

Republics of Myth: National Narratives and the US–Iran Conflict

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Introduction: “Foundations of a Conflict”

For forty years, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been enmeshed in a cold war, punctuated by small eruptions of violence or covert action, with each relentlessly declaiming the other as aggressive and fanatical. Remarkably, in the midst of this routine outrage and maneuvering, the two came to an agreement on a difficult, complex issue: Iran’s nuclear program. Then, abruptly, that sole achievement was unraveled. How and why did this happen?

As to the achievement, the simple answer is that the two men elected as president of his respective country—Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, and Hassan Rouhani in 2013—were prepared to negotiate more seriously than the two nations had before. Aided by America’s other negotiating partners, which were France, Britain, Russia, China, and Germany, by U.N. and U.S. sanctions that increasingly squeezed Iran’s economy, and by the mounting, violent disorder in the region stemming from the Iraq War and the rebellions of “Arab Spring,” each side had powerful incentives and openings to reach a pact. With skilled negotiators and a favorable climate of world opinion, the breakthroughs came. Iran’s nuclear program, the most worrying aspect of which was a large and growing number of centrifuges capable of producing uranium that could be fabricated into weapons, was sharply constrained—indeed, rolled back—by the agreement that was to last for the ensuing ten to fifteen years, with some constraints being permanent.

Then it came apart, and that demise was also attributed to a personality—Donald J. Trump, elected president about sixteen months after the deal was signed. Trump had vowed during his White House campaign to scuttle the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the full name of the Iran deal, which had always been a *bête noire* of the Republican Party and its increasingly extreme leadership.

This common template for explaining the Iran nuclear deal’s roller coaster ride is sturdy, but incomplete. The JCPOA did not spring from the heads of Obama and Rouhani like Athena from the head of Zeus, nor was it later a victim of Trump’s whims alone. The Iran deal was instead the culmination of at least eighteen years of fitful, contentious, and miscalculated attempts to build a relationship between Washington and Tehran. Negotiators, policy makers, opinion leaders, and the publics had to overcome deeply ingrained mistrust of each other. It is a distrust borne of actual events and accusations in the relationship. And because they exert powerful influence on political leaders, the two countries’ national narratives constantly clash, an undertow that subverts attempts at a normal relationship.

A national narrative is a story a nation tells about itself. Narratives are typically complex, weaving actual history with myth. They are composed of cultural artifacts and trappings, often borrowing from religious tales and folklore, and exalting the nation in uniquely heroic expressions. The American national narrative, rooted in the myth of the frontier and burnished with a certain self-glorifying idealism, tells a story of persistent expansion on the continent and beyond. The Iranian national narrative conveys, among many diverse elements, deep suspicion of foreign involvement in Iran, spurred by centuries of domination by non-Persians.

The two nations came into conflict not only because their respective narratives are conflictual, but because specific events brought them into confrontation—which the narratives enabled and reinforced—as did conventional national interests. This dynamic, moreover, gave rise to another narrative, that of the fraught relationship itself. The slings and arrows of that specific, bilateral narrative—the U.S.-led coup against Mossadegh, the Iranian takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, with much more in between and afterwards—fit the larger national narratives that span centuries before the two countries ever encountered each other.

Precisely how these narratives shaped the U.S.-Iran confrontation, the fitful search for some sort of accommodation, and the missed opportunities to create a functional state-to-state relationship, is the subject of this book.

A brief history

The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States was fraught from the beginning. The revolutionaries in Tehran saw Washington as the power looming behind the throne of the deposed shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose long reign was enabled by U.S. and British power and intrigue. Most notable was the coup the two powers engineered to remove a popular prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953, restoring the young shah to a stronger political position and supporting him for more than two decades. The shah fell in 1979, due not only to repression, but also to lavishness and corruption enabled by American petrodollars. American elites failed to see the situation for what it was, and dug themselves into a deeper hole by allowing the ailing shah into New York for medical treatment. This, for the Khomeini-led masses, was the final straw; they overran the embassy and held its staff hostage for 444 days.

The animus became even more deadly during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The Carter and then Reagan administrations supported Saddam with intelligence, political legitimacy, non-lethal military equipment, and financial credits—probably saving his regime when the tide of war turned against him. Only after Khomeini died in 1988 did the possibility arise for some rapprochement, signaled by President George H. W. Bush, but the chance slipped away in the tumult of Desert Storm in 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union several months later.

Beginning with the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997—an enormously consequential event in the politics of Iran—the two adversaries commenced as never before an improvised series of moves to build a better bilateral relationship. These moves were not intended to “normalize” the relationship, which seemed far-fetched at the time, but to transform it into one with regular, direct communication, some discussion of mutual concerns, and more efficient troubleshooting. These modest but achievable goals seemed feasible with Bill Clinton having begun his second term as president just seven months before Khatami was inaugurated. Clinton had hardly been embracing Tehran with open arms before Khatami’s arrival. He issued several executive orders banning investment in Iran’s energy sector, for example, and signed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act in 1996, all of which cheered Iran’s opponents. Just as significant as sanctions was Clinton’s palpable anger when in June 1996 nineteen U.S. air force personnel were killed in a truck-bomb explosion at Khobar Towers near an air base in Saudi Arabia. Iran was fingered as the culprit, and Clinton actively considered a retaliatory attack on Iran. -

In light of Clinton’s actions and attitudes, it was not a given that he would respond favorably to the surprise election of the reformer Khatami. A cleric with a rank just below ayatollah and a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad, Khatami was something of a mystery to

U.S. policy makers, as indeed Iranian politics had always been. Soon into his presidency, however, Khatami was making gestures that indicated he sought a fresh beginning with the United States. The gestures were largely rhetorical; in one important instance in January 1998, he spoke at length with Christiane Amanpour of CNN and said, among much else, “I respect the American nation because of their great civilization.” He was also opening up social space in Iran, loosening the restrictive revolutionary practices that, in the West, appeared highly repressive.

As a result, the Clinton foreign policy team began to see Khatami as something new and possibly agreeable. The question for them was how to take advantage of this new attitude in Tehran, assuming it would last and not be subverted by hardliners. So began a back-and-forth process of signaling, preparing publics for a new approach, some policy changes, and a considerable amount of confusion about what was unfolding.

Very little seemed to be tangibly achieved by the Clinton administration in advancing relations with Iran by the time of its exit in January 2001. As we argue later, the awkward and at times even hostile exchanges with Iran appeared to be fruitless, and very much beholden to past events and long-held prejudices. The beginning of something more favorable was nevertheless developing. This continued, for a short time, during the George W. Bush administration. Relations with Iran were not a major issue in the Bush-Gore election in 2000, although the Israeli-Palestinian issue and threats made by Saddam Hussein were somewhat prominent. The Bush team was visibly more interested in a potential confrontation with China in its early months and had neglected the potential for a terrorist attack arising from the Mideast. With the September 11, 2001, attacks by Al Qaeda, the U.S. policy focus shifted abruptly. For relations with Iran, which had been in limbo for several months, this had a twofold effect.

First was a promising cooperation on post-9/11 action. Khatami had been reelected just that summer, and while his star had dimmed due to a student uprising that state security forces harshly subdued in 1999, he remained relatively popular in the eyes of most Americans. Thus his expressions of empathy with the victims of the Al Qaeda attack and the Iranian people’s outpouring of solidarity in candlelight vigils and the like showed a seemingly authentic sense of caring. This attitude took a more concrete form when Iran played a very positive role at the December 2001 Bonn conference following the collapse of the Taliban’s state. Conversations between Iran’s envoy, Javad Zarif, and U.S. ambassador James Dobbins were particularly promising. Even after President Bush surprisingly included Iran in his “axis of evil” reference in the February 2002 State of the Union speech, Iranians pursued a better relationship through the diplomatic channel afforded by state building in Afghanistan.

Again, however, it was apparently all for naught. For the second impact of the 9/11 attacks was America’s elevated fear of terrorism, and Iran had long been identified as a terror-sponsoring state. The most vivid memory of Iran in America was the U.S. embassy hostage taking of 1979-81, and the Islamic Republic had been charged with terrorist sprees from then on. That the United States went to war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda and then eighteen months later in Iraq against Saddam Hussein—two mortal enemies of Iran—did not lessen Americans’ wariness of Iran or Iranians’ fear of a hostile United States suddenly encircling their homeland. Many in Iran believed, as did many Americans, that the United States would make Iran its next regime-change target after Saddam Hussein was removed from power in March 2003. The public disclosure of a covert nuclear-weapons program in Iran in 2002 added to the tension on both sides.

Perhaps as a result of that fear in Tehran, the Khatami government, with the apparent approval of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamanei, wrote an unaddressed letter or memo that was faxed by the Swiss ambassador in Tehran to the State Department seeking a “grand bargain” on all outstanding issues. These included the nuclear file, recently galvanized by accusations about a secret enrichment facility at Natanz; a vow to stop supporting militant Palestinian organizations and to resolve differences with Israel; and to cease support for political violence more broadly. The letter was ignored in Washington.

Still, the Bush administration did allow for some progress as Iran engaged on its nuclear program with Germany, France, and Britain (EU3), as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency. A 2004 accord in which Iran agreed to suspend enrichment and accept inspections appeared to be an important step forward. In the final months of Khatami’s government, new proposals from Iran were put forward by negotiator Hassan Rouhani, including relatively sharp constraints on enrichment and other nuclear activities, and an extensive inspections regime. The EU3 countered with a few more conditions, but Iran declined the proposal because it did not recognize Iran’s right to enrich uranium, a norm Iran insists was established in the bedrock Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968.

The election of Ahmadinejad in 2005 (and his inauguration just after the EU3 proposal) threw that progress off course for a time; he restarted enrichment and raised the level of bumptious rhetoric, even as the parties continued to discuss comprehensive proposals for stopping Iran’s enrichment of uranium. A 2006 proposal from the West, including the United States, demanded an end to enrichment—the major stumbling block throughout negotiations—which Iran promptly rejected. But the rejection was tempered by acknowledging that the proposal contained constructive ideas.

This back-and-forth on the nuclear issue was occurring as the U.S. war in Iraq was intensifying. The anti-occupation insurgencies in Anbar province, mainly Sunni Arabs, were to clash with Iran-backed Shia militias, and both were dangerous to U.S. forces. The 2003 invasion and resulting occupation stirred sectarianism so violent that it became in 2005-2007 an outright civil war. Iran was playing a key role in backing the likes of Muqtada al-Sadr, the firebrand Shia cleric, who commanded a militia and was a major voice lambasting the U.S. presence in Iraq. Virtually all Shia politicians, who represented 60 percent of the Iraqi population, were beholden to Iran; many had lived there during Saddam’s reign of terror against Shias. The war was fractious: U.S. military and political leaders contended that Revolutionary Guard Corps operatives were directly killing American soldiers. All sides pursued their objectives through the multifaceted use of violence.

The mounting mayhem in Iraq coincided with a change in the Iranian government’s public face—namely, the feisty Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2005 to the presidency, replacing the placating Khatami. Ahmadinejad’s questioning the Nazi Holocaust and his confrontational statement, drawing on Khomeini, that this “occupation regime over Jerusalem [Israel] must vanish from the page of time,” rattled regional and bilateral relations, particularly as his hardline supporters widely used the provocative interpretation to mean that “Israel must be wiped off the face of the Earth.” Given the closeness of the United States and Israel, such incendiary statements were bound to singe whatever working relations were enlivened by the nuclear talks. The rhetoric also brought pro-Israel lobby ever more forcefully into the domestic political whirlwind around nuclear negotiations.

It is remarkable that these disruptions—Iraq violence, Holocaust denial, harsh rhetoric on both sides—did not derail the nuclear talks completely. They resumed in 2008. By then with

Russia and China participating, the group included all five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, plus Germany, hence their designation, P5+1. The UNSC was increasingly the generator of sanctions, prompted by the United States, to constrain Iran and exert negotiating pressure. The 2008 offer from the P5+1 was similar to the 2006 offer, with some sweeteners if Iran would quit enrichment, including membership in the World Trade Organization. Again, progress remained elusive. Later that year, Barack Obama was elected president and proposed in April 2009 that suspension of enrichment would no longer be a condition for negotiation. A few weeks later, Iran was suddenly beset by a major political crisis following an allegedly fraudulent presidential election in June 2009, with large-scale street protests following. It did persist with nuclear matters, however, among them requesting fuel for a small research reactor that then became a focus of multilateral talks.

This took two tracks. One was the so-called Vienna Group (U.S., Russia, France, and the IAEA), which guaranteed fuel if Iran would ship out an equivalent amount of enriched uranium to a third country. This confidence-building measure was stalled in Iran's decision-making process while enrichment centrifuges continued to spin. A second initiative, this by Turkey and Brazil, essentially aimed to achieve a similar fuel swap, and resulted in a signed agreement with Iran, the Tehran Declaration. The United States, then about to extract strong sanctions on Iran, quashed the agreement within a day of its signing in June 2010.

The P5+1 and Iran convened for the first of what turned out to be the format for the eventual deal, this in Istanbul in April 2012. Ahmadinejad was still president, but as became known later, he was (contrary to the typical depiction of him in the U.S.) negotiating seriously at the formal talks and through back channels. The proposals each side put on the table in 2012-13, before Rouhani's election, were very close to the final JCPOA in 2015. The sticking point then and later was how much enrichment would be allowed—the total material, the level of enrichment, the number of centrifuges, the source of fuel, and the length of an agreement. Issues of cooperation on the research reactor, transparency of Iran's nuclear program, IAEA inspections, and the like proved far less troublesome. The series of talks that first achieved the interim agreement in November 2013 and the final accord in July 2015 proceeded much as arms control negotiations usually do, with broad political objectives apparent, technical specialists ensuring the agreement's integrity, and all-hands-on-deck to find work-arounds to political or technical obstacles. Notably, and again typically for arms control negotiations, the talks and final accord excluded other issues—regional security (the civil war in Syria especially), human rights, support for terrorism, and other such hot-button concerns.

Trump campaigned on scuttling the JCPOA, probably his most specific campaign promise regarding foreign policy, and it was clear from the start of his time in office that he wanted the United States out of the deal with the explicit hope then that the deal with the remaining partners would collapse. He used language as incendiary toward Obama as toward Iran, but he made no secret of his dislike of Iran and the need to reverse its gains in the region. Notably, Iran was again depicted as cheating (the IAEA confirmed Iran's fealty to the pact), devious, and hell-bent on violence toward neighbors (especially Israel). Many of the people close to Trump were those that for many years urged a U.S. policy of regime change in Tehran, including the possibility of going to war with the Islamic Republic. The brief respite of the Obama years was clearly over.

Elements of constancy & change

What this brief history does not convey are the personal qualities that ultimately are so important to how events unfold, and the broader set of relationships and unofficial actors trying to influence the course of U.S.-Iran relations. The final deal was achieved by Rouhani and Obama, and their principal negotiators, Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, and John Kerry, the U.S. secretary of state. Both Zarif and Kerry began their tenures in 2013, and knew each the other from the time Zarif served first under Khatami as Iran's envoy to the U.N. (2002-2007), and Kerry was a prominent member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (later chairman) and Democratic nominee for president in 2004. This familiarity, forged in countless, informal meetings and exchanges, was aided by Zarif's intimate knowledge of the United States, where for more than a decade he lived and was educated. This familiarity was important not only because Zarif understood American politics better than his predecessors and other Iranian clerics and politicians, but because he had so many opportunities to interact with U.S. elites.

Throughout these years, and indeed preceding Khatami's election in 1997, the trajectory of the bilateral relationship was bent one way or another by several competing forces in each country. Most prominently in America were the pro-Israel lobby, mainly the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), as well as numerous other organizations pleading Israel's case. AIPAC and its offshoot, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, populated policy circles throughout the period, helped to formulate Clinton's signature initiative for the region—"dual containment" of Iran and Iraq—and strongly influenced the news media coverage of Iran.

Working the other side of the street, pro-arms control and pro-détente, was a less well-organized but sizable cohort of civil society groups, scientists, former diplomats, and intellectuals. This included "track two" meetings, those convened by Pugwash, for example, the venerable organization of scientists around the world; lobbying action based on sophisticated policy analysis by the Arms Control Association and the Union of Concerned Scientists, among others; a steady stream of articles in the *New York Review of Books*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, online venues like the Huffington Post, and the elite dailies; and academic and policy conferences that enabled shared analysis and networks across borders. That is to say, there was for more than two decades a "norm cascade," establishing the value and feasibility of handling the Iran nuclear problem diplomatically, which was started and sustained mainly by civil society organizations, given intellectual muscle by scholars, and supported by private, grant-making foundations.

In Iran, domestic politics played a significant role as well. Khatami's election was a shock to conservative elites, and they worked from the beginning to narrow the new president's room to maneuver. The complex governance structure of Iran allows for restraints on popularly elected legislators and governors, and the president, who enjoys no exception in this respect, is not as powerful as in most political systems. The Guardian Council, for example, vets the candidates running for office and may disqualify any who do not meet its standards for piety. This led to the overturning, by 2004, of the reform parliament, Majlis, that had been elected in 2000. Pressure on reformers is relentlessly exerted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the dominant security force in Iran that is close to the Supreme Leader and generally aligns with hardliners. The IRGC essentially threatened a *coup d'état* against Khatami if he failed to deal severely with the student demonstrators in 1999, but they habitually exert influence indirectly. Street violence by a paramilitary force, the *basij*, is common. The conservative press, such as the newspaper *Kayhan*, signals the thinking of the hardliner elite and has the informal power of intimidation.

At the same time, the popular pressure for reform (political reforms, loosening of social strictures, and an overhaul of the clumsy and corrupt economic system) was quite apparent in most elections. Khatami won the presidency in 1997 and 2001; no reformist stood in the 2005 election; Mir-Hossein Mousavi identified with reform aspirations in the 2009 election, which many believe he would have won in a clean vote count; and the pragmatist and reform-minded Rouhani won a large-margin victory in 2013. So popular sentiment for reconnecting with the world through an end to sanctions was apparent. And the end of sanctions would come only with a nuclear settlement.

In both countries, the hostility to the other is longstanding and difficult to dislodge. Opinion surveys in the United States consistently show suspicion of Iran's motives and opposition to much of its foreign policy among the public and opinion makers. In Iran, while young people embrace American popular culture and technology, the official line is to resist U.S. "imperialism." The U.S. alliance with the "Zionists" is widely derided by Iran's public. So the hurdles for negotiators of the nuclear deal were high—not only the usual problems of negotiating a technically complex agreement (with seven parties, no less), not just two countries with sharply different understandings of geostrategic reality, but two publics reared on narratives that encouraged suspicion of the other and not especially willing to take risks for an accord.

The depth and rigidity of these attitudes, which persisted after the nuclear deal was completed, stems from national narratives that have been nurtured and grown steadily over many decades and intensified since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. As noted earlier, every nation has its myths and legends, and a unifying social and political narrative about itself and its challengers. For Iran, the United States looms large, because Iran has long suffered under foreign occupation and influence. A sense of betrayal at the hands of Arabs, Turks, Britons, Russians, and Americans is acute, and is strongly reinforced by a recurring insistence on victimhood, or martyrdom, in Shia Islam. The unifying perspective of these centuries of foreign domination in modern parlance is *imperialism*, which Iranians of all political stripes freely accuse America of imposing.

The American national narrative has also come into play most powerfully via the frontier myth, which regards American expansion from seventeenth century New England as divinely sanctioned. The wilderness—the frontier—would be tamed, savages would be dispatched, and bounty would be reaped. This vision informed continental expansion, and when that frontier was closed in the late nineteenth century, many political leaders thought the American frontier to be abroad. In America's encounter with the Middle East, the frontier myth remains relevant. The wild places would be subdued by injecting Western civilization, the savages would be tamed like so many Apaches or Seminoles, and the bounty of oil would be collected.

The frontier thesis has fit neatly into America's dealings with Iran. The specific instance of disruption that has conformed to that narrative is the hostage-taking at the U.S. embassy in November 1979. That and the triumph of the apocalyptic Khomeini lent credence to the widely held depiction of Iran as being run by "mad mullahs." Like Arabs who had challenged U.S. activities in the region—Nasser, Arafat, Assad, Saddam, Qaddafi—the new rulers of Iran looked like "savages," all the more so because of their theocracy.

These two national narratives—which we examine in detail in the next chapter—had no obvious path to resolution, to some kind of joint understanding, much less a single narrative. U.S. imperialism and Iranian irrationality became the sturdy pillars of how one viewed the other. Throughout the post-1979 era, these frames of reference often guided policy makers in both countries. In Washington, this penchant for seeing Iranian actions and overtures as duplicitous

and conniving, prone to violence and sheer anti-Americanism, may have led decision makers to poor choices when Iran was open to a more constructive relationship. A series of violent incidents attributed to Iran—two bombings in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, the assassination of Kurdish activists in Berlin in 1992, hostage taking in Lebanon in 1986-92, and the 1982 bombing of U.S. marine corps barracks in Beirut, among others—shaped U.S. perceptions of Iranian intrigue such that when the Khobar Towers bombing took place, a ready-made assumption pointed to Iran. The same dynamic was at work during the Iraq War, when U.S. commanding general David Petraeus exclusively accused Iran of fomenting anti-occupation violence in Iraq.

Similarly, Iran has for years routinely accused the United States of plotting regime change, taking actions to undermine Islam, fomenting ethnic divisions in Iran, encircling Iran militarily, imposing sanctions without justification, conducting cyberwarfare against Iran, sponsoring a “velvet revolution” against the Islamic Republic, et cetera, even accusing the West of altering Iran’s climate to produce drought. These many complaints typically take form as Iran’s potential victimhood at the hands of the imperialist aggressor, but averted by Iran’s capacity to resist. Many observers point out that this conforms to longstanding cultural tropes, such as the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet who was betrayed and slain by a rival.

In the face of these durable narratives—which contained enough factual bits and pieces to remain robust—the elements of positive change were all the more essential to move the relationship from outright hostility to something like cooperation. These elements derived from state interests, an international system that rewards compliance to widely held norms, the nurturing of newly applicable norms to the Iranian nuclear imbroglio, and communication channels supplementing, or instead of, traditional diplomatic channels that were afforded by new technologies and conveyed through global civil society. Each of these will be explored later, while it is worth noting that each element reflects one or more theories of international relations.

The powerful engine of state interests, reflecting realist theory, has been obviously at work throughout the relationship and in the nuclear negotiations and JCPOA specifically. For the United States, the interest was to keep Iran contained, its revolutionary impulses subdued, the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf unimpeded, and its support for anti-Israel violence neutered. Iran’s state interest above all else has been regime survival. As a corollary of that objective, it has sought to break free of constraints that harm its economy and political influence in the region—thus, the desire to end U.S. and U.N. sanctions. The United States and Iran have had some overlapping interests, mainly sustaining oil and gas trade, and opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Cooperation was possible, and sometimes extensive, in pursuing the latter interests. It’s worth noting, however, that the articulation of these interests underscores the profound imbalance in the relationship: Iran’s interests, particularly regime survival, were existential; the United States, while pestered by Iran, rarely considered it to be a top global concern.

The international norms that most affected Iran’s nuclear program were those barring nuclear weapons proliferation and promoting the rules—such as transparency—embodied in international institutions like the NPT and IAEA. One can say this is both explained by realist theory (states have interests in maintaining credible international institutions) and liberal internationalism (collective rule making and enforcement are constituents of a liberal global order). Another set of norms, noted earlier, coalesced around the central salience of negotiations as being strongly preferred to war. While this would seem always to be preferred, in the Iran

case the deeply rooted bias that regards Iranian leaders as both irrational and cheaters, “rug merchants” who will fool the West’s negotiators, and determined to destroy Israel all militated against the norms favoring diplomacy. This latter, derisive set of attitudes is what Trump carried into the White House and implemented as policy by withdrawing from the JCPOA and imposing new sanctions.

That Iran had a perspective on security and its place in the world that should be honored became commonplace even in popular accounts of the nuclear controversy. It reflects, in this way, constructivist theory that emphasizes the role in global politics of ideas, including the narratives or discourses of the subaltern. The Iranians’ arduous insistence on equal status and respect in negotiations has an account in critical or postcolonial theory as well, in which those who have been excluded from the dominant political systems (principally colonized peoples in the global south) struggle to gain a voice and the capacity for autonomous action.

The guiding question in this book is not to prove one theory or another, but to demonstrate how national narratives, and national-security narratives, have dominated at pivotal junctures of the relationship. The narratives may reinforce a calculation of interest, but they sometimes work against such formulae. Narratives can express aspirations akin to liberal internationalism—support for universal human rights, to cite one American hope—while they can also be parochial and pre-modern. Ideas matter significantly, but narratives tend to draw on longstanding cultural formations and are relatively maladaptive to new conditions, quite different from what most constructivists consider to be ideational power in international relations.

The broad, nearly chaotic process over eighteen years that reached an historic nuclear agreement, only to have it disrupted precipitously, can insightfully be examined through this lens of understanding national narratives and how they apply to real-world problems. The same can be said for other matters besetting the relationship, notably Iraq, Israel, and U.S. regime-change efforts, among others. That process and those issues—what they were and how they unfolded—and refracted through the lens of national narratives, are the subjects of this book.