Iran’s Nuclear Behavior: The Gender Dimension

Behravesh, Maysam

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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” (Delvapasan) – 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 harin 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 "pofyous" (abstract 
noun and swear word in Persian), the defining characteristic of a man 
lacking gheirat. In other words, "pofyous" (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 pofyousi.

“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, masculinity 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 
instrument 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.