Identity, Affective Attachments, and US-Iranian Nuclear Politics

There has been a notable contrast in approach, tone, and behavior between the first and second Obama administrations with regard to Iran. Obama's first term was characterized by maintaining tough economic sanctions on Iran backed up by fairly hawkish rhetoric regarding both the supposed nature of the Iranian regime and their intentions. Upon signing into US law in 2010 the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act, Obama stated that Iran has "violated its commitments, defied United Nations Security Council resolutions, and forged ahead with its nuclear program – all while supporting terrorist groups and suppressing the aspirations of the Iranian people" (Obama 2010). Other members of the first-term administration went further. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton – who, as a presidential candidate, claimed that the US could "totally obliterate" Iran (Morgan 2008) – suggested Iran must rethink its "dangerous" nuclear policy and that it is "moving toward a military dictatorship" (Sturcke 2010). Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (2011) labeled Iran an "international pariah" and that that "no greater threat exists to the security and prosperity of the Middle East than a nuclear-armed Iran." However, by Obama's second term starting in early 2013, this kind of rhetoric – although still maintaining key underlining elements – began to give way to less confrontational language that more emphasized the possibility of cooperation between the two states. Iran has little featured in Obama's State of the Union addresses, and when it is mentioned little is noted other than reassurances that America will not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon (Obama 2012). More important is that a "peaceful resolution of this issue is still possible, and far better,

and if Iran changes course and meets its obligations, it can rejoin the community of nations" (Obama 2012). In the 2015 State of the Union, Obama (2015) emphasized that "diplomacy is at work with respect to Iran" and should therefore be allowed to continue, yet ensured that the "American people expect us only to go to war as a last resort, and I intend to stay true to that wisdom."

There are numerous mutually-reinforcing reasons for this shift in language. One likely reflects the election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as Iranian president in 2013, from which followed a number of friendly overtures and unprecedented meetings (since the 1979 revolution) between Iranian and US officials. Of course, this also coincides with substantially increased efforts towards sensitive negotiations with Iran over its alleged nuclear program. The "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," signed between Iran and the P5+1 powers (five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) was finalized in July 2015. It involves concessions from both Western powers and Iran, and is centered around three main issues: nuclear infrastructure, transparency, and sanctions. First, Iran agrees to never produce or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons, and ensures that its nuclear capacities (such as uranium enrichment) are solely focused on civilian energy production. Second, in return Western powers agree to lift existing economic and financial sanctions on Iran. In particular, the United Nations Security Council agrees to terminate all previous resolutions relating to the Iranian nuclear issue, in addition to the US agreement to cease bilateral sanctions. Third, these parallel processes of peaceful nuclear capacity development and international regulatory inspections will made transparent by international regulatory bodies.

Specifically, the International Atomic Energy Agency will subject Iran to an extensive inspection regime, including maintaining a long-term presence in Iran, close monitoring of uranium development, and centrifuge technology, among other issues (White House, Key Excerpts of the JCPOA, 2015).[1]

The significance of these changes – both in policy and rhetoric – mark a potentially momentous shift in US-Iran relations. Their importance should not be understated. In particular, given the Obama Administration's notably harsher rhetoric toward Iran during its first term, such a comprehensive agreement with Iran and such a primary issue was far from a foregone conclusion. Yet, despite the significance of these negotiations, the discourse of the Obama administration still bears marks of the identity dynamics that have driven US policy toward Iran for the last three decades. This, in some sense, is to be expected. Decades of mistrust and tension cannot be swept away through a set of negotiations on one issue. However, even within the Obama administration's shifting discourse on Iran, an unspoken set of assumptions is subtly evident. Despite the new tone of cautious and tentative cooperation, official US discourse is marked by similar assumptions and affective undercurrents as the first Obama administration's more hawkish stance toward Iran – even if the rhetoric itself is less overtly antagonistic. This chapter helps to explain how the conditions for this agreement came about despite the harsher rhetoric of the Obama first term.

To illustrate, consider that for years US intelligence agencies have found that although Iran is developing its nuclear energy capabilities, there is no evidence that

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[1] See full text of the agreement at http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/.

it has engaged in direct development of nuclear weapons. The 2007 US National

Intelligence Estimate found that Iran ended its pursuit of nuclear weapons in 2003

and that although its uranium enrichment capabilities continued (which Iran

maintains is for civilian purposes of energy generation) that a military-operated

weapons program likely ended (Mazzeti 2007). In 2010 and 2012, subsequent

National Intelligence Estimates maintained that although Iran had hastened its

uranium enrichment, "there is no hard evidence that Iran has decided to build a

nuclear bomb" (Risen and Mazzetti 2012). Despite the lack of evidence of a

weapons program, US foreign policy elites – including the Obama administration –

nevertheless evidently *believe* that Iran desires nuclear weapons. This disconnect

between evidence and belief could potentially be explained via recourse to

psychological theories of misperception (Jervis 1976). Yet, the individual level-of-

analysis focus of most political psychology frameworks (McDermott 2004) often

neglects the multiple intersubjective factors at play. Mistrust no doubt plays a role

here, too, as both sides readily admit. However, what is often missing – somewhat

surprisingly – from scholarship are the affective and emotional politics involved in

US-Iranian relations. This display of belief in spite of evidence points towards what

Mercer (2010) terms "emotional beliefs." That is, "feeling is believing because

people use emotion as evidence" (Mercer 2010: 1). Building upon these insights,

this chapter draws upon Slavoj Žižek's social psychoanalytical framework to

contend that the intersections of identities and affect are central to unraveling this

empirical puzzle posed by the nuclear politics between Iran and the US. Dynamics

of affect and emotion are, this chapter argues, key to a more comprehensive

understanding of the politics between the US and Iran regarding the latter's nuclear program. Specifically, Žižek's approach helps to account for the peculiar dynamics of beliefs and evidence in contemporary US-Iranian nuclear politics, and points to the overlapping roles of rhetoric and affect in the social construction of identity.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it briefly reviews existing arguments regarding US-Iranian relations, and finds that most work has neglected affective factors. Both realist and constructivist analyses rightly focus on the geostrategic concerns and socially constructed perceptions involved. However these studies tend to neglect the affective dimensions involved in the social construction of identity. The chapter suggests instead that the affective underpinnings involved in the intersubjective process of identity construction is key to understanding the disjuncture between evidence and belief here, and thus offers a more comprehensive understanding of the case. Second, the chapter turns to Žižek's (1993; 1997) social-psychoanalytical framework, which is concerned, among other issues, with how affect is involved in the social construction of identity. For him, identity is constructed with reference to an other, in line with most IR constructivist frameworks (Wendt 1999). However, where he departs from IR views is in the contention that affective aspects of desire and enjoyment are deeply involved in the particular type of "otherness" for a particular identity. Third, applying these concepts to elite US discourses on Iran takes a step beyond (yet complements) existing analyses and argues that desire and enjoyment help to not only account for discrepancies between empirical evidence and perceptions, but also begins to

capture some of the key affective underpinnings of American constructions of Iran as the "other" of US identity.

Extant Arguments: Self-interests and Identities in US-Iran Relations

Most IR analyses of the Iranian nuclear issue focus on the conflicting geopolitical interests of the US and Iran. As structural realism argues that states are most concerned about their security and the balance of power (Waltz 1979), many analyses take American and Iranian interests as pre-given and materially-based. As Mearsheimer (1995: 91) contends, "the distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics." Through this lens, Iranian and US interests will naturally be at odds – Iran will to strive towards regional hegemony to ensure its security, and the US will aim to keep access to a strategic area as a major resource base. Along these lines, Kroenig (2009) suggests that states' nuclear proliferation decisions are based largely on its geostrategic position. Several scholars find that states' policies toward Iran stem from similar material interests, such as the strategic value of oil (Talmadge 2008; Wagner and Onderco 2014), potential payoffs in rational bargaining outcomes (Sebenius and Singh 2012) or strategic reactions to Iran's latent nuclear capability and "hedging" (Bowen and Moran 2015). For Sanati (2014: 126), most of the US's and Iran's behavior toward each other "stems from the interplay and ultimate collision of their core national interests, posited in the shifting power changes in contemporary history." Stephen Walt (2013) succinctly offers a realist perspective, and argues that "the real issue isn't whether Iran gets close to a bomb; the real issue is the long-term balance of power in the Persian Gulf and Middle East . . . If Iran ever escapes the shackles of

international sanctions and puts some competent people in charge of its economy,

it's going to loom much larger in regional affairs over time."

From a constructivist perspective, other scholars have emphasized the role

of socially constructed identities and perceptions in producing US-Iranian tension.

Taking a step beyond realism, constructivism argues that interests are not

materially-based, but rather coalesce through processes of social interaction via

language, norms, and practices (Wendt 1999). Interests are not themselves

"objective" or pre-given, but are filtered through self-images and identity. Through

this lens, antagonistic US-Iranian relations are less material facts than they are

products of a particular shared history, normative ideas, and identities that have

developed in contingent ways. For example, Tirman (2009: 536) emphasizes the

role that narratives play, in that "perpetual distrust [is] deeply rooted in the two

national narratives and [is] reinforced by the actual actions" of both Iran and the US.

Similarly, Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013) demonstrate that representations of Iran in

American media overwhelmingly portray an "enemy" image that defines the

production of knowledge and meanings given to Iran within US culture. Adib-

Moghaddam (2007; 2009) further shows how US-Iranian relations are not merely

the conflicts of material national interests, but rather have deeper roots in

discursive contexts and symbolic politics that produce antagonistic identities. For

him (2009: 512), a key task is to explore "representations of Iran and the United

States, and how the fundamental friend-enemy distinction setting the two countries

apart has come about." More specifically, in American politics Iran holds a

particularly central position within neoconservatives discourses. Iran occupies a

"prominent place in the imagination of influential neoconservative strategists with direct links to the decision-making process in Washington and immense resources to influence public discourse in the USA" (Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 636). A key theme of these studies, then, is that US-Iranian relations are less the product of naturally opposed material interests but instead are socially-produced through narratives that shape shared understandings of the relationship in particular ways.

Both accounts are useful in illuminating competing geostrategic interests and in uncovering the socially constructed identities constituting the antagonistic politics. Yet, each account suffers from a few weaknesses. What accounts for the prominence of the US obsession with Iran despite the fact that it poses little material threat to the US? As constructivists have long noted, realist conceptualizations of interests and threats as materially-based and pre-given do not give adequate explanatory weight to the power of narratives to shape shared understandings, and to explain how interests and perceptions of threat can change over time (Thrall and Cramer 2009). While constructivism, in this sense, remedies some of realism's shortcomings, it also has trouble explaining several issues. For example, constructivism's contention that identities (and therefore interests) are socially constructed helps to explain the variability of threat perceptions. Yet constructivism has trouble explaining how some narratives prevail while others do not. Why do some narratives "win" over others? While constructivist research has recently begun to engage with emotions (Ross 2014), this chapter argues that there is a distinctive affective aspect to how narratives of identity are efficacious. In other words, *given* that identities and narratives are historically contingent constructs,

what accounts for the visceral emotional "grip" of narratives beyond their mere social-constructedness (Glynos 2001: 195)? Both realism and constructivism neglect the role of affect and emotion in the intersubjective processes of identity construction. It is precisely in this process that Žižek's framework of desire and enjoyment can help.

Desire and Enjoyment in National Identity

Žižek's analysis of identity has similar starting points to many in IR who have emphasized the role of language in the social construction process. Žižek's Lacanian-inspired framework shares many of the assumptions about ontology and epistemology underlying discourse approaches in IR, and starts from the notion that agents do not have access to reality outside of narratives, which can be understood as "framings of meaning and lenses of interpretation, rather than objective, historical truths" (Hansen 2006: 7). Subjects and their identities are produced in and through language, and since language has no firm foundation in biology or "objective" material facts, identities themselves have no firm rooting in such material factors (Campbell 1998: 12).

However, to argue that identities have no firm foundation outside of language is not to suggest that they are endlessly fluid or infinitely variable. Many instances of discourse exhibit considerable power of stability and efficacy. For Žižek, this relative stability can be understood through two linked concepts – desire and enjoyment – that aim to account for the visceral "grip" (Glynos 1999) of narratives of identity, beyond the fact of their social constructed-ness.

For Žižek (1997), a key question that constructivist approaches overlook is: if identities are never fully rooted or pinned-down (even if they exhibit some temporary stability), why do subjects keep trying to fulfill the image of a pure, "whole" identity in the face of constant frustrations? This is where the concept of desire enters. As agents' identities are socially constructed through narratives – and yet as narratives never really produce the imagined "essences" that agents nevertheless believe in – subjects' desire for such stability is elicited. Desire here is understood not in a conventional or sexual sense, but rather in the sense of desire for ontological stability, an imagined stable, fixed, or whole identity. Moreover, as language and narrative are fluid systems, never able to fully deliver the pure identity they seem to promise, desire always exists as long as a subject remains a subject within discourse. This situation leaves the subject in a bind: she desires to attach herself to and invest in a narrative that she feels is her own, that fully represents her, yet no narrative ever fully delivers on this promise. The subject is thus left as desiring, desire remains unsatisfied, and the subject is driven to continue its identifications practices (Solomon 2015: 29).

Although a key factor in social construction processes, desire functions alongside enjoyment in the production of subjectivity. Since language cannot fully bring the stability that the subject seeks, Žižek contends that the subject's incompleteness also plays a key role in the feelings of "wholeness" that it aspires to. While desire is oriented toward the promise of enjoyment, enjoyment itself is never quite reached. "Enjoyment" thus refers to this always aspired to, and desired for, state of anticipated "wholeness" that is ultimately unattainable. This is because

language itself (a lacking and unfixed system) produces lacking subjects (Žižek

1997). There is a continual frustration in relation to wholeness precisely because it

is never attained and is impossible to reach. The subject's incompleteness therefore

produces both the condition of possibility and impossibility of enjoyment. Language

creates the possibility of the subject to pursue enjoyment (through identification

with narratives), but the enjoyment that the subject seeks is a retroactively created

fiction produced only by the subject's use of language to articulate its desires. Yet

precisely because enjoyment "itself" cannot be captured in language (since it is

illusory), subjects can never quite articulate or pin down what *exactly* attracts them

to a discourse, yet it is this visceral attraction that binds them as subjects to the

discourse. Žižek offers the example of the enjoyment underlying religious devotion.

When a believer describes his spiritual experience to a skeptic and cries, "'You don't

really understand it at all! There's more to it, something words cannot express!' he

is the victim of a kind of perspective illusion: the precious *agalma* perceived by him

as the unique ineffable kernel which cannot be shared by others (non-believers) is

precisely *jouissance* [enjoyment]*"* (Žižek 1997: 50).

A more explicitly political example – and one that bears directly on US

constructions of Iran – is Žižek's analysis of nationalism. He argues that national

identity cannot be understood solely through constructivist approaches alone. That

is, the fact that nations are socially constructed does not adequately capture the

visceral, affective pull of nationalist identity discourses. Rather, the pull of the

enjoyment seemingly promised through such discourses is what elicits such strong

identification. One could list the markers of national identity that seemingly define

what it is (for instance in the US, the flag, Fourth of July, founding fathers, etc.), yet there is always something *else*, beyond such features, that *really* pulls us to identify with a group. This unnameable, inexpressible *thing* is enjoyment. As Žižek (1993: 201) notes, if "we are asked how we can recognize the presence of this Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called 'our way of life.' All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community *organizes its enjoyment.*"

The national "thing" – enjoyment that exceeds attempts to capture it in discourse – is also paradoxical, and it is this paradoxical aspect that draws it into nationalist discourses of threats from the "other." Žižek (1993: 201) notes that our imagined national enjoyment – *our thing* – appears to us "as something accessible only to us, as something 'they', the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by 'them.' It appears as what gives plenitude and vivacity to our life, and yet the only way we can determine it is by resorting to different versions of the same empty tautology." Think of recent discourses producing migrants as people who are usually weak and desperate yet who are "marauding" "our" countries and who threaten our "standard of living" (Perraudin 2015). "The national Thing exists as long as members of the community believe in it; it is literally an effect of this belief in itself" (Žižek 1993: 202). What is at stake in nationalist discourses and conflict, then, is the "possession" of the national "thing" (Žižek 1993: 202). "We always impute to the other an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our

enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment" (Žižek 1993: 202). Yet, key here is the notion that enjoyment is something that is never attainable (nationalist discourses promising to do so notwithstanding). "What we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*" (Žižek 1993: 203), since what is perceived to have been stolen (our essence, "way of life," and so on) is nothing other than the retrospective presumption that we once "had" it. Such presumed origins or "essences" are illusory, but the promise of their delivery through nationalist discourses is what helps elicit audiences' affective identifications with such discourses.

As Kingsbury (2008) discusses, the notion of enjoyment offers some novel insights into the politics of affect. For example, enjoyment suggests an answer to the question of "how do the painful yet thrilling emotional lures of enjoyment that irrupt in the social antagonisms of, for example, racial, nationalist, and ethnic enmities trump the lures of pleasures that can only be acquired in times of peace and material prosperity?" (Kingsbury 2008: 51). In other words, why do people sometimes seem to strongly desire conflict (ethnic, nationalist, or otherwise) when it will immediately result in their harm? The role of enjoyment in nationalism suggests one answer – that audiences become so viscerally attached to their modes of enjoyment that violence (at least partially) brought about through this politics of othering becomes a struggle over the very indefinable *thing* that forms the core of the affective investment in the nation. The politics of enjoyment thus suggests "a difficult truth: when people and groups are locked in conflict, they are – beyond

their immediate interest in securing sovereignty over another land or people –

already experiencing intangible gains" (Lane 1998: 5 quoted in Kingsbury 2008: 51).

As the following section suggests, incorporating desire and enjoyment –

more specifically, the "theft" of enjoyment – into identity arguments can shed some

light on some of the heretofore unexamined affective identity politics surrounding

the US-Iranian nuclear issue.

"Stealing our enjoyment:" The Affective Co-Constitution of US and Iranian

Identity

As of this writing, US-Iranian relations seem to be undergoing some

substantial changes as represented by direct dialogue between the two (through the

P5+1 group) regarding the former's alleged nuclear program. The scope of these

shifts should not be understated. Yet, even alongside the changes brought about

during the second Obama administration, there are some notable underlying

discursive similarities between the first and second Obama administrations

regarding Iran. Some of these underlying similarities stretch back to

characterizations during the George W. Bush administration, where Iran was

included in the "axis of evil" and the administration not only criticized Iran's alleged

pursuit of a nuclear weapon, but also frequently emphasized Iranian influence

throughout the region as a threat in itself. A notable 2007 speech by Vice President

Dick Cheney reveals some of these concerns. "Operating largely in the shadows,

Iran attempts to hide its hands" in using violence to spread its influence; Iran's

"efforts to destabilize the Middle East and to gain hegemonic power is a matter of

record;" "Given the nature of Iran's rulers, the declarations of the Iranian president,

and the trouble the regime is causing throughout the region . . . our country and the

entire international community cannot stand by as a terror-supporting state fulfills

its most aggressive ambitions" (Cheney 2007). Concerns over Iranian influence

would go on to form a key element of the Obama administration's discourse.

Obama's first term discourse on Iran was marked by both diplomatic

overtures and castigation of threats. While Obama's steps toward a "new beginning"

with Iran (Black 2009) garnered much attention, this was often matched by more

hawkish discourse by him and administration officials. For example, in an early first

term speech Obama (2009) stated that " Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile activity

poses a real threat, not just to the United States, but to Iran's neighbors and our

allies . . . As long as the threat from Iran persists, we will go forward with a missile

defense system that is cost-effective and proven." Former first-term secretary of

State Hilary Clinton recently suggested in even stronger terms the threat of Iranian

influence:

a lot of this is weakness [from the Arab Spring uprisings] that Iran takes
advantage of, and you know, in this world, you can be mad at somebody taking
advantage of you. But at the end of the day, that's your fault. That you haven't
figured out how to defend yourself, and how to protect yourself, and how to fend off
external interests, and how to treat your own people in a way that they will not look
outside your borders. That's part of what's been going on, as you know, and the
Iranians have been incredibly focused on exploiting any opening (Maloney 2014).

The discourse of Obama's second term administration displays a notable

change in tone from some of the more hawkish first term rhetoric. This is likely to

due at least two factors: the 2013 election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as Iranian

president, and the intensive nuclear negotiations throughout 2013-2015. While

much of the second term discourse has been more restrained, many of the same

themes are on display regarding the concern about broader Iranian influence in the Middle East. Second term Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel noted that "that while Iran's nuclear program is a critical worry, its other missile threats, terrorism links and occasional provocative maritime behavior also greatly concern the US and the region. And those threats are not addressed by the nuclear agreement" (Associated Press 2013). Elsewhere he assured Congress that he'll "focus intently on countering Iran's malign influence" (Capaccio 2013). More recently, Secretary of State John Kerry, who has played a pivotal role in the nuclear negotiations, tried to reassure Gulf allies that the US was prepared to "push back" against Iranian influence in the region (Reuters 2015). Similarly, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter promised that the US would combat Iran's "malign influence" despite the nuclear deal (Cooper 2015). In a strategic sense, much of this discourse regarding Iranian "influence" is aimed at allaying US regional allies concerned that a nuclear deal may lessen the US's stance towards what many Gulf states view as a common foe.

However in a broader sense, the Obama administration's concern about not only potential Iranian weapons but "malign influence" directly echoes themes that stretch back at least thirty years in US foreign policy history. As Andrew Bacevich (2005) has discussed, US policy towards the Middle East has been largely aimed at retaining dominant influence in the region. Although from the end of the Second World War to 1979, the US sought to ensure political stability and access to oil in ways that minimized overt American involvement, the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted the US to become much more deeply involved. Dealt with these crises, President Jimmy Carter believed that the Middle

East needed to take center stage in US foreign policy. "A great contest for control of that region had been joined, one that Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini had made unmistakably clear was not simply an offshoot of the already existing East-West competition (Bacevich 2005: 181). The following year he articulated what became known as the Carter Doctrine, which stated that the US would play a central role in the region's politics. "Any attempt," Carter boldly declared, "by an any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (quoted in Bacevich 2005: 181). Bacevich argues that this basic tenet has guided US foreign policy toward the Middle East ever since. "As a consequence, each of President Carter's successors has expanded the level of US military involvement and operations in the region" (Bacevich 2005: 181). American identity, in this sense, as long been constructed with reference to the Iranian "other."

Of note here are the near mirror images of American and Iranian ambitions in the region. Despite the shifted tone and more cautiously optimistic discourse on Iran, much of the Obama administration's second term discourse nevertheless continues many of the same core themes of US foreign policy developed over the past thirty years. In one sense this is expected – although Obama has drawn down American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan during his tenure, a wholesale shift in American foreign policy either toward Iran or the Middle East was not expected. However, what often gets neglected in both realist and constructivist analyses of US-Iranian relations is what this mirroring reveals. While Iran is the enemy it curiously

seems to embody all the traits that America *should* be with regards to Middle East politics. The image of an ambitious Islamic competitor suggests that while this reinforces American desires to be the promoter of stability in the region, there nevertheless seems to be something to *admire* in Iranian assertiveness. Iranian influence throughout the region, prominent and now growing, has long been a common trope in American foreign policy discourse, and Obama's second term rhetoric – despite a shift in tone regarding nuclear negotiations – remains largely unchanged in this respect. Moreover, something about "their" ambition in spreading their influence reinforces *our* notions of who we *should* be during this competition. Each mention of Iranian ambition and influence by American officials is usually matched by the suggestion that the US has fallen behind and that it must step up similar efforts. These discourses subtly illustrate some of the notions of enjoyment discussed above.

In nationalistic tensions it is often not merely a fear of the Other for fear's sake but a fear that the Other might steal our national "thing"—our enjoyment. "We always impute to the 'other,'" Žižek (1993: 203) observes, "an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. . . . The basic paradox is that our Thing is conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by him." In American discourses on Iran, the mutual construction of self and other occurs not only on a discursive level, but also through a perceived "theft of enjoyment." The representations of Iranian influence, and concerns over the Iranian nuclear program, in American discourse are in a sense a mirror of what American

behavior *should* be. The US should not only keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, but should also work to counter Iranian influence across the region. Deeply rooted in American objectives since at least the Carter presidency, American discourse on Iran displays a concern that Iran is enjoying precisely what America *should be* enjoying – growing influence, ambition, and assertiveness in a vital region. American identity has long been constructed in relation to the Iranian other (Adib-Moghaddam 2009). Yet a key factor in the social construction of identity is the affective dynamics of desire and enjoyment. While realist and constructivist lenses point to the strategic and socially produced aspects of US identity vis-à-vis Iran, they say little about the role of affect and desire. Although Iran poses little material threat to the US, and despite the fact that American identity is socially constructed by "othering" Iran, the politics of enjoyment offer a new insight into the relationship. That is, not merely is American identity constructed against the Iranian "other," but that the politics of enjoyment shed light on how these particular narratives have gained affective currency with American audiences. Iran is seen to be enjoying growing dominance of Middle East politics – precisely the element that American identity is seen as lacking in relation to Iran. Iran is "stealing" American enjoyment of political hegemony of Middle East politics, and it is this affective pull that helps to (in part) account for the American obsession with Iran despite a lack of material threat.

In this sense, the affective links between discourse, desire, and enjoyment help to account for the discursive conditions under which the Obama administration heavily pushed for a robust nuclear agreement with Iran. Despite little to no

evidence that Iran is actually development nuclear weapons (according to successive US National Intelligence estimates), the Obama administration (and many prominent elite voices in the US across the political spectrum) nevertheless evidently believes that Iran wishes to develop them. Although political psychological approaches (McDermott 2004) would well analyze the individual traits and variables that might account for elite diplomatic behaviors during the agreement negotiations, such approaches would be less able to capture the broader, intersubjective collective understandings and affective movements that produce the *conditions of possibility* for the negotiations and agreements in the first place. Following a range of discourse-based research (Doty 1996; Hansen 2006), this chapter contends that examining the discursive production of conditions of possibility is a key move in foreign policy analysis. Following Doty (1996), this chapter asks how it became possible – or commonsensical – that an Iranian nuclear agreement was necessary and desirable from the perspective of American national interests. The affective investments of desire and enjoyment in particular representations of Iranian identity have helped to bring about a particular "common sense" in the US about Iran regarding their alleged nuclear ambitions. However, the prevailing American "common sense" regarding Iran is neither neutral nor pre-given. Rather, it is the result of ongoing series of representations that elicit American identifications that are underpinned by affective investments of desire and enjoyment. Consequently, the discursive conditions of possibility for the nuclear agreement between the US and Iran are in an important part shaped by the desires for enjoyment represented in American images of Iranian identity, and

resultant American desires to pursue fantasies of control in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Although there are notable contrasts in the way the Obama administration's discourse on Iran has shifted from his first to second terms, much of the official language carries with it many of the same themes that have characterized US rhetoric on Iran for thirty years. Obama's second term discourse has often been much more muted in tone due to the sensitive nature of the nuclear negotiations. However, alongside these more diplomatic openings are continued concerns of Iran's perceived increasing influence in the region. Harking back to US foreign policy themes that stretch back to at least the Carter administration's definition of US interests as political and military hegemony in the Middle East, the Obama administration's concern over both Iranian nuclear weapons and influence mark a continuation of American perceptions and policy. This chapter argues that to in order to more comprehensively understand not only the identity politics behind American obsessions with Iran – despite little material threat – analyses should consider how the politics of affect is entangled with identity. Drawing upon Žižek's concepts of desire and enjoyment – notions that capture aspects of the affective construction of identity – the essay suggests that the Obama administration's second term rhetoric displays some of the same affective underpinnings as prior US discourses. While the essay does not claim that enjoyment (or more accurately, the perceived "theft" of enjoyment) is not the only affect or emotion involved here, it does aver that the US-Iranian relationship is ripe for further work on the mutually entangled roles of affect, identity, and security.

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