

# Creating the Irrational Other: The Iranian Nuclear Issue



The Issue of Iranian Nuclear Development has bubbled under the surface of international politics since Ayatollah Khomeini restarted progress on the Bushehr reactor in 1984. Despite decades of international effort to negotiate, the dispute boils down to two actors, Iran and the US, being unable to come to a mutually acceptable agreement.



## Ayatollah Khamenei's Norouz Speech

Ayatollah Khamenei is the 2nd Supreme Leader of Iran. He has been the highest power in Iran since the first leader of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, died in 1989. While Iran does have a democratically elected President in charge of policy, the Supreme Leader has the ultimate say in all matters that he wishes to. This speech, given at Iranian New Year (21st March) was a summary of the the previous and coming years, and focuses heavily on the Iranian-US relationship. Considering the role of the Supreme Leader in Iran, it can be taken as a comprehensive establishment of their policy boundaries.

## Under Secretary Sherman's Speech

Wendy R Sherman is the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in the US State Department. Appointed in 2011 by Hillary Clinton and currently serving under John Kerry, Sherman is not nearly as senior as Khamenei. She does though have the authority to speak for President Obama and her June 4th speech to the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs is a comprehensive summary of the US position on Iran under the Obama administration. Under Secretary Sherman's Speech covers all aspects of US-Iranian relations, with a heavy focus on the nuclear issue that both sides consider crucial.

This study compared these two speeches to analyse the influence of rhetoric on reality, aiming to establish the factors that allow the creation of the irrational other. Four factors have been identified:

## The Culture of Distrust

In the 34 years that have passed since the revolutionary replacement of the US-installed dictator with the Islamic theocracy that currently governs, Iran and the US have never been on friendly terms. The entire issue is enveloped by the history of the two sides privately and conspicuously desiring the other's downfall.

Sherman claims to "have no illusions about the difficulty of overcoming decades of mistrust." [S] As Khamenei states though, they "have told you many times we are not after nuclear weapons and you say you do not believe us. Why would we believe your statements?" [K] - neither is willing to take the first step.

The culture of distrust - the track record of dishonesty prevents them trusting each other's promises and commitments.

## Denials of Mutual Culpability

The historic wounds from three decades of antagonism are visibly brought to the current disagreement; and with neither side willing to recognise their own complicity they insist it is the duty of the other to make concessions first.

Where the Americans say "We have approached these negotiations realistically, conscious of our difficult history... But the onus is on Iran"[S], the Iranians say "they should stop being hostile if they want to put an end to the problems that exist between us - and they announce that they really want to resolve the problems that exist between Iran and America" [K].

The refusal to accept mutual culpability for their antagonistic history hinders any efforts to move beyond the past.

## The Myth of Community

The American rhetoric defines the issue as one of the world against a rogue state; positioning themselves as trying to "resolve the international community's concerns about [Iran's] nuclear program." [S] Khamenei specifically challenges this concept, using the Non-Aligned Movement as a tool to demonstrate that "The global community is not at all determined to oppose Iran, Iranians or Islamic Iran." and claiming "what they call 'the global community' is [just] a few countries." [K]

For both sides, the myth of the global community's support is an essential tool to legitimize of their actions.

The myth of support from the 'global community' allows both sides to claim constant legitimacy.

## Accusations of Irresponsibility

Both Sherman and Khamenei call on their counterparts to stop acting irresponsibly. Painting the other actor as wholly unreasonable allows the speakers to steamroller over any valid, constructive engagement.

Khamenei construes the USA preventing "the Iranian nation from achieving progress and development"[K] in nuclear matters as a spiteful action, rather than recognising that the US sees that progress as a grave global security threat. Similarly Sherman acts as though oblivious that a state could have a legitimate desire for a civil nuclear capability in order to taint Iran's aims.

The defining of their counterparts as unreasonable allows them to refuse to engage - even with valid arguments.

These are the conditions that allow the creation of the irrational other, demonising their adversary and resulting in a stalemate that neither side is willing to solve.

### References:

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Sherman, W., 2013. Iran Sanctions: Ensuring Robust Enforcement, and Assessing Next Steps - Written Statement before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, Washington, DC, USA. 4 June 2013. Available at: <<http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/210260.htm>> [Accessed 1/8/2013]. Marked by [S].