



Self-Other Constructions, Difference and Threat: U.S. and Arab ‘Othering’ of Iran

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At what point does difference between states become a threat or is perceived so? Difference is something that can be tolerated in normal relations among states, depending also on the degree and quality of difference. But in an arena of heightened alert, suspicion and past negative experiences – and especially in matters relating to security – difference can easily become threatening to various degrees. In this chapter Sybille Reinke de Buitrago analyses and compares threat perceptions and threat narratives of the U.S. toward Iran with those of Arab states toward Iran. She asks: Which self-other constructions and which threat narratives exist? Do processes of ‘othering’ become apparent? Has the Arab Spring with its turmoil and new opportunities introduced a change in perceptions and threat narratives? What are the implications for security?

Constructing ‘self’ and ‘other’, and the implications for security

At the centre of analysis are self-other constructions, threat perceptions and threat narratives in official foreign and security policy discourse from the 1980s until today both of the United States and of the Arab states of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Syria toward Iran. Threat perceptions and threat narratives, because of their constitutive effects, shape behaviour toward the other and reflect the quality of interstate relations. Identifying elements and dynamics of perceptions and narratives then allows us to better understand and reflect upon those issues that may act as barriers or as bridges in interstate relations. We may then utilize insights to improve relations with Iran and, thereby, strengthen regional security.

Despite currently improving U.S.-Iranian relations, the U.S. still perceive Iran through the lens of past unresolved trauma and resulting mistrust. The current softening of the U.S. threat narrative towards Iran, and the slightly improved image of Iran are still fragile and delimited by existing threat perceptions. Changes in perceptions and narratives were enabled by Iranian President Rouhani in 2013 expressing the willingness to negotiate on the Iranian nuclear program and offering improved relations. U.S. President Obama has recognized the good will and responded in kind. U.S. discourse has now become more conciliatory and nuanced; constructions of self and other are less shaped by opposition and dichotomy, and self-other difference has been narrowed. But discourse also highlighting past Iranian word-breaking and Iran needing to prove its good intentions points to old threat perceptions still being active. While lessened in discourse, Iran is still the threatening and opportunist ‘other’ that presents a risk to regional and global stability and security. The Arab Spring has not significantly led to a change in narrative, even if the transition is generally seen as motor of change.

Arab perceptions of Iran differ depending on particular positions and relations. At play are fears of Iranian aims for regional hegemony and nuclear weapons, as well as the aspect of Sunni-Shiite rivalry. UAE discourse shows Iran as overpowering, threatening and as internationally aggressive 'other'. The narrative is mainly driven by the UAE's island dispute with Iran and by the UAE being the weaker of the two. In UAE perspective, while the UAE show good will for cooperation, Iran acts provocatively. And while the UAE is said to need international actors such as the UN on their side, Iran can stand up to the UN, ignore international norms and refuse cooperation. The Arab Spring has not resulted in a shift of the threat narrative.

Saudi Arabian discourse portrays a corrupt and aggressive Iran that aims for regional hegemony, sponsors violence and, with nuclear weapons aspirations, threatens regional and international peace and security. Iran is furthermore represented as distorting Islam. Thus, Iran is not only made into the aggressive and dangerous, but also the degenerate and eternal other. The religious dimension may also present the greatest barrier to positive relations. In addition, Iran is blamed for making the region vulnerable to outsiders and having thus betrayed the region. The Saudi-Arabian self is constructed as responsible, cooperative and regionally stabilizing. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Saudi discourse also illustrates fears of Iran taking advantage of new opportunities for Iranian benefit and Saudi detriment.

Syrian discourse towards Iran differs due to the strategic alliance with Iran. Existing ideological differences were usually smoothed over by shared strategic and political interests. Both Syria and Iran have more to gain by tolerating their differences than by rivalry. Syrian discourse thus represents Iran as essential ally. Syrian perceptions of Iran are mostly positive, with the recognition of mutual interests, past mutual support and joint projects. Syria sees itself in the same boat as Iran, leading to recognition of their somewhat equal status. In light of the Syrian civil war and the Syrian regime currently being itself an outcast of the international community, Syria has positioned itself on the side of Iran. The Arab Spring has only added to the impetus to continue the alliance.

Thus, the U.S. as well as the UAE and Saudi Arabia see in Iran a threatening other, whereas Syria does not. The U.S. threat narrative of Iran has recently softened, but Iran is still a dangerous other. Such processes of othering are significant in sedimenting negativity in perceptions and, due to constitutive effects of discourse, also in relations. As the other is perceived more and more negative, the self is further raised and appears superior to the other, which hinders equal relations between self and other and the possibility of introducing changes in discourse and relations.

Threat perceptions, threat narratives and processes of othering expressed in U.S., UAE and Saudi discourse towards Iran have furthermore significant impact on security. Iran is securitized in U.S., UAE and Saudi discourse. Multiple actors securitizing Iran and linking a threatening Iran to developments in the region furthermore securitizes the region. As a result, regional security may be further undermined. Perceptions and narratives of threat shape interpretation and make it easier to miss or ignore small positive changes on the side of the other. And since threat perceptions delimit room for action, opportunities to improve security may not be recognized. In efforts of overcoming a cycle of negative perception, narrative and action, it takes a solid awareness as well as reflexivity of held perceptions, a recognition of positive changes on the side of the other, taking advantage of such opportunities, and a lasting political will to introduce and maintain a different self-other narrative.



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