

Atomic Empathy – US-Iranian Diplomacy Behind the Nuclear Deal

Ellie Geranmayeh is an Iran expert and Policy Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. In this Insight Ms Geranmayeh discusses the vital role of empathy and leadership in helping to secure the Iran nuclear deal in April 2015. She highlights the role of symbolic gestures in cementing personal relationships that underpinned negotiations and the way in which each side helped the other to manage hardliners who opposed the deal. Looking ahead, given likely changes in senior officials, Ms Geranmayeh argues that empathic relationships need to be institutionalized.

The story of Iran-United States relations, since as far back as the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, is one of a succession of missed opportunities. While many in Iran considered Khatami's presidency as a real chance to take forward a reformist agenda, most Western countries did not view Khatami as a sufficiently reliable interlocutor. Under the George W. Bush presidency, the United States labeled Iran as part of the "axis of evil", burning the bridges of collaboration built between the West and Iran during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. This Western stance on Iran also contributed to a hardline backlash in Tehran, culminating in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005. In contrast, under the presidency of Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani, last year's nuclear deal, provided a rare case of genuine leadership to push forward diplomacy on advancing global security. In reaching this goal, empathy and leadership played a significant role, particularly in the way negotiators from Iran and the United States interacted with one another.

First, a combination of empathy and leadership helped establish the secret Omani channel of dialogue between U.S. and Iranian officials, initiated before President Rouhani was elected. These talks paved the way for direct engagement between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue. The empathic approach of Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, in providing a safe platform for these delicate talks should not be forgotten. He brought the United States and Iran together in secrecy, which was necessary after years of outright hostility. Key figures, such as U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, safeguarded the process, which provided the foundation for subsequent, more open negotiations.

Second, the relationship between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif involved and demonstrated empathy in full. They each understood the popular psyche and domestic politics of the other's country. Zarif's time in the US, both as a student and as Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations enabled him to understand the competing forces in U.S. politics, opposition to the nuclear talks and how this influenced Congress. This enabled Zarif to interpret U.S. domestic politics in a way that could not have been expected of the Iranian leadership. Early on in the negotiations, both the United States and Iran knew what the ultimate outcome of the deal was going to be, in terms of the framework, technicalities and bottom lines. What followed was an exercise by Kerry and Zarif to sell the deal to their own domestic politicians and populations. This was ambitious, as hardline leaderships on both sides were deeply skeptical and anxious.

The negotiation process illustrated how small human gestures can make a big difference – such as the famous Geneva riverside walk by Kerry and Zarif, and Zarif's historic handshake with Obama at the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2015. When Rouhani's mother passed away at the height of the negotiations in Lausanne in March 2015, the top US negotiating team went to see Rouhani's brother, who was part of the Iranian delegation, to offer their condolences. This included Wendy Sherman, who just two years before had testified to Congress that "deception is part of the DNA" of Iranians negotiating over the nuclear program. Each of these steps helped to humanize each of the two sides, and they were supplemented by an unprecedented level of contact between Kerry and Zarif. Kerry reportedly logged more calls to Zarif than to any other Foreign Minister during the course of the nuclear talks.

Third, there was “scientific empathy” between US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation, who developed a common understanding based on the technicalities and science behind the nuclear talks. They had both been students in the United States at MIT, and shared a background of scientific education, which meant they were able to sit together, put aside their political differences, and negotiate difficult technical issues. This was key in moving talks forward. Salehi became a grandfather during talks, and at the subsequent round of talks, in March 2015, Moniz presented him with baby presents bearing MIT logos. Creating headlines in Iran and the United States, it helped underline their shared human common ground.

Through a shared commitment to diplomacy, Kerry and Zarif successfully developed a win-win paradigm, which was important to secure, sell and deliver on a final agreement. Iran had always insisted on its legitimate ground for enrichment, as a matter of national pride in the country’s scientific advancement. For the United States, the ultimate aim was containing the high threshold of enrichment by Iran, which what was widely seen by the West as a threat to stability in the Middle East. During the negotiations, Kerry and Zarif were both careful not to undermine the other’s position by over-reacting to criticism from hardliners on the other side. For instance, when GOP senators wrote to the Iranian leadership saying that they would tear up the deal, both Zarif and Rouhani essentially dismissed the letter as a matter of internal politics of the U.S. administration. Likewise, Kerry and Obama largely ignored a sustained backlash from hardliners in Iran.

The negotiations also highlight a rare alignment between Obama and Rouhani as key personalities who understood the importance of diplomacy and empathy. Obama’s policy on Iran was guided by notions of “mutual interest” and “mutual respect”. Since the start of his tenure, Rouhani, who has been perceived by many as a relatively moderate leader, sought to secure a more positive relationship between Iran and the United States and move the two countries away from perpetual enmity. In this sense, timing was important – the two leaders opened up possibilities for rapprochement and pushed forward with this agenda despite huge internal opposition.

The Iran nuclear talks also provide an example of how outside actors can promote empathy between two adversaries. At the beginning of talks, and to a lesser extent later on, European diplomats were useful in helping to balance relations between the United States and Iran and to diffuse tensions. The Europeans played an important role in damage limitation when opposition groups in Iran and the United States tried to undermine the talks. The frequent presence of European diplomats in both Tehran and Washington throughout the recent period of talks also helped to consolidate diplomatic efforts.

Since the nuclear deal was agreed, there are questions about how far the recent détente between Iran and the West, in particularly the United States, can go. Moreover, if the nuclear agreement was safeguarded by particular leaders, what will happen when Kerry and Zarif leave office? Empathic relationships need to be institutionalized – which does not seem to have happened in the case of the United States and Iran. There are also concerns about what lessons the West draws from the nuclear deal. In Iran there is a strong sense that the West still wants to isolate Iran, despite the easing of sanctions, given the slow pace of Iran’s reintegration into global economic platforms. On-going efforts are required to ensure that this disillusionment does not impair future relations with Tehran in ways that could limit the potential for greater diplomatic achievements, most notably on regional security.

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