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An Iranian Perspective on Iran–US Relations: Idealists Versus Materialists

Mohammad Reza Chitsazian and Seyed Mohammad Ali Taghavi

Abstract: Over the past four decades, the relationship between Iran and the US has been marked by conflicts, ranging from hostage-taking and sanctions to military confrontation. The present research aims at explaining the dispute by referring to the mindsets of the two countries' leaders and exploring their epistemological origins. The main question this article seeks to answer is: what are the roots of disputes in US–Iran relationship in the post-Revolutionary era? The hypothesis is that the US governments' materialistic and Iranian leadership's idealist, ideational and identity-oriented approaches have led to diverging perceptions on different issues at stake. This has precluded a common understanding between the leaderships of the two countries.

Introduction

The Iran–US relations in the post-Islamic Republic era have gone through various ups and downs, the last phase being the lifting of the US sanctions on Iran after the nuclear deal of April 2015 by the Obama administration and their re-imposition by President Trump on November 4, 2018. The elites in both countries have been wondering as to why the two previously strategic allies turned into bitter enemies after the Iranian Revolution. Several hypotheses have been proposed to answer this question. Some scholars believe that there are several groups in both countries interested in fuelling the conflict.¹ The best example is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC),² which pursues Israel's interests in the US. Some others have described Iran as a player that seeks to maximise its power in the international arena and particularly challenges US hegemony in the Middle East. Moreover, some scholars also believe that the conflict is rooted in divergent and contradictory interests.³ In a sense, the two countries' foreign policy orientations and agendas are incompatible to the extent that they have led to increasing confrontations.

However, the deep-rooted cultural and ideological dimensions of the conflict have rarely been discussed. Perhaps, the statements of the officials of the two countries, particularly those of the leaders of the United States, when they express

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their frustration with their counterparts' behaviour and attitudes in international politics, point to insufficient appreciation of these dimensions. In fact, some scholars believe that the tension results from the nature of political systems in the two countries, grounded in the historical narrative informing their institutions. The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 sought to develop a new order not dominated by superpowers, particularly the US, which could, by no means, stand any change in the existing international order. The Islamic Revolution set out to challenge the values and norms of Western liberalism, spearheaded principally by the US. Hence, in response to the main question raised in this paper as to what might be at the root of the dispute in Iran–US relationship in the post-Revolutionary era, the hypothesis is that US governments' materialistic and Iranian leadership's idealist, ideational and identity-oriented approaches have created diverging accounts of the issues at stake, with no common understanding between the two sides.

This research attempts to explain deeper dimensions of the complex and complicated relationship between Iran and US, taking into account factors such as human rights, terrorism, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and the nuclear issue, which have been the main areas of dispute between Tehran and Washington, in the post-Islamic Revolution era.

Human rights and democracy

Human rights abuse charges have been among the most challenging issues between Iran and the US, resulting in numerous sanctions by the United States against Iran. This issue has various dimensions, from the philosophical foundations of the political system established after the Islamic Revolution to the more practical issue of dealing with criminals and offenders, raising divergent perspectives on the nature of human rights between the two countries.

Hillary Man Leverett, who served in the US State Department under Hillary Clinton, believes Washington's antipathy towards Iran is constructed by American strategic culture. This culture leads to disavowal of any independent power and hostility towards the so-called non-liberal states, unless their foreign policy is aligned to that of the US. This is deeply rooted in the perception that if states would follow US-recommended norms, values, and international procedures they would be held as liberal and they would not hamper US interests in the world. That is why the US demonises those who oppose its policies in the Middle East. Post-revolutionary Iran, perceived as a non-liberal political system, where 'the integration of participatory politics and elections with principles and institutions of Islamic governance and strong commitment to foreign policy independence are discerned', has never been tolerated by the US.⁴ The US foreign policy, despite having some elements of liberal internationalism, has largely been selective about choosing states it regards as its friends in order to pursue its own particular interests. As John Mearsheimer states, in some cases materialistic benefits are in line with their liberal values, and US foreign policy decision-makers use the latter to justify public opinion. Even when the materialistic interests and liberal values are at odds some American experts 'spin doctors appear and tell a story that accords with liberal ideals'.⁵ He would cite the example of Americans calling the former Soviet Union as an 'evil state' in the 1930s, and 'Uncle Joe' when the United States joined forces with Stalin's Soviet Union in 1941 to fight against Hitler. In fact, he would aver that the US government even 'began a massive public relations campaign to clean up the

image of America's new ally and make it compatible with liberal ideals'. Similarly, today, while the US officials accuse the Islamic Republic of violating principles of democracy and human rights, US relations with authoritarian regimes in the region are warm and friendly, without asking them to promote democracy, or to punish them for their violation of human rights. Accordingly, many scholars believe that US policy towards Iran aims at 'regime change', to facilitate easier pursuit of American interests in the region.⁶ Saudi Arabia has never been the target of US penalties for violating human rights, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi consulate in Istanbul being the latest case in point. Materialistic interests pursued by US foreign policy decision-makers prevented them from putting appreciable pressure on Riyadh to come clean on the issue.

To justify their regime change policy regarding Iran, US policy-makers depict the Islamic Republic as an illegitimate regime despised by its own population and on the verge of collapse. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran as a political system has remained powerful in the realm of international politics, despite all pressures, because of its democratic institutions such as elections along with Islamic norms and values, which are what the majority of people living there demand. Defying such hostile policies, Iran has followed its own version of democracy consistent with Islamic norms and values and harmonious with its political order and cultural values. As Seyed Mohammad Khatami, Iran's former reformist president, noted: 'we want independence, freedom, and progress, taking into account our national and religious identity.' This is also evident in the views of the founder of the Islamic Republic, which is particularly crystallised in its Constitution. The Islamic Republic is a system chosen by the Iranians despite some flaws and shortcomings.⁷

Human Rights Report on Iran published by the US Department of State in 2014 upholds the above anti-Iranian claim. The report describes Iran as a theocratic republic founded by popular referendum in 1979. It states that the country's Constitution was amended in 1989, and the concept of the authority of *faqih* (*Velayat-e-Faqih*)⁸ was substituted by the absolute authority of *faqih* (*Velayat-e-Motlaq-e Faqih*), according to which the supreme leader monitors the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government, and is the commander of the armed forces. The supreme leader is elected by a body of influential clergymen, which, in turn, is elected by people. Presidential and parliamentary elections are to a considerable extent free, though candidates are screened by the Guardian Council, appointed by the Supreme Leader and the Parliament. The above-mentioned report states that despite high turn-out in recent presidential elections, the candidates for the Parliament are selected by a panel of unelected authorities based on vague and arbitrary criteria. This report claims that one of the most important sources of human rights abuse in Iran is the limitation imposed on the citizens' right to peacefully change their government.⁹

Different perspectives on the nature and foundations of human rights have brought about an escalation of tension and conflict between the two countries. The attitudes of political leaders, parties, and interest groups in America are strongly influenced by the natural rights school emphasising on individual liberty. It privileges individual rights over limitations imposed by ethnic, religious, or cultural communities. Under the influence of individualism, freedom of expression, speech and association are considered immutable and non-negotiable human rights, enshrined in the US Constitution and its Amendments.¹⁰ According to John Locke,

who inspired founding fathers of the US Constitution, natural rights are privileges and claims to which every individual is entitled. He argues that 'the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness.'¹¹ His view on the duty of the state to protect 'life, liberty, and estate'¹² is reflected in the American 'Declaration of Independence'.

On the other hand, the perceptions of decision-makers in Iranian politics are rooted in Islam, according to which the sources of law are Divine revelations, not individual reason or wisdom of the human beings.¹³ When individual rights flow from a divine source, human beings are deemed limited creatures; human wisdom is also regarded as limited and thus, the humans are not competent to have full legislative powers. In fact, according to the tenets of such a philosophy, if human wisdom could meet all human needs and could solve all human problems, there would have been no need for Prophets and Divine revelations. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri argues, for example, that the root of all rights is God, Who is Omniscient and the Creator of all beings. Human beings, due to the deficiencies of their intellect, need Divine revelations to realise their own good.¹⁴ According to Muslim scholars, however, there is no conflict between human wisdom and Divine revelation; and in case there is any conflict, priority is given to the revelation, whose rationale is yet to be fully comprehended by the human mind. The purpose of rights and laws is to establish order and justice in society, and to guide humankind towards perfection, providing an individual with worldly and otherworldly happiness.¹⁵ According to Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, the rationale and pillar of Islamic law is achieving justice. So, the rules of Islam are aimed at realising worldly and other worldly good for human beings and preventing the evil.¹⁶ In contrast, the main purpose of law-making in the liberal tradition championed by the US is effective administration of the society through man-made laws based on human reason which would facilitate individual's pursuit of worldly prosperity and well-being. For them, authority of the state is derived from citizen's will, which gets reflected in majority rule.¹⁷

Such a radical divergence in the perspectives of the two countries on human rights can be clearly seen in the report published by the US Government in 2014, where the most important cases of human rights abuse are said to be the limitation imposed on civil liberties of the citizens, such as the freedom of association, expression and religion. The report also rebukes the Iranian legal system for lack of respect for human dignity and arbitrary use of torture and execution.¹⁸

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution and strategic changes in Iran's foreign policy, many scholars opined that the emphasis on the Islamic identity of Iranians would automatically favour the cause of the Palestinians. Similarly, some of the researchers in the US have attributed America's spirited defence of Israel to either cultural and ideological correspondence or continuous pressure from powerful Israeli lobbies. Answers to these questions can add to the understanding of the nature of Iran–US dispute over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Jeremo Slater argues that identity considerations should be taken into account as the reason for strong US-Israel ties. Slater (2009), in an article in the *Security Studies Journal*, divided the reasons for the Israel's special place in US foreign policy into four categories. The first is US' moral duty to help Israel *vis-a-vis* its Arab enemies. The memory of the Holocaust and the ideology of anti-Semitism have reinforced

such a commitment from the US. Second, Israel is perceived as the only liberal democratic State in the region ridden with despotism. Third, in the Cold War era, Israel was seen as an anti-communist country, that was pro-American, and a military ally against Communist expansionism in the region and the world. The fourth reason is concerned with cultural and religious similarities between the US and Israel. In the United States, the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not seen as relevant, as both countries share the Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁹

On the other hand, scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt believe that the special relationship between US and Israel is owed to lobbying. They argue that if public opinion in America spontaneously supported Israel, there would have been no need for the Anti-defamation League (ADL)²⁰ and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).²¹ Moreover, a positive image of Israel in the US is partly because of media publicity.²² Although most Americans feel pity and compassion for Israel, many of them criticise Israel's policies more than their political leaders do.²³ Slater, too, has a similar view about the effects of the lobbying groups for the furthering of pro-Israeli policies. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, over the past 37 years, 'Israel and the lobby have pushed the United States to pursue a strategically unwise policy towards Iran.'²⁴

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israel conflict has undergone fundamental changes, as it was considered the most important Muslim predicament in the world. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, believed 'Israel is the centre for Western imperialism, supported by the US.'²⁵ Consequently the conflict has become a central issue in the US-Iran relations. In the pre-Revolutionary era, Islamist groups and figures opposed the Shah's ties with Israel, pointing to the predicaments of Palestinians. Ali Shari'ati, a renowned Islamist thinker, denounced the Iranian political system's indifference to the occupation of the Palestinian lands and expulsion or killing of their Arab population.²⁶ After the Revolution, Anoushiravan Ehteshami argues, 'Tehran was anxious to bury the legacy of the Israeli-Iranian alliance of the Pahlavi era, and thus was very keen to draw itself closer to the Palestinians. This it attempted to do, first by "Islamicizing" the Arab struggle against Israel, and second, in the absence of any viable Islamic Palestinian factions in the first half of the 1980s, through developing contacts with the radical and rejectionist factions'.²⁷ The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, provided Iran to wage a holy war against Israel indirectly, with the help of Shi'ite community of southern Lebanon.²⁸ Under Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's anti-Israeli stance not only did not weaken, but also with emergence of Palestinian Islamic groups such as Hamas²⁹ and Islamic Jihad,³⁰ it entered a new stage, threatening Israel more directly, as described by Ehteshami.³¹

Fundamentally, the Islamic Republic's policy towards the Israel-Palestine dispute is not only based on geopolitical realities, but also on ideological norms.³² Under the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the state has a duty to fight injustice worldwide. The Islamic Republic of Iran defies the dominant global discourse on international relations, mobilises forces of resistance opposing the global hegemonic power, and describes the existing international order created by world powers as unfair.³³ This stance can best be seen in Iran's approach towards the Palestinian crisis. Iran seeks to pursue this goal as long as the existing order established by the hegemonic powers perpetuates itself in the world. Accordingly, true and lasting peace cannot be achieved since it would depend on justice, equality, and, in this case, the restitution of

Palestinians' rights.³⁴ Moreover, under the Constitution, Iran's foreign policy shall be shaped by the fraternal commitment to Muslims all around the world.³⁵

The identity principle that shapes the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is the rule of *nafy-e sabil*,³⁶ which means to prevent the Islamic society from domination of non-Muslims, directly or indirectly. Thus, the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a vanguard Muslim state fighting Israel, is looking to restore the dignity of Muslims, reclaiming the *occupied territories* from Israel.³⁷ Another principle having a significant role in Iranian foreign policy is called *ta'lif qoloob*,³⁸ which means using material incentives to attract Muslims and non-belligerent infidels. Politically, it means that the Islamic state may support liberation movements and non-allied governments to prevent their alliance with the enemy.³⁹

Terrorism

Terrorism has been a crucial issue in Iran–US relations, in the post-Revolutionary era. The US considers Iran as a state supporting terrorism and in this context has imposed a wide range of sanctions on Iran. On the other hand, Iran sees America as the sponsor of many terrorist groups acting against the interests of Muslim communities in the region and, thereby, justifies Iran's presence around the Middle East. Also, while Iran considers some groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah⁴⁰ in the Middle East as liberation movements, Washington defines them as terrorist groups threatening the interests of the US and its allies. Thus, contradictory perceptions of terrorism and difference of opinion on their application have affected Iran–US relations over the past four decades.

The United States Government defines terrorism as politically motivated crimes committed against civilian targets carried out by transnational groups or clandestine agents. This definition encompasses four characteristics. The first is concerned with pre-determined aims. The second, these actions are carried out with political motives. Third, non-military targets who would not be able to defend themselves are attacked; and the fourth refers to uninformed and non-identifiable shape of these groups.⁴¹ Yet, the US has always taken a pragmatic approach towards terrorism and used one form of radicalism against the other. At one stage, they used radicalism against communism, and now they are using radicalism against Islamist movements. The communist coup d'état in Afghanistan during the Cold War turned the country into an arena of competition between the two superpowers. At that stage, the US, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, tried to defend the Afghan insurgency against the former USSR. Huge amount of money and weaponry were sent to Afghanistan, and many fundamentalists from all over the Middle East and the North of Africa went there voluntarily. It was during this time that Osama Bin Laden and many other Arab fundamentalists joined the Afghan insurgents. At that time, Washington⁴² considered these insurgents as Mujahideen.⁴³ Later on, the Americans and their regional allies, such as the Saudis, encouraged, helped or were happy to see the emergence of Salafi Sunni militant groups, like the Taliban or al-Qaeda, which was supposed to partially offset the influence of Shi'ite Islamic groups, seen as allies of Iran.⁴⁴ This happened in the context of rivalry between Shi'ite and Sunni fundamentalist groups for wider influence in the region.⁴⁵

Following the September 11 incident, a US senior official stated that his country and Iran had, in some ways, 'a shared vision of the current situation, and there [was]

a possibility of cooperation between the two countries in the war against the Taliban'.⁴⁶ The prediction was realised, and the two countries acted cooperatively in the fight against the Taliban. Hence, a group that came to power with the support of the United States in Afghanistan turned into its bitter enemy. Meanwhile, Iran, whose diplomats were brutally murdered by the Taliban, joined the US in the fight against the Taliban. The defeat of Taliban resulted in the weakening of the radical Salafi forces, which were considered Iran's ideological enemy.⁴⁷

Today, there is more evidence for the claim that material interests of the United States and its allies have justified US support to terrorist organisations. US support has been achieved through sale of arms to warring parties, maintaining military presence, and balancing hostile actors such as Iran and Syria to ensure domination in the region plagued with chaos and instability. Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, based on Hillary Clinton's 1700 emails, claims that the country played a leading role in organising the so-called 'Friends of Syria', namely, Al Qaeda and ISIS, to back the CIA-led insurgency for regime change in Syria.⁴⁸ In her book, *Hard Choices*, Hillary Clinton has also mentioned this issue.⁴⁹ It was raised by Trump too, during the US presidential elections campaign.⁵⁰ Hillary admitted that Saudi Arabia and its allies provided ideological, financial and military sources for armed terrorist groups. At the same time, the US has sold its latest weapons to Saudi Arabia worth over US\$ 110 billion.⁵¹

The Islamic Republic of Iran, on the other hand, has a relatively simpler definition of terrorism and terrorist activities. Iran's Supreme Leader defines terrorism as actions that an organisation or state carries out to advance its purpose by the means of terror, murder, and insecurity. The Islamic Republic strongly opposes the killing of innocent people and civilians. However, based on this definition, fighting to liberate one's land from occupation is not considered as terrorism.⁵² As it can be seen, there is not much difference in the definition of terrorism between both the sides. The main problem lies in how this definition is applied on the ground in various theatres of violence in the region.

In an interview with the ABC, Iran's former Secretary of Supreme National Security Council, and the current President, Hassan Rouhani, represented the perception of the Islamic Republic authorities regarding the issue. According to him, terrorist groups and liberation movements should be made distinguishable from each other. From his perspective, the struggles for the liberation of occupied lands, and any such action in self-defence, are quite different from terrorist acts. According to this logic, Palestine is occupied by the Zionists, and Palestinians should be able to expel the invaders.⁵³ Therefore, 'Tehran that sees itself as the champion of the "dispossessed" around the world',⁵⁴ supports the Palestinians' struggle. Tehran also has a different approach towards the ISIS and other Salafist groups. The ISIS develops and advocates Salafi ideas and has fundamental ideological differences with Iran and its values. The ISIS portrays Iran as a Shia power, which is threatening other Muslims, especially the Sunnis. Al Zarqawi, the founder of the group that ultimately became ISIS, called for fighting the Shias, or Rafedhis, as he called them.⁵⁵

The nuclear crisis

Iran's nuclear programme has significantly affected Iran-US relations in recent years. According to the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5 + 1, nuclear-related sanctions against Iran would be lifted in return for a curb on the country's nuclear programme. However, there are still many questions regarding this issue: Why has it become an international crisis lasting more than a decade? Why, despite

the agreement, does the shadow of suspicion and mistrust still dominates the relations between the two sides? And what would be the future of this agreement? It seems that the problem has partly resulted from the differences in the psychological make-up of the parties negotiating this deal.

The US leadership adopted a liberal-democratic approach which can be observed in features such as benefit-orientation acts, humanism and instrumental rationality. From this perspective, the world is understood instrumentally through senses, experience, and rationality. At the negotiation table, these presumptions are at work in any type of interaction between Iran and the US. It is quite natural that given their liberal-democratic mental-make-up the American negotiators will adopt a rationalistic and benefit-oriented approach in diplomatic relations and international bargaining. The best example of such an American attitude is reflected in a poem by Hafiz, the great Iranian poet, cited by Barack Obama in a recorded message for *Nowruz*⁵⁶ 2015. This is quite significant for his audience, whether it was Iranian leadership or the people.⁵⁷

It is early spring; try to be joyful in your heart/

For many a flower will bloom while you will be in clay

Rational choice determines the US policies, based on Bentham's account of utilitarianism. According to this view, human being chooses rationally, on the basis of evaluation of profit and loss. While the US is guided by such philosophy of rationalism, it fails to perceive the Iranian authorities' behaviour with respect to nuclear negotiations. With their materialistic and utilitarian presuppositions, America's politicians cannot believe that Iran is pursuing a peaceful nuclear energy programme. The Iranian authorities, on their part, have repeatedly stated that their nuclear energy programme is tied with the Iranian national pride, and if the plan fails or officials negotiating with foreign parties cannot manage to reach a settlement guaranteeing the success of the programme, Iranian national honour would be severely affected. This would be regarded as a historic defeat for Iran.⁵⁸ Collective self-esteem has a special meaning for the leaders of Iran, through which national interests are served well.⁵⁹ In their view, national interests are not limited to material aspects. Ideational as well as identity dimensions have been taken into account in Iran's nuclear programme. This aspect is highlighted, since the collective historical memory and public opinion of Iran are strongly hurt by bitter experiences of confrontation with great powers, in the last two decades.⁶⁰

The US officials claim not only does public opinion in America want to suspend or at least limit Iran's nuclear programme, but also European powers, Israel, and even the Arab States of the Persian Gulf support such a policy. Iran's nuclear programme should be understood on the basis of 'Iran's regional policies. Such a programme, in a different Iran, less hostile to the West, particularly to Israel, and less willing to change⁶¹ the regional political order, would be less threatening to the West.⁶² The former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, prior to the nuclear agreement between Iran and 5 + 1 countries, claimed that Iran's nuclear programme is not only a concern for the US and Israel, but also for many other countries in the region.⁶³ Iranian leaders would opine that decision-making regarding the nuclear issue is to be made on the basis of truth and not the majority opinion of the world community.

Security is one of the most important issues in shaping and directing liberal states. In the view of liberal politicians, the states have a minimal function, which is providing security for their citizens. This viewpoint was evident throughout the

nuclear talks. The US emphasis on the national security and the security of its allies in the Middle East, particularly Israel, points to this issue.

Another misconception that shapes the US policy towards Iran is the belief that the nuclear programme is the demand of the political system or the state, rather than that of the Iranian nation. So, the perceived gap between the state and the nation persuades the United States to pursue its interests in the nuclear talks; and perhaps, one of the reasons the US resorted to sanctions was aimed at deepening this gap.

On the contrary, Iran states that promoting collective self-esteem and giving priority to the spiritual over material and economic interests is one of the fundamental principles that underline the nuclear talks. For example, the above-mentioned rule of *nafy-e sabil*, which is derived from a verse in *the Holy Quran*, expresses that Allah will by no means provide the unbelievers with a way over the believers.⁶⁴ In the interpretation of this verse, it is cited that 'way' means to bring under domination, and if any diplomatic deal or agreement paves the way for domination of non-Muslims over Muslims, it is nullified and void.⁶⁵ Given that peaceful nuclear energy is the right of all countries, recognised under the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT), by suspending its development, the principle of *nafy-e sabil* may be violated, as it may be considered as surrendering to the will of the domineering West. Hence, heavy economic cost of nuclear energy is justified, by referring to the normative dimension of national interests, i.e. collective self-esteem. As David Patrikarakos puts it, the nuclear programme has been a source of pride for Iranians, since its beginning under the Shah.⁶⁶ Patrikarakos goes on to argue that '[s]urred by ideology and Khomeini, the [Iran's nuclear] programme became a means of appropriating Western technology to help create an identity for Iran in the modern world, but on its own uniquely Iranian and Islamic terms.'⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Iran's resistance has an economic justification as well, since the country has already spent a large amount of its budget on nuclear plants, it should be able to take advantage of this investment.⁶⁸

Another factor shaping the minds of Iranian officials regarding the nuclear issue is, 'the idea of resistance/challenge'. The concept is derived from *the Holy Quran* and has been the manner of the Shi'ites, especially the Twelvers. *The Quran*, particularly the Quranic stories emphasise the duty of confronting human evils such as Pharaohs. These stories have a symbolic dimension. They advise people of all ages to stand up against oppressors, such as the Great Satan, the United States of America. Theoretical and practical traditions of Shi'ite holy Imams favour the culture of resistance. Historical events of the early Islamic era, such as *Shi'b-e Abu Talib*⁶⁹ or the *conquest of Mecca*, the battle of *Siffin*⁷⁰ and the battle of *Ashura*⁷¹ are used by ruling Shi'ite clergies to nurture the culture of resistance for the sake of fulfilling justice. Ayatollah Khomeini once famously said: 'a nation which has [the concept of] martyrdom does not surrender ever'. In addition, many Iranians including their leaders believe that if the Iranians retreat in the face of a greedy enemy, the latter would tie the Iranian nuclear issue to other issues and extend the scope of their demands to issues such as human rights, support of Islamic resistance group, and the defence capabilities of the country.⁷² For Iranians, 'the nuclear issue is an opportunity to resist US hegemony and its regime change policy. The nuclear issue is a matter of national consensus and pride that enables the Iranian government to unite the nation around the flag and resist the West.'⁷³

Conclusions and implications

It can be argued that over the past four decades, tensions, threats and even military confrontations between the US and Iran have been the results of deep epistemological differences between the leaders of the two countries. Materialist viewpoints of the US politicians *vis-à-vis* idealist mind-set of Iranian leaders have led to diverging accounts on issues such as human rights, terrorism, the Israel-Palestine dispute and Iran's nuclear programme. The US utilitarianism has failed to properly understand the behaviour of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which pursues identity-based collective self-esteem. In other words, the tension between Tehran and Washington has deep epistemological foundations alongside different philosophical and ontological accounts.

This mutual misperception is not going to change in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, there are some points which should be taken into consideration by the US political leaders. First of all, they should know that the Islamic Republic of Iran should be recognised as a political system different from Western liberal democratic political systems. Due to the above-mentioned differences in the mind-set, the options of threats, sanctions and regime change would only radicalise the Islamic Republic, leading to the marginalisation of the moderates in Iran. This can lead to the destruction of the political-diplomatic channels devised by Mohammad Jawad Zarif and John Kerry. Diplomacy should be considered as the only solution to the crises. The US power is limited, and it needs to talk and cooperate with other countries in order to solve global and regional issues, such as those relating to Iran.

The US politicians should also consider the fact that supporting Iranian opposition groups and attempt a regime change would not lead them to any significant results for the US. Iranian opposition groups such as the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (Mojahedin-e Khalq)⁷⁴ has no popularity amongst the Iranians. This is also because of their treacherous actions during the Iran–Iraq war. Moreover, due to the religious nature of the Iranian polity, Western groups do not have much influence in Iran. Therefore, supporting these groups will increase Iranians' mistrust and suspicion of the US.

Several decades after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the US has failed to follow a coherent foreign policy towards Iran. It has pursued different approaches towards Iran at different stages—from the carrot and stick policy to outright military threats. It has to be recognised that Iran's influence is rapidly growing within the countries of the region, as there are many cultural and political factors consolidating mutual links between the state and countries such as Iraq and Lebanon. It has been following its policies through legitimate governments and well-recognised political groups in its neighbouring countries. Given the fact that crises in the Middle East cannot be handled effectively without considering Iran and its interests, the US should be more coherent in its strategic policy towards the Islamic Republic.

Also, in the interest of the region, the US should not follow contradictory policy-approaches on issues such as terrorism and human rights and stop its support for authoritarian regimes in the region. The US must realise that it would only sacrifice its long-term strategic interests by antagonising Iran to fulfil its short-term needs. The US attempts at weakening Iran—the most-effective force against terrorism and extremism in the Middle East—would only destabilise the region further.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. See for instance, Mirijam Koch, *A Liberal Perspective: The Role of Interest Groups in US Foreign Policy Towards Iran*, ECPR General Conference 2015, The Université de Montréal, Montreal, at <https://ecpr.eu/Events/PaperDetails.aspx?PaperID=25490&EventID=94>
John Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt, "Is It Love or the Lobby? Explaining America's Special Relationship with Israel", *Security Studies*, 2009, 18: 1, pp. 58-78.
2. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is one of the most influential lobbying groups in the US, advocating pro-Israel policies to the Congress and the United States government. It has strong links with the Likud party in Israel, and the Republican Party in the US, thought having the support of other parties in both countries.
3. See for instance, Penelope Kinch, *The US–Iran Relationship: The Impact of Political Identity on Foreign Policy*, London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2016.
Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.
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30. Islamic Jihad is a Palestinian organisation founded in 1981 with the aim of the establishment of a sovereign, Islamic state in Palestinian. It is said to have close relationship with Iran. It has been involved in many attacks against Israel, and been targeted by the Israelis many times. Some of its leaders have also been assassinated by Israel.
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70. The Battle of Siffin took place in year 36 AH/657 AD between the armies of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fourth Sunni Caliph and the first Shi'ite Imam, and that of Muawiyah, the rebellious ruler of the Levant. It was the first civil war in the Islamic society, with far reaching impacts on the history of the society.
71. The Battle of Karbala occurred in the year 61 AH/680 AD in Karbala, part of present Iraq, between the armies of Imam Hossein, the third Shi'ite Imam and Prophet Muhammad's grandson, and that of Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph. Imam Hossein and his followers were killed brutally, leaving a significant impact on Shi'ite culture and collective memory.
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