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Behraves, Maysam

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

The gender politics of Iran's nuclear policy

Defenders of Iran's nuclear programme speak in terms of protecting female honour from the 'inspections' of intrusive foreigners

Maysam Behravesh for Tehran Bureau

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'Dignity' has been an indispensable part of discussions in Iran over nuclear talks with world powers. "Iran, with millennia of history, will not be intimidated," said Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign minister in late May, as he dismissed any solution that was "less than respectful, less than dignified".

Honour and dignity are mostly framed in reference to historical events, including the US and British-led overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and the western support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Some conservatives have even compared Iran's nuclear concessions to world powers with the humiliating 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, through which the country gave up parts of its northern territory to Tsarist Russia.

Often lurking within discussions about Iran's prestige and international standing are terms carrying deep associations with gender. Potency, firmness and resistance are all perceived as masculine characteristics, hence embraced and affirmed, while weakness, flexibility and softness are all associated with femininity, therefore to be avoided and disowned.

The masculine thus constructed needs to protect the feminine in order to prove itself, and, at the same time, avoid being contaminated with feminine characteristics. Along these lines, one of the key concepts used to assert the inalienability of Iran's nuclear rights is *namous*. Promoted mainly by conservatives, *namous* is a term of Greek origin referring in Iranian popular usage to the female side of emotional or family relationships. It is widely regarded as a significant, even sacred, carrier of honour.

It is the violation or desecration of *namous* that provokes masculine violence in acts of honour killing. Honour is thought to be preserved by killing the adulterated female and also making attempts to punish the violator.

Framing the Iranian nuclear project in terms of *namous* helps construct an aura of sanctity and inviolability around it, meaning that any profane, penetrative or possessive treatment of it by outsiders can elicit a radical response.

In a television interview on 18 April, Brigadier General Hossein Salami, deputy head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), stressed that Tehran would respond with vigour to any attempt at visiting its military sites. "I believe that we will not only not allow foreign countries to visit our military centres, but we will not even allow any thought about this

issue,” he said, likening such a visit by nuclear inspectors to “occupation of land” and “national humiliation”.

“Anybody who broaches such remarks”, Salami concluded, “we will respond to them with hot lead”.

Closely allied with the concept of namous are two other highly gendered keywords, harim (sanctum) and gheirat (manly moral courage). As projected in the Iranian atomic discourse, military sites are nodes of national power and potency and therefore constitute an integral part of the nation's harim, which should stay free from alien access and, worse still, inspections.

The same rule applies to the nuclear scientists as “sons” of the motherland. The term harim in Iranian popular culture brings to fore the notion of female privacy, which is perceived to require protection and so warrant guardianship.

In an address to military alumni of the IRGC-affiliated Imam Hossein university in Tehran on 20 May, the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ruled out agreeing to any permission for foreigners to inspect military sites or to interview Iranian nuclear scientists.

“Now in these negotiations, once again they are raising new issues, such as inspections; we said we will not allow strangers to conduct any sort of inspection of our military centres; they say we ought to come and interview your scientists, that is indeed, interrogate them”, he said. “We will not allow the smallest insult to the harim of our atomic scientists and scientists in any other important and sensitive subject.”

To leave no room for doubt, Khamenei continued: “I will not allow strangers to come here, sit and talk to our scientists, the prominent and dear sons of the Iranian nation who have taken this vast science to this point.”

The resonance of this nationalist-paternalist discourse with conservatives and their constituencies has been shown in the formation of a gathering calling itself “We Won't Allow” - following the hardline group “The Solicitous” (Delvapaslan) - which has organised demonstrations in several Iranian cities including Tehran, Mashhad, and Isfahan.

Such guardianship of the national sanctum, and its protection from insult and alien hands, is usually carried out through demonstrating gheirat: a type of virile moral courage with an occasional religious touch that is intended to guard namous or harim against external adulteration.

Safeguarding honour is widely regarded as proof of gheirat. And those who fail to do so stand accused of pofyouzi (an abstract noun, and swear word in Farsi), the defining characteristic of a man lacking gheirat.

In other words, pofyouz (a subject noun in Farsi) is a man with loose and dishonourable morals, particularly when it comes to the social or sexual life of the female members of his kin. Reformist academics in Iran who have questioned the costs of the nuclear policy have been accused by certain conservatives of pofyouzi.

'Flexibility' yes, but of the 'heroic' sort

When flexibility (narmesh) and compromise (sazesh) - usually perceived as feminine characteristics - are to be exercised, they need to be "heroic" in order to compensate for the dilution of masculinity.

It took the supreme leader's speech on "heroic flexibility" - with references to Imam Hassan, the 7th-century Shia leader who negotiated a peace treaty with the Sunni caliph Muawiyah - that paved the way for the Rouhani government to persist with the nuclear talks in the face of stiff opposition from 'principle-ist' critics of rapprochement with the west.

This "hegemonic masculinity" is not limited to conservatives. It but has been employed, in a more subtle and veiled fashion, by moderates including Rouhani himself. In a speech to Iranian ambassadors in August 2014, he called opponents of nuclear negotiations "political cowards", literally the "chicken-hearted...[who]...say we are trembling as soon as the issue of talks comes up."

Rouhani dismissed their cowardice with some force. "To hell with it," he burst out. "Go find a warm place for yourselves! God has created you timid and trembling." For Rouhani, those prepared to negotiate over the nuclear programme were the ones with real courage and fortitude, those who had put themselves at the forefront of the fight to secure the nation's honour and rights.

It is clear that for many in the Iranian body politic - not least the leadership - the nuclear programme reeks of masculinity, and denuclearization raises fears of emasculation. But what is the relevance of all this, and how can an understanding of it help facilitate the nuclear negotiations in their most critical phase?

In a nutshell, Iran's dignity is predominantly of a masculine nature. While this holds true of many other nation-states and their foreign policies, western negotiators will be well advised to take these nuances into account. The choice of terminology can be of paramount importance.

Indeed, the international controversy over Iran's nuclear programme is, in a way, a clash of masculinities, caught up in an array of coercive instruments and escalatory policies like economic sanctions, sabotage and threats of military action. The bottom line is that negotiations and dialogue can rupture this vicious circle of confrontation and prevent it from degenerating into the most rabid exertion of masculinist power - war.

Maysam Behravesht is a PhD candidate in the department of political science at Lund university, Sweden, and editorial assistant of the academic journal Cooperation and Conflict

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