

Review - U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue

Written by Ghoncheh Tazmini

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GHONCHEH TAZMINI, AUG 17 2014

U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue
Edited by: Abbas Maleki and John Tirman
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In the midst of ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran, the United States, and its international partners; the regional conflagration in Gaza, Iraq, and Syria; and the ascendance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – widely labelled a ‘common enemy’, this book could not come at a more opportune time. Below the surface of the nuclear talks is the question on everyone’s mind: could a permanent nuclear deal result in a thawing of US-Iran relations? Can Americans and Iranians mitigate their historical grievances and pave the way for cooperation and, if not a grand, but limited bargain? How do each country’s elite view each other and what factors have shaped (mis)perceptions of one another? These are the questions that lie at the heart of *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue*.

In this eight-chapter volume, editors Abbas Maleki and John Tirman attempt to clear up some conventional cobwebs in thinking that separate these two pivotal countries by bringing together the insights of a range of former policy makers and international relations experts. In an effort to move beyond the rigid and hostile perceptions that have beset the relationship since the advent of the 1979 Iranian-Islamic Revolution, this collaborative effort engages the most sensitive issues that separate the two countries, including the American position during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the hostage crisis, Iran’s role in the Levant, the nuclear issue, and Iran’s role in the region. These themes, of course, have been covered extensively in literature on Iranian and American history and international relations – thus, in this capacity, the volume does not offer anything new. However, the ideas floated around in this collection of essays re-energise the somewhat stale and exhausted debate on Iran-US relations.

The book is timely and, as the subtitle – ‘a dialogue’ – suggests, there is a degree of optimism embedded in each chapter as each author strives to chart a potential trajectory towards diplomacy and rapprochement. However, the bulk of the book is predominantly descriptive, with its biggest shortcoming being its failure to tie chronological events into a broader conceptual framework. The chapters lack the kind of rigorous analytical framework required for a serious and scholarly analysis of American and Iranian perceptions, policy choices, and strategic priorities.

Conspicuously absent in the volume is an analysis of the growing body of literature pertaining to Iranian-American relations. IR theory, the paradigms of foreign policy behaviour, and state peculiarities – for example, the role of Shi’a Islam in international relations as a discursive and mobilisation force – need to be woven in. Otherwise the arguments and predictions presented are tantamount to crystal ball reading.

For example, in his chapter, “Iran’s Perception of the U.S. Policy towards the Region” (pp. 89-110), Kayhan Barzegar discusses American support of Saddam Hussein during the traumatic Iraq-Iran War, commonly known as ‘the Imposed War’ in Iran. He explains, ‘[US] support of Saddam Hussein and their intensifying political and economic pressures as well as military threats... all institutionalised the sense of threat from the United States among the Iranian political-security elites.’ (p. 93). His argument, while entirely valid, lacks the theoretical underpinning required to give it scholarly weight. The chapter would have benefitted from a short survey of the leading works on threat perception and security dilemma in foreign policy formation. In the same vein, a theoretical overview of the role of

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psychological factors in foreign policy decision making, and the way in which perceptions are shaped by historical memory, would have made for a more robust analysis.

Robert Jervis's instructive chapter, "The United States and Iran: Perceptions and Policy Traps" (pp. 15-36), would have also benefited from a literature review. As a leading theorist on misperceptions in international relations, the author could have been more generous in providing the reader with a theoretical context in which to situate his argument. Jervis cites Karim Sajjadpour, hardly an authority on the subject, and he disappoints with declaratory statements. For instance, in asking 'What is the Iranian-US conflict about?' Jervis explains, 'for the Americans, it is Iran's support for terrorism' (p. 16). Such a wholesale statement betrays the complexity and texture of the relationship.

In general, higher standards should be set for the study of Iranian foreign policy in both academic debate and policy discourse. More analytical depth is required for a book that is being marketed as a scholarly title – and not merely a think tank monograph. For instance, what is the Islamic Republic's conception of a normative foreign policy and what is the profile of American normative foreign policy? Each country brings its own distinct history, political philosophy, institutions, traditions, and resources to bear upon these questions. These elements cannot be simplified or summarised: they need to be wrestled more aggressively in order to buttress the arguments put forward – otherwise the postulations are merely speculative and superficial. A substantive assessment of US and Iranian normative foreign policy goals would allow us to determine, with more confidence, if there is both conceptual and practical common ground on which a tentative relationship could be forged.

Also absent is a discussion of how Iran's foreign policy priorities unfold in the international system. What is the external context and how has the environment shaped Iran's perceptions or misperceptions vis-à-vis the US? How does Iranian foreign policy interact with the domestic dynamics, and how does foreign policy interact with the policies of other international actors and the wider international context? What international or regional pressures bear upon American position vis-à-vis Iran? These issues should have been considered in more depth for a book the editors deem a scholarly title. On this note, another issue with the book is that of the eight chapters: four of the chapters include are written or co-written by either of the editors, Maleki or Tirman.

Overall, the book provides exactly what the title suggests: an explanation of US-Iranian perceptions and misperceptions. In this task, the book has delivered adequately: it provides a coherent account of the progression, development, and consolidation of American and Iranian perceptions of one another. However, it finds itself with an awkward identity crisis – as neither an academic book nor a think tank brief.

About the author:

Ghoncheh Tazmini is an Associate Member of the Centre for Iranian Studies at the London Middle East Institute at SOAS. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent at Canterbury and is the author of *Khatami's Iran: the Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (I. B. Tauris, 2009, 2013) and *Revolution and Reform in Russia and Iran: Politics and Modernisation in Post-revolutionary States* (I. B. Tauris, 2012).