The visual politics of the 2015 Iran deal: narrative, image and verification
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Abstract

This article explores the role of visuality and narrative in the forging of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the UN Security P5+1. We advance strategic narrative theory by explaining how narrative alignment between longstanding antagonists can occur through protagonists’ coordination of communication – a methodology of orchestration – across public and private spaces of diplomacy. Analysis of news, policy and social media materials as well as interviews with protagonists allows us to trace the gestures and performances through which actors sought to reinforce or overcome an identity narrative of Iran as untrustworthy and dangerous. We draw on Foucault’s concept of alethurgy to show how verification mechanisms were constructed to ensure Iran’s actions (if not its intentions) could be brought into public view. US and Iranian leaders’ political will was significant, and sanctions and sabotage exerted considerable pressure on Iran. This article demonstrates how communication can enable alignment and peace-making rather than confusion and conflict in world affairs.

Keywords: Iran; Public Diplomacy; Strategic Narrative; United States of America

Introduction

On 14 July 2015 Iran signed a deal with the P5+1 group of countries – the US, UK, France, Russia, China, plus Germany – and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that meant Iran could possess nuclear technology for peaceful purposes as long as it ensured its facilities were fully transparent. That technical deal also

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signalled a wider rapprochement between Iran and the international community. Nuclear energy had symbolic value within Iran, standing for national sovereignty, resistance, and signalling that an Islamic society can achieve technological progress (Moshirzadeh, 2007). The nuclear symbol appears on Iranian banknotes. Iran’s relations with the US and UK had been antagonistic for decades, however (Adib-Moghaddam, 2008; Axworthy, 2013; Warnaar, 2013). Iran’s interlocutors feared it would use nuclear facilities to develop nuclear weapons – to “weaponize” its capabilities. Since the discovery in 2002 that Iran was enriching uranium, attempts to strike an agreement on nuclear technology between Iran, the IAEA, the USA and an EU3 of Germany, France and the UK had been fraught (Parsi, 2017). Meanwhile Israel, fearing a shift in the regional balance of power if Iran was fully accepted in international relations, pressured the P5+1 members to reject any deal. What explains how these at-times enemies could forge a deal in 2015 with such symbolic value? Through what diplomatic methods could these countries come to talk to each other at all? We argue that the deliberate, careful and coordinated development of strategic narratives between the protagonists allowed them to overcome the enmity, the contingency of any negotiation, forge public agreement, and give sense to how Iran and the international community could work together in the future (See also Bjola and Manor, 2018; Duncombe, 2019; Oppermann and Spencer, 2018; Wastnidge 2015).

The standoff between Iran and its interlocutors can only be understood by accounting for the narrative and visual properties of international relations. We aim to explain how actors use events to (re)narrate the character of their allies or adversaries in a way that reinforces longstanding identity narratives. We also investigate how this plays out visually, as a series of spectacular acts that “show” or make public the true character of the other. Hannah Arendt wrote that politics is the exchange of claims and actions within a shared space of appearances, where we recognize and evaluate what the other says and we do this while being aware we are being judged the same way (Arendt, 1963). More recently, Adriana Cavarero described this theatrical model of politics as a ‘plural and interactive space of exhibition’ (Cavarero, 2000: 57). Our analysis shows how these interactions in a global space of appearances can function to make a standoff like Iran’s nuclear programme seem more or less intractable. This allows us to consider how leaders can visually forge cooperation – a task that leaders on all sides consciously undertook when talks eventually found momentum in late
2013. This analysis therefore allows us to respond to recently calls for the examination of how narratives and images are used by leaders and a range of other actors to craft a sense of what is happening in international relations (Crilley, 2015; Galai, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2017). In the context of misinformation and a generalized frustration that digital and visual communication may be polarizing politics, we explore how communication can enable alignment and peace-making.

In the next section we outline three aspects of our theoretical approach. First, we conceptualise the manner in which images can have narrative qualities that can support verbal narrations of past, present, and future in international relations. This entails, second, that diplomacy is performative – it needs visual gestures and visualised actions to support the narrativizing of events. Finally, third, from Foucault we take the concept of “alethurgy” – the process through which an actor seeks to evidence their good character. To be a trustworthy character in international affairs a state must perform and display its virtue and credibility.

We then proceed through two sections of analysis. In the first we examine how Iran’s opponents tried to portray Iran as untrustworthy to undermine an agreement. We suggest news images of Iran’s nuclear facilities worked to represent Iran as alien, that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly worked to represent Iran as dangerous, and that Iranian actors themselves sometimes took actions that represented Iran as threatening. We then examine efforts by Iran, the P5+1, and the IAEA to portray Iran as trustworthy. Leaders in Iran and the US in particular managed to overcome antagonistic identity narratives through a coordinated strategic narrative campaign. Leaders and their teams drew upon the tools of traditional and social media as well as face-to-face diplomatic interactions in public and private – a truly hybrid set of communication environments and practices (cf Chadwick, 2017). We argue this constituted a methodology of orchestration. There was no template to follow – the leaders and teams crafted this in an ad hoc manner according to the needs of actors in concrete situations facing opponents and policy trade-offs. Leaders appeared in each other’s media, and used social media to build a feeling of momentum about a deal.

We conclude by reiterating that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal entailed visual management of various public spheres, some interlocking more than others.
Performances of goodwill had to be organised and played out. Gestures had to be visible. Hardliners tried to bring to light evidence of the other’s malign intentions. This analysis does not discount the role of “hard” power: economic sanctions by the P5+1 against Iran damaged the Iranian economy and sabotage damaged Iranian nuclear facilities. Yet our analysis will show that those hard power processes were visualised and narrated in ways that made them meaningful in ways that legitimated particular strategies towards a potential deal (see also Duncombe, 2016; 2017). Social media is therefore a means to make visible the progress made in diplomacy and signal the incremental steps made towards agreement.

Analysis is based on a mixed methods approach. This article draws on a much wider project in which we analysed the identity, system and issue narratives in the period 2002-15 in policy documents of all protagonists and in news articles in all protagonist countries using the Lexis Nexis database that contains BBC Monitoring translations of Iranian, Chinese and Russian media. We conducted interviews with individuals involved in Iran-West diplomacy from the US, Iran and UK, and analysed them in terms of narrative, visuality, and alethurgy, three theoretical dimensions we explain in the next section. Interviewees requested anonymity and in some cases no mention of their organisation (see table in appendix, for those drawn upon in this article).

Theoretical framework: Narrative, Visuality, and Alethurgy

The political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that narrative is a framework that allows an individual to connect to wider society and to history: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ (cited in Galai, 2017: 275). A task for political leaders is to place their nation and its foreign policy within an international context in ways that make world affairs meaningful and does so in a way that legitimises their particular set of foreign policies and understanding of that country’s role in the world.

We define strategic narratives as, ‘a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 6). Narratives give meaning to events through establishing a sequence, such that
events are connected through time in a causal way. Narratives contain particular features: a setting or scene, some characters, a conflict or dilemma to overcome, tools characters use to address the dilemma, and a resolution (Burke, 1966). We argue that a central part of communication in international relations involves establishing these five features. When this is done to further a political strategy, we can speak of strategic narrative.

There are three types of strategic narratives in international relations. System narratives outline how the system or order of international relations is structured, who the main players are, and how the system should be ordered. Identity narratives concern the character of actors and perceptions of what is appropriate for an actor to do in any given context. Narrative contains the possibility of a dramatic reversal in which the true character of an actor becomes manifest. However, much of the time identity narratives are difficult to move. Narratives’ legitimising function depends on how credibly events and actions live up to the expectations set by that narrative - the familiar stories and characters - hence Bruner (1986) talks of narrative verisimilitude. Leaders must make foreign policy consistent with domestic public expectations and history offers few opportunities to take a country in a radically new direction. Finally, policy narratives outline how an actor views the appropriate response to address a political problem and articulates a position based on material interest and what might be a normatively desirable resolution. In an interconnected world, policy narratives often compete within complex multilateral contexts, but if accepted by a range of actors, can forge consensus between disparate positions.

Much narrative communication works through a visual modality. All five features of narrative established by Burke – scene, characters, dilemma, tools and resolution – can be visualized. Often visual depictions of diplomacy work through metonymy (leaders stand for countries), symbolism (a handshake invokes a gesture traditionally representing progress), or synecdoche (a single nuclear facility stands for a whole geopolitical threat or crisis). Visual representations position the viewer in relation to the thing depicted, creating a perspective. In all materials we analyse – news reports, policy documents, social media posts – images are anchored by written texts and meaning is generated through the interplay of both. Efficient narratives often rely on imagery, metaphor – painting a picture with words and images is not exclusively
visual (Mitchell, 2013). Further, drawing on Ranciere, Bleiker argues that images ‘delineate what we, as collectives, see and what we don’t and thus, by extension, how politics is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, carried out and legitimised’ (2017: 4). The ‘we’ leads to an important distinction between inter-textuality, in which the meaning of one text is always generated in relation to others, and inter-visuality, in which the meaning of a visual image is considered through reference to others (Hansen, 2011). Galai (2019) argues that certain visual images may connect communities across cultural divides whereas inter-textuality renders such connectivity more difficult because of the denser layers of meaning involved. Thus, we expect to see political leaders try to use iconic visuals that may have (near-)universal meaning in order to support the logic of their strategic narrative.

The central dilemma of the Iran deal concerned establishing trust among the protagonists. In particular, the P5+1 had to trust that Iran was not committed to ‘weaponization’ of its nuclear programme. The P5+1 had to reach an acceptable degree of certainty about the true intentions of Iran’s leaders. It is useful to think of this through the framework Foucault offers to analyse the ‘politics of truth’ (Foucault, 2007: 3). In his own analysis Foucault traced the origins and evolutions of societal regimes that governed societies by establishing the truth of any process being governed. To govern the flow of people, goods, germs or ideas, institutions would need knowledge of their quantity, quality and dynamics. Institutions develop techniques to establish truth. The same can be said for nuclear governance. The IAEA is tasked with establishing what nuclear materials are held by countries that have signed up to its Non-Proliferation Treaty – and ideally those who have not, too. It needs techniques to establish this truth or to produce the knowledge it requires to prescribe action.

How Foucault describes the problem of governing early modern European societies is equally relevant for nuclear governance – it was a question of establishing techniques that allow the manifestation of truth: ‘Essentially it was a question of making truth itself appear against a background of the unknown, hidden, invisible, and unpredictable.’ (Foucault, 2012: 6). Such manifestation became ritualized in different ways in different periods – seers and astrologers once, statisticians and scenario-mappers now, each describing laws and patterns. In 1984 Foucault stated he was less
interested in epistemological structures that in what he called “alethurgic forms” (Renault, 2016). He calls this “bringing to the light” alethurgy:

… we could call ‘alethurgy’ (manifestation of truth) the set of possible procedures, verbal or otherwise, by which one brings to light what is posited as true, as opposed to the false, the hidden, the unspeakable, the unforeseeable, or the forgotten. We could call ‘alethurgy’ that set of procedures and say that there is no exercise of power without something like an alethurgy (Foucault, 2012: 7)

Alethurgy has three subject positions: (i) an active agent in alethurgy, (ii) the spectator of alethurgy, (iii) the agent becomes an object of alethurgy. Iran actively seeks to demonstrate its goodwill and lack of weaponisation activities to its spectator, the IAEA and the P5+1. Once witnessed, the IAEA and P5+1 can treat Iran as an object to be governed: to be sanctioned, welcomed, surveilled and so on. Iran must communicate to establish itself as a trustworthy object. As an object of controversy and uncertainty for others, it must communicate and signal its “true” intentions. Foucault writes, this requirement ‘is putting oneself into discourse, the perpetual putting oneself into discourse’ (Foucault, 2012: 307). The discourse we are interested in here is the self-narration and visual self-projection. Iran must reveal its secrets and be seen to perform that unveiling for any narrative about future cooperation to be credible. As a “character” Iran must put its interiority on display, probing deeply for evil, and thereby producing a truth that the IAEA and P5+1 can work with or reject. Since no alethurgy or truth-establishing procedure can be perfect, there is also a role for faith. The IAEA and P5+1 cannot get inside Ayatollah Khamenei’s mind, so there is an intrinsic level of doubt, and regular political performances are required to assuage this.

Alethurgy has an affective dimension; it produces feelings because the knowledge established has consequences. To establish that Iran is or is not weaponising triggered, at various times between 2002-2015, feelings of relief and assurance, anger and pride. This can be understood within the broader constructivist proposition in international relations that power must be witnessed and in being witnessed produces
affective responses. Steele (2010) argues that power must be made manifest otherwise those considering themselves to hold power suffer anxiety that others will not recognize that power. A superpower or a rising power must be seen to exercise that power, and this engenders feelings in that state and in others.

In summary, narrative, visuality and alethurgy are concepts that offer analytical traction on the meaning-making involved in the 2015 Iran deal diplomacy. The visual enactment and verification of truth creates the opportunity for a milestone or turning point in diplomatic negotiations. Any turning point requires shared agreement that a certain act has happened, which requires a process of verification. In the next sections we examine how leaders stitched together these understandings to impede or propel diplomatic progress.

Establishing Iran as Untrustworthy

The first form of visual representation we will examine will portray Iran as alien. In autumn 2011 events unfolded in a manner that supported an identity narrative of Iran as untrustworthy. In early October the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London published a report stating that Iran’s ambition to build a nuclear weapon was ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. However, the report stated that it would take Iran 19 months to enrich its uranium to a level required for a bomb – a 19-month “breakout” time (Coghlan, 2011). Since a single weapon might fail, a credible threat would require Iran to build several nuclear weapons, and this would make it far more likely the IAEA would detect such an initiative. Iran’s likely missiles, Sajjil-2s, were also up to three years from being ready to use. In its coverage of the IISS report The Times newspaper offered readers a photograph of Iran’s Natanz plant where enrichment was carried out (Figure 1):
The reader is invited to peer down on a typical-looking industrial facility. This is not quite the alienating landscape of some photographs that depict desert facilities on the horizon that we find in many news reports on Iran’s nuclear programme. The static nature of the photograph suggests a facility that is contained. That sense of containment was reflected in a statement by the head of the IISS, John Chipman, contained in the news text. He said he stood with the assessments of ex-MOSSAD chief Meir Dagan and US officials in depicting ‘more relaxed timelines’ for Iran’s nuclear weapons aspirations (ibid.). Any sense of urgency was eased in this period. Indeed, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta flew to Israel on 5 October to limit any urge on the side of Israeli officials to talk up military action against Iran now that Dagan had retired (Pollard, 2011). Iran’s facilities remain distant, something to be peered down upon and surveilled, not an urgent danger. In 2003 US Secretary of State Colin Powell gave a presentation using satellite images to the UN to make the case that Iraq possessed WMD, a speech which was later highly contested for making the case for war against Iraq. Given the legacy of Powell’s speech, that such images of Iran in 2011 stand inter-textually alongside Powell’s images weaken their capacity to invoke threat. However, it also suggests the threat that Iran might possess capabilities.
For many years no party had any solution to the problem of Iran’s breakout capability, or what was referred to in 2014 by some as its ‘sneakout’ capability (Sanger and Broad, 2014). The breakout capability was not just a technical problem to be resolved; it also symbolised past failures of Western intelligence, notably the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate. That 2007 Estimate had claimed that Iran had stopped trying to build nuclear weapons in 2003 but that it might still use covert facilities to enrich uranium for a weapon in the future (National Intelligence Council, 2007; Parasiliti, 2009). We can understand this as a case of what Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2013) calls prospective memory: a past event within a longer narrative that must be returned to and resolved before the narrative can reach its full resolution. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate haunts US policy thinking in documents from 2011 right until the 2015 deal. There is a need to repair that damage by finding both the truth of the present and the truth of past covert activities. The presence or absence of Iranian covert activities would provide evidence of Iranian future intentions. Hence, the breakout capability comes to represent a window on Iran’s “true” character. It becomes the basis for identity narratives about Iran.

This monitoring of Iran’s political character was not just a matter of the temporal record. It involved total spatial surveillance too. A spokesperson for Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps wrote a newspaper column stating, ‘This will mean [inspectors] will get permission for reconnaissance flights over our country and that their inspectors can enter anywhere, even the presidential palace’ (cited in Sanger and Broad, 2014, italics added). In February 2009 the IAEA reported that Iran had built a dome over its facilities, and in 2014 Iran put paving and soil over facilities at Parchin. On 23 November 2014, the New York Times reported that US intelligence and arms control experts ‘say hundreds, perhaps thousands, of underground bunkers and large tunnels now honeycomb the nation’ (ibid). According to this logic, for a sovereign state to defend against the penetration and internal surveillance of its body politic, evasion could be Iran’s only response. This could only raise the question of whether Iran had something to hide – a circular logic difficult to unravel.

The New York Times accompanied this story with an image taken from Google Earth with the caption: ‘A view of the mountain where Iran built a hidden centrifuge facility
called Fordo. The U.S. revealed its existence in 2009’. Again, following Powell’s 2003 Iraq WMD speech, such images offer uncertainty (Figure 2).

The visual effect of such an image is again to distance the reader from Iran. If this is Iran, it is alien. There is nothing to identify with. The landscape is abstract, it could be anywhere, even on another planet. There are no human beings to identify with; no facial expressions to interpret. There are some dots that may be trucks or people. These images indicate targets, potentially: what can be seen can be hit – what Bousquet (2018) calls the “militant gaze”. Nuclear power has always been difficult to visualise (Gallagher, 2013). Visuals often rely on iconography of its effects: mushroom clouds, poisoned landscapes – radiation itself being invisible. These images are often sublime (Hales, 1991; Victor, 2014; Shapiro, 2018). First, we are baffled by them since they are of uncertain scale or nature. We look at the image as a purely aesthetic object. Next, we enjoy a moment of realisation when we deduce what
is depicted. This should be a moment of pleasure. Finally, we return to thinking about what exactly it is we are seeing, and realise we will never fully understand it or never grasp the horror or awesomeness of what is depicted.

The Fordo images in no way implicate the reader either, as with images of such landscapes that are damaged by industrial pollution or the effects of war (Peeples, 2011). There is no damage yet. If there is drama, it is latent. The facility is simply there and all the reader can do is wait.

This is in contrast to presentations of the nuclear image using people. Much news of the Iran diplomacy took the form of short video clips of diplomats sitting by a fireplace or standing by a podium – what Schill (2012) calls “image bites”. These at least allow audiences to interpret gestures and whether the protagonists look satisfied or disappointed. Equally, and as we explore below, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held up various diagrams at the UN in 2012 and 2014 representing Iran’s bomb-making capabilities that invited audience engagement (Netanyahu, 2012; 2014; to see these images and US “trolling” of the images, see Itkowitz, 2015). Either one relates to him affirmatively and feels his anxiety about an Iran threat, or one feels him to be wrong or foolish, but a bond is possible and, particularly through social media, audiences can share views with others who also looked upon Netanyahu and his pictures. The Fordo landscape closes such shared viewing down. This dis-identification may have served to reinforce identity narratives of Iran as a mysterious, untrustworthy and dangerous other. There may be a threat in this picture but we literally cannot see it and we are alone with that uncertainty.

Some images represented Iran as dangerous. Those seeking to undermine the talks turned to striking visual imagery – a consistent pattern. On 27 September 2012 Netanyahu spoke to the UN General Assembly and specified his red line (Netanyahu, 2012); if Iran possessed 250 kilograms of uranium enriched to 20 percent, Israel would attack Iran. That mass was sufficient to produce one bomb, he said. He depicted this visually, holding up a diagram of a bomb and using a red marker pen to draw a line to indicate the threshold he viewed Iran as dangerous. This gesture was widely criticized in international media. Ascertaining the truth of Iran’s development was impossible without full transparency for the IAEA. What if Iran was hiding some
production and Israeli or US spies had not infiltrated some of Iran’s facilities? More broadly, if forced into a decision, could Obama be any more certain than Bush in 2003 that US (or Israeli) intelligence had identified weapons or behaviour indicating a weapons programme (Kitfield, 2012)? There was no way for US President Obama to meet Netanyahu’s demands for an absolutely specific red line. Thus while Netanyahu could keep talk focused on hard power and Israel’s security, ultimately his pressure on the Obama administration could not translate into effects on US foreign policy.

Two years later, speaking in Jerusalem, Netanyahu projected a similar concrete picture to that he turned into a literal cartoon at the UN in 2012. He said, ‘If Iran perches itself as a threshold state in which it has all the elements of a nuclear weapon in place, they’ll just have to do one little twist of the knob to get final enrichment … take these components from one side of a room and another side of a room, put them together and … they’d have a nuclear weapon’ (Dehghan, 2014). By now, this communication was not effective.

Alongside the visual contest being played out, an invisible “war” of assassinations, sabotage and espionage unfolded. These actions sometimes came to light in ways that reinforced antagonistic identity narratives. A bizarre terror plot reinvigorated voices of antagonism in 2011. On 11 October a 56-year old Iranian-American citizen, Manssor Arbabsiar, and Gholam Shakuri, a member of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, were charged with a plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US, Adel Al-Jubeir. US authorities accused Shakuri of recruiting Arbabsiar, and Arbabsiar had tried to hire a member of Los Zetas, the Mexican drug cartel, to kill the ambassador – with US$1.5 million allegedly changing hands (Warrick, 2011). The Mexican was in fact an informant for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The New York Times described Arbabsiar as ‘a whiskey-drinking used-car dealer’ (Shane and Afhami, 2011). Its editorial writers depicted the entire plot as ‘extraordinarily brazen – the first major Iranian attack on American soil – and almost laughably sloppy’ (New York Times, 2011).

Here was an event open to narration. The charge and the notion that Iran could be behind such a plot were met with scepticism from other countries (Sanger and Landler, 2011). As reporting unfolded in the week that followed, no journalists could
identify any evidence that Iranian leaders had known of the plot. An unnamed Obama administration official told the *Washington Post* that ‘this plot was so bizarre, it could be a sign of desperation [by Iran], a reflection of the fact that they’re feeling under siege’ (Warrick, 2011). In many ways, the plot seemed credible. Ambassador Al-Jubeir had cabled American officials in 2008 instructing them that Saudi King Abdullah had asked the US to launch military attacks on Iran to destroy its nuclear programme. ‘He told you to cut the head off the snake’, Al-Jubeir is reported to have written (Shane and Afkhami, 2011). Killing a Saudi ambassador would have further symbolic value given the backing the Sunni nation gave to forces opposing Iran’s Shia allies. An assassination in Washington DC could represent vengeance for the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists in Tehran. But was it true? Less than a decade since US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech to the United Nations about the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, US claims about evidence in cases with geopolitical implications would lack credibility on the international stage.

Nevertheless, even Obama administration officials narrated the plot as evidence of Iranian aggression, legitimizing hardline identity narratives from the US Congress that depicted Iran as *fundamentally* and *essentially* antagonistic to the US. In Washington DC, Wendy Sherman told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘This plot was a flagrant violation of international law and a (dangerous) escalation by Iran’ (cited in CNN, 2011). ‘Imagine how much more blatant (Iran’s) aggression would be if it had nuclear weapons’, said the committee chair, Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (ibid.). Some Republicans called for regime change in Iran. ‘The little fellow from the desert – Ahmadinejad – has to be replaced by his own people’, said Republican Ted Poe (ibid.).

Secrecy was sometimes necessary for Iranians to avoid being scoped and targeted under what Bousquet (2018) calls the militant gaze. Iran had to keep some nuclear scientists hidden for their own safety because Israeli intelligence regularly assassinated them. On 30 August 2012 the *Wall Street Journal* published a news story indicating that Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the ‘guru’ of Iran’s efforts to develop nuclear weapons, had returned to work after being ‘sidelined’ and hidden from public view for some years (Solomon, 2012). This marked another game of hide and seek, of
establishing the truth of Iran’s intentions through what is hidden or visible. In the UK, a journalist based in Jerusalem reported for *The Telegraph*, ‘Iran has gone to great lengths to shield Mr Fakhrizadeh from view. No known photographs of him exist in the public domain, and efforts by nuclear inspectors to interview him have always been rebuffed’ (Blomfield, 2012). This sustained a narrative of Iran as untrustworthy. Two years later, journalists drew attention again to Fakhrizadeh, ‘who had headed several of the murky government institutes that American officials say are cover organizations for a weapons effort’ (Sanger and Broad, 2014). However, Iran also sometimes publicly proclaimed their nuclear scientists, for instance in 2015 the Museum of Holy Defence and Promotion of Resistance was opened in Tehran to celebrate these “nuclear martyrs” (Black, 2015).

There is a strategic interplay, therefore, between that which is visible and hidden. Iran makes visible its commitment to a deal with the international community and to the peaceful development of its nuclear technology. At the same time, it hides scientists who are key to its nuclear industry. Yet Iran also makes visible its struggle to develop its nuclear facilities, publicly marking the “martyrdom” of its scientists assassinated by Israel.

In summary, images of Iran as alien, dangerous or secretive play out through a visual politics that reinforces antagonistic identity narratives. Spectacular terror plots -- such as a whiskey-fuelled car dealer funded by Iran’s revolutionary guards to kill a Saudi ambassador on Capitol Hill – remind us that politics can be considered a series of exchanges in a shared space of appearance (Arendt, 1963). You kill our scientists in broad daylight, we kill their ambassador the same. These actions express a visual economy akin to the economic exchange of valued goods; a clash through the tit-for-tat of symbols and images that signify something of worth (Bourdieu, 1991; Gursel, 2016; Mitchell, 2011). Each ‘side’ has shown trophy images such as power plants created or disabled. These exchanges were used to reinforce prior identity narratives. This is one more dimension of the story of the Iran deal that leaders would have to work on as they move towards an ultimate agreement. How would they put aside these visual tit-for-tats and find a different way to visualize relations? In fact, we will see very conscious strategic and tactical efforts to do so as we near 2015.
The Visuality of Cooperation

The election of President Rouhani in Iran in June 2013, having promised on the campaign trail that he would seek better diplomatic ties with the US, brought a window of opportunity for talks, and by July 2015 a deal was agreed (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016). There was a methodology of orchestration. It emerged amid contingency and the needs of actors in concrete situations facing opponents and dilemmas. They settled upon a strategy to overcome the history of “duelling monologues” and from the Geneva agreement of November 2013 to the Vienna deal of July 2015 each moved threads to a common ground: Iran would enjoy it sovereign rights and the world would be safer from geopolitical catastrophe.

This was made possible by a series of secret meetings since 2012 in Oman (Rhodes, 2018). These were not always straightforward; Europeans insisted on wine at dinner so Iranians had to eat elsewhere (Sherman, 2018). The purpose was to provide a space in which history and intentions could be explored, and any notes written on a whiteboard would be wiped to erase evidence (ibid). This supports Duncombe’s (2019) argument that the experience of emotions like disrespect and anger leads to fear and mistrust, whereas forming mutual positive emotions makes trust possible. Both sides had to put to one side antagonism that the US and UK supported a coup in Iran in 1953 or antagonism that Iran had followed a revolutionary path since it deposed its rulers in 1979. Trust could form in private meetings and be relayed to P5+1 and Iranian negotiators, such that multilateral negotiations could proceed directly towards Iran having IAEA-verified limited enrichment.

The arrival of Rouhani’s foreign policy team enabled negotiators to divide up what communication would be used in what domains (Iran policymaker interview). In backchannel talks they could deal privately with scientific, technical details. At the IAEA Iran could negotiate in terms of its enrichment rights and offer transparency to allay fears of weaponisation. At the level of P5+1 talks, the protagonists could focus on diplomatic gestures, stressing the progress being made and seeking press photographs that would symbolise that.
The UN General Assembly meeting in New York on 26-27 September 2013 would give the protagonists a first chance to perform some symbols of progress. There were by now three sets of negotiations ongoing. In New York, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif met representatives of the P5+1 on the sidelines of the main talks. Discussion focused on paths and steps; Rouhani even told journalists the talks could ‘in a short time, yield tangible results’ (CBC, 2013). Those results would come within three to six months, he said, and talks were scheduled for Geneva in October. US undersecretary of state for political affairs Wendy Sherman recalls ‘two exhilarating, historic conversations’ took place that day that marked ‘the real beginning of the Iran talks’ (Sherman, 2018: 31). First, Zarif and Kerry met publicly – and told the press this was happening. Second, Obama called Rouhani – the first time the executives of the two countries had spoken since 1979. Obama was prepared to have a photo actually meeting Rouhani, but by the time he called the Iranian president the Iranians were already setting off for the airport (Pedram, 2013; Rhodes, 2018). Rather than alter plans, Rouhani took the call and they spoke for fifteen minutes.

Through this period the porosity of media systems allowed national publics to monitor developments in other states. One State Department official we interviewed said that part of the strategic environment at this time was that countries were ‘permeable’ (US policymaker interview 1). Information about the US debate was entering Iran. At the same time, the official told us, information from Iran was reaching the P5+1 countries. Reuters had journalists in Iran such as Laura Rosen, who the official described as a good ‘shoeworn’ reporter; she had covered life on the ground in Iran for long enough to know how debates were moving there. This was new: one UK policymaker spoke of their difficulty receiving different and contradictory information from different Iranian government departments (UK policymaker interview). Now, US, Iranian and other publics could reach a more informed understanding of each other.

That monitoring of the rival’s public debate helped the protagonists play a two-level game of domestic and international opinion. Obama tried to emphasise his administration’s tough attitude towards Iran, saying the US would come down ‘like a ton of bricks’ if any company tried to evade sanctions on Iran (Gladstone, 2014d). The New York Times accompanied Obama’s words with a photograph of a long line
of Iranians queuing for food parcels in Tehran. This was a visual demonstration of the hard effects sanctions had on the Iranian economy. US leaders could “talk tough” without offending their Iranian interlocutors because each side had agreed that the other needed to use such displays to negate hardline domestic opposition to a deal (US interview 1).

The leaders learned to use public and private channels carefully. Leaders had taken to social media by late 2013 as digital diplomacy became a tool to signal both to policy elites and publics in the other countries. Prior to the October 2013 Geneva talks Zarif used Twitter to say he wanted his proposals to mark the start of the new process of reaching an agreement. Rouhani tweeted, ‘Tel Aviv upset & angry...because the Iranian nation's message of #peace is being heard better. #Iran #Dialogue’ (Rouhani, 2013). As talks ended, Zarif posted on Facebook that Iran’s proposal had offered ‘a new view, which emphasizes the need for pursuing a common goal by all players’ (Smith-Spark and Sciutto, 2013).

Despite the ongoing pressure of sanctions through 2013-15 diplomatic progress was made. Indeed, Javad Zarif announced on Facebook on 8 April 2014 that he felt behind-the-scenes talks in Vienna were so successful that all sides could begin drafting a comprehensive agreement in the next round of talks in May, though adding that talks are, as ever ‘a complicated, difficult and slow process’ (Borger, 2014a). On 15 April UN diplomats reported that Iran had complied with their commitment to reduce its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium. On 18 April President Rouhani used an army parade to make a statement that ‘we are not after war, we are after logic, we are after talks’ (Karimi, 2014). Duncombe’s (2019) analysis of Iranian leaders’ tweets shows a shift from negative portrayals of the US towards a positive self-image. This takes focus away from the material power imbalance or past grievances, hence ‘small shifts in these representations arguably strengthened positive steps towards the eventual successful nuclear deal’ (Duncombe, 2019: 184).

We would go further than Duncombe in arguing that it is not simply the refined content that helped, but that the volume and timing of social media posts was itself noteworthy because it made opposition difficult. Our focus can be on representation
but also on the force of circulation itself. It was evident that Iranian leaders were following each other on social media and, quite possibly, coordinating their messages (US interviews 1 and 2). This allowed for narrative alignment of the main Iranian players – Rouhani as President, Zarif as Foreign Minister, and Supreme Leader Khamenei. This was signalled across different media outlets. This include direct tweets for journalists and publics to pick up and share:

![Figure 3: Screenshots of Iranian leaders tweeting harmoniously](image)

We also see the visual representation of the scientific, technical and legal modes that any nuclear deal would involve. Here Foreign Minister Zarif dons a lab coat and is supported by Rouhani and Khamenei on Twitter:
The chaotic element of digital media could not be avoided altogether. In Figure 4 we see a slip from the more harmonious tone of other tweets as Khamenei insults Israel.

Zarif addressed Western policymakers directly by publishing an article entitled ‘What Iran Really Wants’ in the US journal Foreign Affairs (Zarif, 2014). The text begins with an analysis of the changing nature of power and order in international relations that reflected the system narrative in much Western thinking at the time. Solving the nuclear issue would allow Iran’s relations to be less defined by security and enable Rouhani to be more proactive in international affairs. Zarif emphasised Rouhani’s attempt to alter how other countries view Iran’s identity: ‘even a perception that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons is detrimental to the country’s security’ (ibid). Critically, Iran could not be a regional power if those in its neighbourhood viewed Iran purely through a military lens.

However, an article in the Wall Street Journal by David Albright and Bruno Tertrais on 15 May 2014 threatened to derail the talks completely (Albright and Tertais, 2014). They argued that Iran had still not addressed IAEA questions about possible weaponization. Without transparency about past activities or access to military sites
where clandestine developments were alleged to have happened, the IAEA could not have complete verification. This put Iran in a no-win situation. Either it could continue to refuse to discuss those allegations, or it could confess and contradict the Supreme Leader Khamenei’s fatwa against nuclear weapons (Borger, 2014b). Given that possession of WMD had been one reason Iraq had been invaded by the US-led coalition in 2003, admitting to developing nuclear weapons would also risk foreign intervention in Iran. In this way, a scientific matter was transferred into a geopolitical dilemma. On 16 May 2014 US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel said that, with regard to stopping the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran, the US ‘will do what we must’ (Jahn, 2014). If the November 2013 Geneva agreement had cleared a path as Iran agreed to dilute its enriched materials, the (re)emergence of the weaponization issue for Iran to resolve was, the New York Times reported, the ‘first major roadblock’ (Sanger and Broad, 2014).

Nevertheless, through late 2014 and early 2015 technical details were agreed behind the scenes while social and mainstream media were used to build wider support for a deal. The basic framework of the eventual Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was agreed on 2 April 2015. How did Obama and Rouhani narrate the agreement on a framework? Breakthrough moments allow the leading protagonists to articulate narratives across a wide horizon and to move from the technical, legal and economic details to wider worlds of geopolitics and identity.

On Friday 3 April Rouhani appeared on state television to announce that ‘Today is a day that will remain in the historical memory of the Iranian nation’ (cited in Dehghan, 2015). Rouhani projected a future in which 2 April 2015 would be a past event of national significance – part of a shared collective memory. Rouhani addressed matters of sovereignty – the world recognised Iran’s right to nuclear technology; matters of economy – ‘all economic, banking sanction and all resolutions against Iran will be lifted’; and geopolitics, for this would allow cooperation against Islamic State and other issues. In short, their joint action had given a new shape to the movement of Iran through history: ‘we have stopped a cycle that is not in the interests of anybody’, he said (cited in Al Jazeera, 2015). This opened up a horizon for cooperation and movement forward together. Mirroring the metaphorical language “if you are willing to unclench your fist” Obama had used in his January 2009 inaugural address
(Obama, 2009, Rouhani said, ‘We will extend our hands to anyone who would respect us’ (cited in Dehghan, 2015. See also Hurst, 2016).

Iran’s state television broadcast Obama’s parallel announcement the day before. On 2 April, Obama had appeared in the White House Rose Garden and, like Rouhani, spoke across the same geopolitical, security and diplomatic worlds. This was a speech designed for a domestic audience. Instead of using language to put pressure on Iran, Obama put pressure on Congress and the deal’s critics, arguing that the high politics of diplomacy trumped low electoral politics. Obama sought to demonstrate that he achieved the best possible deal at the high table, and it would be mistaken for opponents at the domestic level to derail that. He emphasised, ‘the issues at stake here are bigger than politics’ (Obama, 2015a). In other words, Obama was preparing the ground for a final deal in July.

Obama opened with a focus on security. ‘As President and Commander-in-Chief’, he said, ‘I have no greater responsibility than the security of the American people. And I am convinced that [this framework] will make our country, our allies, and our world safer’ (Obama, 2015a). Such security was being achieved through a twin track of sanctions and diplomacy – ‘the toughest sanctions in history’ and ‘tough, principled diplomacy’. Since the identity narrative of Iran in the US emphasised Iran as a security threat (Duncombe, 2019), Obama addressed this directly. Proof that security had been achieved depended on a relation between seeing, knowing and acting. Following Foucault’s principle of alethurgy, the world had to see into Iran for evidence of prohibited nuclear developments. Obama was clear that ‘this deal is not based on trust, it’s based on unprecedented verification’ (ibid). Clear vision of Iranian actions would enable, in parallel, clear vision into Iran’s character, motives and intentions. ‘If Iran cheats, the world will know it. If we see something suspicious, we will inspect it’, Obama said. Bad character would invite action. Returning to alethurgy, it is not that the priest trusts the confessing person but, ideally, that the priest can see inside the person’s mind, and discipline the person’s body if they transgress. ‘If Iran violates the deal’, Obama said, ‘sanctions can be snapped back into place’. Despite this re-iterated relation of seeing-knowing-acting, Obama could not offer complete certainty that all problems would evaporate. He stated, ‘I firmly
believe that the diplomatic option … is by far the best option’ (Obama, 2015b, italics added).

To firmly believe is not to know. Throughout his presidency Obama had used a rhetoric of ‘calculus’ in foreign policy (Obama, 2012). In X conditions, if we do Y, we will arrive at Z and suffer these costs. Obama treats a crisis as an ‘equation’ (ibid). This presents matters as always and fundamentally uncertain. By 2015 he felt on the balance of probabilities he was taking the course most likely to achieve his goals. Ultimately, though, amid uncertainty the leader must exert will. Throughout this period it was also significant that Khamenei projected support for a deal. This too served to negate domestic opposition in Iran.

The final deal signed on 14 July 2015 promised that ability to verify Iran’s actions. Iran would reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 97 percent and only enrich to 3.67 percent – a level that would not allow weaponization. The IAEA would have access to all nuclear facilities and its nuclear supply chain. Upon verification that Iran was fully complying, the P5+1 would lift all sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear developments. Sanctions related to terrorism, human rights and non-nuclear weapons would remain. The world would never know if Iran had tried to weaponize in 2003, as the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate considered. In 2015 Iran was not wholly trusted, then, but on the policy issue of its nuclear programme the P5+1 were satisfied they could establish the truth of Iran’s actions.

Conclusion

By November 2013 Obama talked about Iran reintegrating into the world (Obama 2013). Iran’s integration into that system depended on overcoming an identity narrative of Iran as untrustworthy and dangerous. Overcoming that depended on an alethurgy of weaponization, which seemed unresolvable. Obama’s political will and ability to exert power was significant. However, it was striking that P5+1 and Iranian leaders overcame visual disruption and the contingency of geopolitical, economic and security disputes to project instead a consistent visualisation of diplomatic progress. The threatening characterisations of the US and Iran could be put to one side through a focus on a nuclear deal.
We have presented evidence that the protagonists found a methodology of orchestration as they tried to project strategic narratives that would justify the deal. It was not the quality of the narratives or visual performances in themselves. What matters is how they work amid uncertainty, sometimes chaotic media dynamics, lack of evidence, and asymmetries of power – the interplay of all these processes. This shows how interests and information emerge within the context of uncertainty and gaps of knowledge and trust, and that emotional attachments help leaders decide how to act. This is why it is important to focus on narratives and the visual performances and gestures that support or undermine them. These give that qualitative sense of the character of the actors and their situation within history. This process explains how the US and Iran could trust each other just enough in 2015.

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Appendix

Table of interviewees

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