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# Book Review: US-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue

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**Editors: Abbas Maleki & John Tirman**

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Written by several policy experts from the US and Iran, this book is a must read by anyone seeking to grasp the inventory of the past and present issues between the two countries and the possibilities that exist to move beyond the long-standing stalemate toward a new chapter in relations between Tehran and Washington. The authors do not necessarily agree with each other in their assessments of the sources of enduring hostility between US and Iran and or their extent of optimism regarding any breakthrough in the stalemated relations, yet their narratives commonly hammer the need to move these relations forward by, first and foremost, learning from the past history and avoiding the "highly counterproductive" misperceptions, such as those that reinforce Manichean enemy images of the other side.

Concerning the latter, Robert Jervis in the opening chapter repeatedly states that the Iranian perceptions of American hostility toward Iran "are not unreasonable" and that Tehran has "good reason to fear regime change" pursued by Washington. Jervis cites "broad sources of conflict" including "incompatible nuclear objectives" and makes the important observation that "correct appreciation" of issues "does not involve less conflict." Whereas Abbas Maleki and John Tirman put the accent on shared and complementary interests, other contributors such as Matthew Bunn and Steven Miller are less sanguine about this and state categorically that Iran's behavior has "been challenging to American interests." Still, despite their negative assessment of Iran's external behavior and recycling some of the prevalent misperceptions about Iran in the US media, Bunn and Miller leave open the possibility of reduced tensions between Iran and the US as a result of breakthrough in the nuclear talks and wise choice of policies by the policy-makers on both sides.

A key importance of this book is its singular emphasis on the regional dimension of US-Iran relations and the important interplay between perceptions and policies in shaping each country's behavior toward the other side with respect to such issues as Persian Gulf stability and conflict in Syria. Concerning the latter, according to the Tehran-based political scientist Kayhan Barzegar, "the confrontation between Iran and the United States in Syria is with regard to the regional balance of power." True, but in light of Iran's endorsement of the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament, one should not overlook the potential areas of US-Iran agreement on Syria, including the threat posed by the radical Jihadists. Also, Barzegar contextualizes Iran's policy in post-invasion Iraq almost solely in terms of containing "the American threat." (p. 104). But this simplifies the complex repertoire of US-Iran actions and reactions, which included two rounds of security dialogue and (unconfirmed yet credible) reports of intelligence sharing vis-a-vis the Al-Qaeda and other threats to the new regime in Baghdad, backed by both Tehran and Washington. Similarly, the depiction of Turkey as Iran's "new rival" due to their policy disagreement over Syria is questionable as well, given the expanding net of economic interdependence between the two regional powers.

With respect to the Iranian leader's perception of US, the contribution by Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian diplomat sheds light on Ayatollah Khamenei's nuanced political ideology that evinces rational thinking and valid suspicions of American intentions toward Iran, intermixed with his willingness to pursue the diplomatic track with Washington within the framework of Iran's national interests. It is important to add to Mousavian's insight, however, the importance of "value-rationality" that needs to be distinguished from "practical rationality," following a well-known Weberian and Habermasian tradition, so that the kernel of Iran's antipathy to nuclear weapons on both practical and moral and ethical grounds can be better understood.

Another Iranian contributor, Hussein Banai, provides a useful outline of the distinct scenarios for the future of US-Iran relations, perhaps overstating the chance of continuing stalemate as "most likely" when, in fact, tangible progress and breakthrough appears to be steadily gaining ground on the horizon. Another problem with this chapter is Banai's mischaracterization of the Clinton administration as coming "closest to correcting course on Iran" (p. 143) when, in fact, it was during his era that the US sanctions on Iran were institutionalized and Iran's overtures during the Khatami era were not fully appreciated. On the other hand, Banai fails to notice that the (George W.) Bush administration never had a systematic "regime change" policy toward Iran and there was a great deal of chasm between rhetoric and policy, one that fueled a passing Iranian paranoia in the immediate aftermath of Iraq's invasion; certainly, the Iranian view then that a US invasion of Iran was imminent constitutes a clear case of misperception, ironically one that fueled a passing Iranian overture toward the US in 2003. In other words, it is a mistake to associate misperception with conflict per se, as the authors in this volume uniformly do.

Another problem with the book is the repeated references to the Persian Gulf as "the Gulf" particularly in the chapter contribution by John Tirman, the book's weakest chapter by virtue of being purely descriptive and rehashing the familiar.

Still, despite such shortcomings, and the absence of direct dialogue among the contributors, the book offers a deeper understanding of the problematic US-Iran relations and the steps necessary to achieve a breakthrough. According to the editors, US and Iran in many respects "are well suited to be strategic and economic partners." The big question now, as in the past, is indeed how to tackle the divisive and incompatible interests and priorities that preclude this possibility? The only viable response appears to be one along the multi-layered "mixed

motives" game of simultaneous cooperation and competition. Any hope of a complete harmony is illusory.

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