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Iran's Nuclear Behavior: The Gender Dimension

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"The choice of terminology can be of paramount importance"

A NUCLEAR IRAN? According to this thought-provoking essay by scholar Maysam Behravesh, for many in the Iranian body politic, not least the leadership, nuclearity passes as masculinity, hence denuclearization as emasculation. And that has consequences.

With the progress in nuclear talks between Iran and world powers following the election of President Hassan Rouhani, the issue of "identity" or "dignity" has increasingly become a decisive and indispensable part of the dialogue. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's famous YouTube clip a few days before the Geneva interim agreement in November 2013 – titled "Iran's Message: There Is a Way Forward" – basically revolves around the importance of "dignity" for Iranians and how it needs to be respected in the negotiations. This has been a recurrent theme in the Iranian nuclear

discourse ever since.

In a more recent meeting with his Greek counterpart on 28 May 2015, he **dismissed** any solution that is “less than respectful, less than dignified”. “Iran, with millennia of history, will not be intimidated”, he asserted. Yet as indicated, the honor or dignity factor has mostly been debated with reference to historical developments, including the US-UK overthrow of Mosaddegh’s democratically elected government in 1952-53 and Western treatment of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Some conservative critics in Tehran have even gone as far as to **compare** Iran’s nuclear concessions to the humiliating **Treaty of Turkmenchay** in 1828, whereby Persia lost **yet another** big chunk of its northern territory to Tsarist Russia. There is arguably more to Iranian sensitivity to dignity than history.

“Gender” is one such salient dimension that has surprisingly remained neglected despite the vast influence of gendered narratives and conceptions underpinning the Islamic Republic’s self-identity and the ways in which they have shaped its nuclear behavior. A gender analysis can in particular help explain stiff conservative resistance in Iran against Rouhani’s whole nuclear diplomacy or why groups like the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) are **deeply averse**, if not categorically opposed, to it.

The “Nuclear” as “*Namous*”

Tehran’s conception of its national prestige and international standing is profoundly conditioned by a certain view of gender, which celebrates masculinity and deprecates femininity. This is primarily because the former is associated with potency and firmness or resistance, hence to be affirmed and embraced, while the latter invokes associations of weakness and flexibility or softness, therefore to be avoided and disowned. Quite paradoxically, however, “the masculine” thus constructed needs to constantly protect “the feminine” in order to prove and sustain its authenticity at the same time as it needs to steer clear of contamination with feminine qualities. Along these lines, one of the key concepts employed to frame Iran’s nuclear program and foreground the inalienability of its nuclear rights is “*namous*”. Promoted mainly by hardliners or conservatives in the Islamic Republic, *namous* is a gendered **term** with Greek origins that basically refers in Iranian popular usage to the female side in an emotional or familial relationship and is widely regarded as a significant and sacred carrier of honor.



In fact, it is the violation or desecration of *namous* that provokes masculine violence in acts of honor killing, where the female member of a relationship or family is usually victimized and the violator punished, all with the ultimate aim of preserving honor. In this sense, framing the Iranian nuclear project in terms of *namous* helps to construct an aura of sanctity and inviolability around it, meaning that any profane, penetrative or possessive treatment of it by outsiders can elicit radical action in response. Notably, 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 bullets to any attempt at visiting its military sites. “I believe that (we) will not only not allow foreign countries to visit our military centers, but (we) will not even allow any thought about this issue”, he **said**, likening such a visit by a nuclear inspector to “occupation of land” that would amount to “national humiliation”. “(Therefore)

anybody who broaches such remarks”, Gen. Salami **concluded**, “(we) will respond to them with hot lead”.

Protection of “*Harim*”, Demonstration of “*Gheirat*”

Closely allied with the concept of *namous* are two other highly gendered keywords that often surface in elite nuclear debates inside Iran, namely, “*harim*” (sanctum) and “*gheirat*” (virile moral courage). From a gender perspective and as projected in the context of 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 is supposed to stay free from alien access and, worse yet, “**inspections**”. The same rule applies to the nuclear scientists as “sons” of the mother nation. Interestingly, the term *harim* in the Iranian popular culture brings to fore, among other things, the notion of female privacy that is perceived to require protection and thus warrant guardianship.

In a significant address to the military alumni of the IRGC-affiliated Imam Hussein University in Tehran on 20 May, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei ruled out any permission for inspections by foreigners of military sites as well as interviews with 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 centers; (they) say we ought to come and interview your scientists, that is indeed, interrogate (them)”, he **enunciated**, adding, “we will not allow the smallest insult to the *harim* of our atomic scientists and scientists in any (other) important and sensitive subject”.

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To leave no room for doubt, he picked up a personal voice and further emphasized that “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 formation of a gathering labelled “We Won’t Allow” – following the hardline group “The Solicitous” (*Delvapasari*) – and demonstrations by them in a number of big Iranian cities including **Tehran**, Mashhad, and **Isfahan** show the extent to which this nationalist-paternalist discourse resonates with conservatives and their constituencies, if not other sections of the general public, in a society which is still predominantly patriarchal.



Pertinently, such guardianship of the national sanctum and its protection from insult and intervention by alien hands is usually

carried out through demonstration of what has come to be known as *gheirat*: a type of virile moral courage with an occasional religious touch that is directed towards *namous* or *harim* and intended to guard it against external adulteration. Indeed, safeguarding honor thus defined is indeed proof of having *gheirat* and those who fail to do so or are negligent about it stand accused of "*pofyouzi*" (abstract noun and swear word in Persian), the defining characteristic of a man lacking *gheirat*. In other words, "*pofyouz*" (subject noun in Persian) refers to a "man" who holds loose and dishonorable morals, particularly when it comes to the socio-sexual life of the female members of his kin. It is noteworthy that the more or less "liberal" attitudes of some reformist academics in Iran, who have criticized its costly nuclear policy, have been **characterized** by certain conservatives as instances of *pofyouzi*.

"Flexibility" Yes, But of the "Heroic" Sort

Even when flexibility (*narmesh*) and compromise (*sazesh*) – mostly perceived as feminine characteristics – are to be exercised, they need to be "heroic" and feature attributes of heroism and valor in order to compensate for the dilution of masculinity under way. It was indeed the Supreme Leader's famous speech on "**heroic flexibility**" – with references to Imam Hassan, the third flawless Imam in Twelver Shi'ism who negotiated a peace treaty in 661 AD with the then Sunni caliph Muawiyah, believed to be a usurper of caliphate – that paved the way for the Rouhani government to persist systematically with the nuclear talks despite stiff opposition against the move by "principlist" hardliners and critics of rapprochement with the West.

Notably, this gendered discourse of power, or more specifically "**hegemonic masculinity**", is not simply limited to the Iranian conservatives, but has also been employed, though in a more subtle and veiled fashion, by moderates including President Rouhani himself, to advance their political agenda. In a controversial **speech** to Iranian ambassadors and representatives abroad on 11 August 2014, Rouhani inveighed against opponents of nuclear negotiations, calling them "political cowards" or more precisely the politically "chicken-hearted" who "say we are trembling as soon as the issue of talks comes up". "To the hell with it", he burst, "go find a warm place for yourselves! God has created you timid and trembling", trying to portray his camp as the ones with real courage and fortitude, who have put themselves at the forefront of the fight to secure the nation's honor and rights. It is fair, therefore, to conclude that for many in the Iranian body politic, not least the leadership, nuclearity passes as masculinity, hence denuclearization as emasculation.

But in the end, what's the policy relevance of all this and how can it help facilitate the nuclear negotiations in their most critical phase now?

In a nutshell, Iran's nuclear dignity is predominantly of a masculine nature. While this holds true about many other nation-states and their foreign policy practices in today's world, Western negotiators will be well advised to take these nuances into account and refrain from using a frame of reference in the talks that may undermine this particular type of identity. More specifically, the choice of terminology can be of paramount importance here, given the age-old axiom that the devil is in the details.

Indeed, the international controversy over Iran's nuclear program is, in a sense, a clash of masculinities, embodying an array of coercive instruments and escalatory policies like economic sanctions, sabotage and threats of military action. The bottom line, however, is that negotiations and dialogue can cause an historic rupture in this vicious circle of confrontation and at least prevent it from degenerating into the most rabid form of masculinist power exertion, that is, war.

*A shorter version of this article appeared in **Tehran Bureau** at *The Guardian*.*

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