As stated, America would recognise Iran's right to enrich uranium, providing it with status and belonging, in return for full transparency that would calm Israeli and American security needs. Both sides would also need to admit that the "mistrust is mutual",<sup>10</sup> and work to overcome it, abandoning "horse for rabbit" maximalist approaches. It would be even more useful if both sides recognised each other's basic needs first, their human givens.

Many steps can be taken that improve the two sides' understanding of each other, including at the level of the human givens. For instance, steps could be taken simultaneously, or reciprocally, rather than one side waiting for the other to take a major unilateral move forward. This would be an implicit recognition of equality between the sides, putting them on a level playing field in terms of human needs – although a difficult call for the US as a superpower with enormous distrust of its Iranian enemy. This could perhaps be overcome, to some extent, by following the suggestion of former American ambassador Thomas Pickering that the "Obama Administration could offer a simple statement that the US government will seek to talk directly to all nations, without preconditions, in order to address the world's problems."<sup>18</sup> Such a general statement would dilute fixations inside Washington DC on the Iran

issue, and raise Iran's sense of status and legitimacy.

The unproductive standoff clouds recognition of the fact that there are many areas where the two nations share common interests – such as controlling the drugs trade in Afghanistan and containing Sunni Al Qaeda. Developing the conversation on these issues could build the necessary confidence to bridge the tough nuclear issue.<sup>19</sup>

### Attention

And then there is the need to meet each other's eyes. After three decades of suspicion and hostility, the lack of familiarity between the sides is considerable. Direct talks at highest level could break the logjam and diminish distrust, but not if the conversation is only at the conceptual level. It requires direct contact at the level of decision-makers to begin to appreciate each other's needs, and work towards a solution.

These are just some of the possible steps forward; diplomacy has many tools. Indeed, what has not yet been sufficiently highlighted is one of the most basic needs of the Iranian side – perhaps the hidden element of the whole equation: *American attention*. It could be said that many of Iran's wilder actions are mechanisms for attracting that attention at any cost, as a means of trying to make the two more equal on the world stage. Imagine if the US provided Iran with a healthier source of this key human given. The Iranian needs for status, belonging and attention would then be met – the key to unlocking the current impasse. And perhaps there are small signs of hope that this may one day come to pass. During a videotaped speech to Iranians on the occasion of *nawrouz* (the Iranian new year) this year, President Obama gave greetings without threats. Iranian President Khamenei responded by saying he was not opposed to negotiating directly with the Americans.

However, when I asked a former Iranian negotiator whether he thought it would be useful to recognise each side's basic needs for status, belonging and attention, whatever they might be termed, before detailed negotiations are entered into, the answer was "I am not sure the Americans really want the negotiations to succeed at all".

### Reality check

The harsh reality is that, if the US and Iran don't recognise each other's needs, then the situation will deteriorate. I believe Mousavian and Shabani are right: you cannot put *maslahat* before *aberu*.

As readers of this journal will know, you need to satisfy basic human givens first to achieve a healthy outcome.

If not, the likelihood is that Iran will keep growing in terms of nuclear potential, and America will continue to try to threaten Iran into submission. The domestic situation in both



**9** Dalton et al (*ibid*) and discussions with former Iranian negotiator.

**10** Reported in private discussions with a former Iranian official.

**11** Erdbrink, T (2012). *Pinched aspirations of Iran's young multitudes*. New York Times, May 7.

**12** Rubin, M (2013). *Deciphering Iranian decision making and strategy today*. American Enterprise Institute Outlook, January 28.

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**14** Kristoff, N (2012). *Hugs from Iran*. New York Times, June 13.

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**17** Comments from diplomats with experience on this issue.

**18** Pickering, T R, Luers, W and Walsh, J (2009). *How to deal with Iran*. New York Review of Books, February 12.

**19** Mousavian, H (2012). *There is an alternative to the Iran impasse*. Financial Times, May 22.

**20** Discussions with Iranian commentators, March 2013.

**21** Ornstein, R and Ehrlich, P (1989). *New World New Mind: moving towards conscious evolution*. Doubleday.

countries only reinforces well-worn grooves: "If Iran wants to make the bomb, you cannot prevent it",<sup>20</sup> "we are stronger", "we can resist any pressure", "our people will triumph". In this situation, the default in diplomacy is to revert to 'conflict management' rather than resolution, managing symptoms rather than dealing with root causes.

Negotiations are under way today between the P5+1 (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) and Iran. Two meetings have occurred this year in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and more are planned. There are conflicting reports about progress, and the strong likelihood is that there is as yet no shift of paradigms, as suggested in this article. President Obama has given signals that another year of talks is needed, and the rhetoric may well continue, sometimes aggravating the existing grievances. Other related events, such as the war in Syria, where both sides have important stakes, could get further out of hand, adding new layers of explosive tension to both the sides.

Iran and the USA continue to live out their relations through what Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich call our "Old Mind",<sup>21</sup> our more dramatic survival mode, laden with fears and threats that paint the world in terms of the strong and the weak and blacks and whites, rather than gradations of grey. A very old civilisation and a potentially waning superpower operate from that Old Mind, even today in the 21st century. As a result, what they 'see', even during negotiations, is a caricature of reality: an Axis of Evil on one hand, The Great Satan on the other – and disastrous policies spill out from there. What they do not (yet) realise is that they have something else in common: a universal set of human needs that could help make sense of their own demands, and, most importantly, of the demands of their 'enemy'. ■