

From Cultural Trauma to Nuclear War? Interpreting the Iranian-Israeli Conflict

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Abstract: For the past two decades Iran and Israel have been on the verge of war. This paper suggests that Iran and Israel are set on their doomsday path by a double-bind process of colliding cultural traumas. It shows that both parties are driven by deeply-traumatised national identities. The Iranians are attempting to escape from a victimhood complex that resulted from a series of colonial defeats. The Israeli threat to engage in a pre-emptive strike reflects deep fears of annihilation. Though generated by third parties, the reactions of one party toward the other only enflame the latter's trauma, creating a double-bind process of escalating crisis. Unlocking of the current trajectory toward war should take a strong grip on the cultural traumas of both parties. Resolutions should create collective narratives that mitigate the national habitus of both parties.

Keywords: International conflict, Cultural Trauma, Israel, Iran, Eliasian Theory

I very sincerely think that we live in a forest of mythologies and that at the moment one of the main tasks is to clear it away.

(Norbert Elias, quoted in van Kreiken 1998: 19)

I never use my sword where the stick suffices, nor my stick when the tongue is enough; and if it is only a thread that binds me with my opponents, it will never be broken: if they pull it, I let it; and if they relax it, I straighten it.

(Khalif Mouawia, founder of the Omayyah Dynasty in 660 A.D.)

In history, character is wrought more by suffering than by success [...] the intense gaiety of some regions, even the laughter of the inns and folk festivals still bears testimony to streams of blood and tears, to countless massacres, heart-breaking disappointments, the sacrifice of whole generations, and repeated failures and defeats.

(Oswald Spengler, On the German National Character, 1925)

Introduction

Iran and Israel are on the verge of war (Menashri 2006). Political leaders portray doomsday scenarios, army generals prepare for war, and nuclear scientists create the weapons for apocalypse. For the past few years the two countries have engaged in 'silent warfare,' exchanging blows that might escalate into a full-blown war. Both sides send messages of potency and vigour, claiming to command the necessary weapons to carry out a destructive offensive. However, analysts fear that since the basis of this escalating spiral of conflict is irrational, it could turn into a global catastrophe. As Peterson suggested some time ago, '[Israel](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Topics/Israel) [<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Topics/Israel>] and the Islamic Republic of [Iran](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Topics/Iran) [<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Topics/Iran>] [...] have grown in their ignorance, misperceptions, and demonisation of each other – and have thereby dangerously raised the risk of escalation to direct conflict' (Peterson 2010b). Indeed, with the Iranian-Israeli conflict looms great danger, and – if realised – it is likely to develop into a 'Calamitous [...] cataclysmic, not just catastrophic' regional crisis with global repercussions (quotation from Saudi prince Turki bin Faisal; see also Y. Alexander & Hoenig 2008; Parsi 2007).

Current political commentators suggest that the Iranian-Israeli conflict reflects recently changing geopolitical circumstances in the Middle East (Parsi 2007). They point out that the weakening of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Egypt has allowed Shia Iran to rise as the new power in the Middle East, taking a leadership position over Sunni countries by targeting the common Israeli enemy. Other approaches to the conflict suggest that the Iranian-Israeli conflict is an inevitable clash between Islam and the West, with Israel being the 'small devil' that should be ousted from the Middle East, together with the colonial forces of America – the 'big devil' (Bowden 2012; Huntington 1996). Standard realist accounts of the conflict, namely those based on 'security dilemma', economic and military interests and 'balance of power' are indeed highly effective in explaining the conflict and we have little critique of their merits (Y. Alexander & Hoenig 2008; Cahanovitz 2012; Menashri 2006; Parsi 2007).

Nevertheless, the present paper seeks to add to those standard geo-political interpretations by extending previous sociological heuristics for understanding the deep traumatic cultural roots of the escalating conflict between Iran and Israel. It follows early suggestions in International Relations (IR) studies to incorporate sociological insights (Wendt 1999), specifically in showing that 'security interests are defined by actors who respond to cultural factors' (Katzenstein 1996). The paper adds a missing 'emotional element' in attempts to understand the Israeli-Iranian conflict and more generally provides sociological IR studies a comparative case to think of other contexts where trauma and myths play an integral part of international conflicts (Löwenheim & Heimann 2008).

Intellectual Background and Theoretical Orientation

Our sociological interpretation of the conflict between Iran and Israel answers for recent critiques of studies of International Relations. As Linklater suggested, the study of international relations suffers from a bias of 'presentism,' namely explaining current international crises through reference to present-day geo-political interests only while ignoring long-term historical processes (Linklater 2012). Another critique of geo-political orientations in the study of IR was made by Bozeman, suggesting that 'scholarly analysts and policymakers [...] would be more successful in their respective callings if they would examine the cultural infrastructures of the nations and political systems they are dealing with' (Bozeman 2010: 6). IR studies too often neglects memory, trauma and myths as important ingredients in configurations of conflict (Bell 2006), and it is here that we enter the field.

In responding to the bias of 'presentism', the present paper exposes historical traumas and myths of creation which pre-set and emotionally pre-arm the Iranian-Israeli conflict. It also answers for IR critiques by suggesting that this conflict is exacerbated by a double-bind process of colliding cultural traumas. In what follows we first show that Iranian and Israeli leaders manipulate deeply-traumatised national identities that have little to do with each other (Eyerman, Alexander, & Breese 2011; Sztompka 2000). We then suggest that the reactions of one party toward the other only enflame the latter's trauma, creating a double-bind process of escalating crisis (Linklater 2011a; 2011b).

The following analyses rest on recent developments in the study of cultural trauma, Norbert Elias's foundational statement about 'national habitus,' and on Gregory Bateson's idea of the 'double-bind' (Bateson 1972; Dunning & Mennell 1998; Elias 1996; Giesen 2004; Kuipers 2013; Sztompka 2000). These approaches view culture and history as necessary ingredients in understanding contemporary problems. Norbert Elias suggested, indeed, that in order to understand contemporary conflicts one has to look back in history, searching for the effects of geopolitical positions, wars and defeats on national habitus (Dunning & Mennell

1998; Elias 1996). He also submitted that past events are likely to affect present politics through contemporary attempts to overcome past traumas and national humiliation.

In the present paper we extend those theoretical insights by showing how past traumas create the double-bind process of the Iranian-Israeli conflict. We surmise that leaders on both sides capitalise on the unique cultural traumas of the Iranians and the Israelis but in doing so they possibly lead both countries onto a destructive path. Crucially, both sides seem to enact cultural scripts of redemption, with leaders promising to deliver their people from the humiliation of conquest or from fear of annihilation. However, those promises of redemption ignite fears and suspicions on the other side, creating a double bind of escalating conflict (see similar ideas regarding peace with Germany in Bateson 1972).

By shedding light on those traumas and their effects, we seek to contribute to growing resources on cultural trauma, national character and international conflict. Our study of the Iranian-Israeli impasse might enlarge the scope of sociological IR studies while contributing to the comparative study of trauma, national habitus and conflict. We further hope that the present collaboration between an Iranian and Israeli sociologist will help to expose irrational ghosts which haunt the two nations, thereby fulfilling Elias's dictum to engage in the 'destruction of myths' (Krieken 1998: 7). In exposing the traumas of humiliation and annihilation we hope to bring the destructive process of the 'double bind' back under control. In this we seek to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between military tactics and the devastating effects that traumatic myths of constitution might wreak. Left unanalysed, these traumas cripple the capacity to solve the conflict in a peaceful way. We hope that our cultural analysis of these clashing traumas will therefore make an effective contribution to public sociology (Burawoy 2004).

We should outright admit that our two-country approach ignores – analytically – the broader multi-party configuration of the conflict. While Saudi Arabia, the United States and other powers are highly relevant, we seek to focus our attention on hitherto underused paths for shedding light on this global challenge. It is thus not the only perspective from which to approach this global risk. Bringing in the traumas and political myths of other players is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The following analyses use Elias's ideas of 'figurations' and extend Linklater's proposal to apply his approach in the field of international relations (Linklater 2012). As Linklater suggested, indeed:

The value of Elias's writings for that field of inquiry is overdue, particularly because his analysis of the civilising process contains many insights into how international relations over the last few centuries have influenced, and been influenced by, the larger, ongoing transformation of human society (Linklater 2011b: 48).

We provide an example for this sociological approach while showing how the Iranian and Israeli cultural traumas of humiliation and annihilation – independently of each other – have become entangled in an escalating double-bind process.

Cultural Trauma and National Habitus

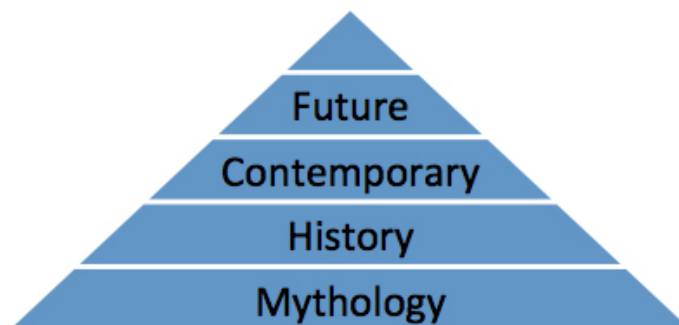
Political analysts have often criticised political and international relations theories for lacking awareness to facets of culture in international conflicts. Ross, for example, suggested that 'Cultural contributions to political analysis are relatively rare and far less developed [...] Most basically, culture is not a concept with which most political scientists are comfortable' (Ross 1997: 43). We follow Linklater's correction for this

common omission by incorporating the ideas of cultural trauma and national habitus, which were recently revived in two independent theoretical circles. One circle – mostly identified with Yale cultural sociology – highlighted the role of national trauma in creating collective identities (J. C. Alexander 2003, 2012; Eyerman 2001; Giesen 2000; 2004; Paterson 2000; Robben & Suarez-Orozco 2000; Sztompka 2000). This school argues that past cultural traumas constitute national worldviews that colour contemporary perceptions and actions (Kalberg 2004). The evolving comparative study of trauma and collective identity suggests that national trauma is a critical historical event – or a series of such events – that stands at the basis of national culture and collective identity. It is a critical turning point that sets long-term trajectories of national development (Abbott 2001). As Elias suggested, cultural trauma is a past that keeps sending expressions through people's actions even centuries after the historical event (Elias 1996).

Studies in this vein have mapped the role of trauma in different countries (Eyerman et al 2011; Kleber, Figley, & Gersons 1995) and minority groups (Paterson 2000). They show that contemporary actions emanate from critical historical events, which continue directing thoughts and actions even generations after the traumatic event has taken place. They also demonstrate that defeats and humiliating moments have long-term effects on national identities (Mock 2012). The classical statement on this theme was made by Norbert Elias. His book, *The Germans* (1996), explained Germany's effervescent enlistment into World War II and the horrors it perpetrated during the Holocaust against the background of the catastrophes of the Thirty Years' War and the experience of repeated defeats to foreign powers (Elias 1996). More generally, he argued that nations maintain memories of an historical and mythical past, and that their collective habitus responds to ancient traumas of defeat and massacre. As he said,

Quite often state or tribal social units have been defeated in [...] violent struggles and have had thenceforward to live with the certain knowledge that they will never again be states or tribes of the highest rank; that probably for all time they will be social units of lower rank. They live in the shadow of their greater past (Elias 1996: 4).

'Some states', added Kalberg, in explicating Elias's work, 'must incessantly struggle with a severe discrepancy between hopes, dreams and hard reality. This situation proves particularly burdensome for those nations that had realised national ideals in the not-too-distant past, yet in the present must acknowledge weakness and inferiority' (1992: 112). As Elias himself suggested, their traumatic past created the psychological predisposition of the Germans. In tying collective trauma and national habitus together, Elias argued that because of their past defeats, the Germans 'suffer from physical danger, begin to doubt their own intrinsic worth, feel humiliated and degraded, and are prone to wishful thinking about the revenge they would like to take on the perpetrators of this situation' (Elias 1996: 6).



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Chart 1: Cultural Trauma: Four Analytic Levels

In what follows we go beyond previous analyses of cultural trauma in suggesting four analytic levels in the constitution of trauma (see Chart 1). The first level refers to a mythic past, which can be either positive or negative (Mock 2012). Myths provide basic narratives of constitution ('Where have we come from'; 'What are our roots?'). They constitute collective identities that provide latent coherence that unifies apparent social divisions. The second level refers to recoded historical traumas – recent defeats or catastrophes that provide anchors for both memory and identity. The third level is associated with contemporary risks that people experience – war or terror attacks, for example. The last level alludes to failed collective legitimacy, namely to a sense that the future is still unsure, still pregnant with illegitimacy, risk and anxieties.

Analyses of conflict-ridden situations need to pay attention to these four levels and appreciate that history and culture are decisive in perpetuating trauma. Leaders and publics often interpret contemporary crises through the lens of myth and historical trauma, perpetuating cultural trauma while increasing doubt about the prospects of peace. Ignoring cultural traumas, therefore, is likely to allow conflicts to run their course, thereby perpetuating trauma and conflict.

The Double Bind: Explaining Escalating Conflicts

Our second theoretical orientation relies on the idea of the 'double bind'. Originally, Gregory Bateson proposed the theory in an attempt to explain schizophrenia, arguing that it is a result of contradictory communication styles in families (Bateson 1972). He argued that rather than being a genetic condition, schizophrenia results from opposing messages that confuse young people, e.g. experiencing positive verbal messages, while seeing negative bodily ones (Bateson 1972). Specifically, the double bind denotes a situation where a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other. Consequently, actors experience being wrong regardless of their response. While the theory of double bind was mostly used by psychiatrists, other researchers have extended the use of the idea of the 'double bind' to other areas, e.g. organisational behaviour (Hennestad 1990; Yair 2005).

Norbert Elias provided a macro-level rendition in using the idea of the 'double bind' in explaining escalating conflicts between two parties. His analysis suggested that conflicting parties often find that regardless of the response they choose to adopt, they are caught in contradiction. He suggested that the double-bind process refers to a mechanism of reciprocal threat and fear, which develops with time and gains a dynamic of its own. This mechanism drives two parties to threaten each other in order to remove their mutually-produced fear. However, with each threat they produce more fear on the other side. Consequently, the mechanism of the double bind escalates the conflict. Linklater added that otherwise-pacified states:

often find themselves trapped in spiralling geopolitical competition and engulfed in major war as a result. [...] Without any actor intending to bring such circumstances about, states (and particularly the great powers) find themselves entangled in geopolitical struggles that generate fear and mutual suspicion, and increase the danger of war (Linklater 2011b: 49–51).

As Norbert Elias explained:

If such a process, a double-bind process, is once set in motion, then it is exceedingly difficult to halt; it often gains a momentum of its own. It gains a self-perpetuating and very often escalating power over the people, the opposing groups which constitute it, and becomes a trap forcing each of the participating sides, out of fear of the violence of the other side, to fight each other with violence (Elias 1996: 216).

In what follows we show that the respective traumas of Iran and Israel create a unique double-bind process between them. While Iran seeks redemption from a sense of collective humiliation, the Israelis perceive the Iranian redemptive nuclear campaign as an offensive against their very existence. Fearing impending annihilation, the Israelis threaten a pre-emptive strike while enlisting the international community to impose sanctions against the Iranian nuclear campaign. However, this Israeli offensive intensifies the Iranian trauma of colonial humiliation, thereby strengthening their desire to command atomic weapons. The synchronisation between the traumas of both sides creates a double bind, a vicious circle of escalating conflict that risks global stability and peace in the Middle East. This is the kind of conflict that Thomas Scheff defined as the 'shame-rage spiral', an emotional process that – once set off – takes on a life of its own (Scheff 1994).



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Chart 2: The Exterior Ghosts that Drive the Iranian-Israeli Double-Bind

As Chart 2 shows, the double bind between Israel and Iran has been reinforced because of prior cultural traumas. Extending Elias's theory, we suggest that those traumas were generated by third parties that have minor interests in the conflict today. The ghosts of their past thus bear heavily on the current configuration between the two parties who find themselves entangled in an escalating spiral of conflict due to faraway reasons. Iran threatens Israel because of its Russian/English/American trauma; Israel threatens Iran because it speaks through the German trauma of the Holocaust. Iranian and Israeli citizens rally around their national flags and support their governments. Furthermore, because of their past traumas, the mutual orientations of the Iranians and the Israelis are emotional and vindictive – to the detriment of both sides. The crux of the conflict is that both sides espouse narratives of victimhood, and therefore keep seeing the other as the aggressor. They see one another as the expansionist aggressor that aims for regional hegemony. Their

demonic portrayals of each other create the context for a double bind. In what follows we expose the underlying logic of this trauma-laden configuration.

The Iranian Trauma: Humiliation by Colonial Invasion

The following analysis shows that the Iranians are attempting to escape from a victimhood complex that resulted from a series of colonial defeats. Remembering the glorious Persian Empire before Islam, many Iranians feel humiliated by historical colonial conquests by the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, the Russians, the British and belatedly by the American invasion in 1980 (Cahanovitz 2012; Farndon 2007). Therefore, the Iranian march to nuclearisation (Hymans 2012) might be interpreted as a post-traumatic and anti-colonial attempt to redeem autonomy. Indeed, the Iranian journey towards nuclear capacity should be seen as a resort against their fear of the re-colonisation of Iran. It has strategic value, of course, but not less importantly it is a cultural asset for revitalising national sovereignty and a sense of independence from colonial intervention (Blackwill 2012). By threatening Israel and by defying Western economic pressures, the Iranians seek to restore autonomy. They aspire to reconstitute deep national and religious layers of their identities – seeking, in other words, to redeem a sense of national pride (Farndon 2007). The Iranians are indeed victims of repeated defeats (Farndon 2007) and their national habitus is constituted by traumas of repeating humiliation. Iranian leaders venture on a fervent nuclear campaign in order to redeem Iran from its deep trauma of humiliation.

Iranians often romantically refer to the golden days of the Persian Empire before the Arab invasion (Cahanovitz 2012). Millennia ago, Persia was a world power, equivalent in stature to the Egyptian and the Greek empires, itself being highly developed in science, art and architecture. Romantically, indeed, the Iranian mythology frequently refers to heroes who blocked invasions to Persia, such as Rostam Farrokhzad blocking the Arab invasion and being beheaded in battle. Major commentators remind the Iranians that ‘they had been the masters of history. They were the capable agents of civilisation, power and leadership’ (Shariati 2006: 80). The Iranians also contrast the old days of a glorious Empire with repeated defeats and present-day victimisation by foreign powers. Because they cling to their mythic past, however, the Iranians suffer from a chronic victimisation complex which motivates them to rediscover their lost greatness.

Historically, suggest Alexander and Hoenig (2008), the geographic position of Iran has made it a chronic subject of external influence, invasion and intervention. The Iranians were victims of military defeats that had several peaks. In 664 – after millennia of Persian Empire – an Arab invasion terminated the [Sassanid Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sassanid_Empire) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sassanid_Empire] (*Tajāvōz-e Arāb*, the attack of the Arabs). Genghis Khan, leading a ferocious Mongol revenge campaign, destroyed the [Khwarezmian Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khwarezmian_Empire) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khwarezmian_Empire], burning down all Persian cities and massacring more than a million people (in 1219–21). Centuries later, colonial interventions intensified as European empires spread to the East. The Ottoman, British and Russian colonial powers had strategic interests in Iran (Cahanovitz 2012). The British government, for example, sought to protect trade routes to India, while Russia desired to expand its territory into Northern Iran. Consequently, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Russian Empire defeated Iran in several wars, and the British army did the same (1856–7). While the Iranians attempted to play the two sides against each other, they often ended up humiliated by another defeat. This contributed to the consolidation of humiliation as a national habitus. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kadschar prince Abbas Mirza provided an apt testimony for this trait. Young Mirza looked at Europe with admiration, lamenting the inferiority of Iran. In a text that still evokes emotions in contemporary Iran, Mirza asked the French envoy, Amédée Jaubert, a series of questions that testify to the Iranian habitus:

Which power triggered your dominance over us? What is the cause of your progress and of our long-lasting weakness? You are master of ruling, winning and the use of human capability, while we, like plants, are leading a slow life in shameful unawareness and without thinking about the future. Are the habitats, the fertility and the richness of the orient's earth lesser than those of Europe's? Have the radiance of the sunshine less blessing for us, although it is being radiated first on us and then on you? Is the willingness of the generous God geared towards more shares in his mercy for you? I don't believe that (quoted in Tabatabai 2006: 134).

At the turn of the twentieth century Iranian intellectuals began to develop ideas of Iranian autonomy, which sought to throw off the yoke of foreign domination in Iranian domestic politics – and later through a critique of 'the Westoxication of Iran' or 'Euromania' and 'Occidentosis' (Farndon 2007; Hanson 1983). Reza Shah, the secular ruler of Iran (1926–41) consolidated the Iranian national habitus around his attempt to redeem their honour through the romantic portrayal of Persian history and glory. Nevertheless, this attempt was short-lived. The Iranian history of defeat was repeated in World War II as well as in its aftermath. As Sick explains:

In 1941, British and Soviet forces invaded Iran in a move to forestall the growth of German influence, to secure the oil fields of Iran and to acquire a route for the transport of supplies to the Soviet Union. The British and Soviets deposed Reza Shah and installed his twenty-two-years-old son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, on the Peacock Throne (Sick 1985: 5).

The trauma of national humiliation was intensified in contemporary Iranian culture by blatant American interventions in Iran's internal affairs. The first of those traumatic interventions took place in 1953 (Kinzer 2003). The CIA and MI6 led a political coup against then secular Prime Minister Mosaddeq who headed a democratically-elected government (Gasiorowski & Byrne 2004). Following the code-named 'Ajax' coup against the democratic government of Iran, the Americans reinstated the Shah as an absolute monarch and aided his autocratic regime with arms and intelligence. This coup created 'the belief that the United States had single-handedly imposed a harsh tyrant on a reluctant populace' (Sick 1985: 6) and intensified the humiliated habitus of the Iranians.

The second American interference in Iran occurred immediately after the Islamic revolution against the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in 1979. Seeing him as the delegate of 'the great Satan,' the Iranians were appalled by the American willingness to accept the Shah for medical treatment, seeing this – a reflection of their traumatised habitus – as evidence of an American plot to reinstate him as a ruler over Iran. An Iranian guard reflected this trauma in saying, 'You have no right to complain, because you took our whole country hostage in 1953' (Peterson 2010a: 53). Khomeini's Islamic Revolution rested on this popular anti-American sentiment; and it succeeded because he promised to free the Iranians of their humiliation. After the US embassy was taken over by Iranian students, President Jimmy Carter decided to launch a military raid to free the American hostages. Though the 1980 operation Eagle Claw failed miserably, the Iranians found new proof of American intervention in their internal affairs. This event was followed by the Iraqi invasion of Iran – with Saddam Hussein's offensive against Iran backed by US military and intelligence – leading to an eight-year war (1980–1988) that caused many casualties, including by illegal weapons of mass destruction. These direct and indirect American campaigns against Iran have had the effect of strengthening the Iranian trauma of foreign intervention, prompting a profusion of conspiracy theories – by seculars and religious parties, by Shah Pahlavi and by Khomeini alike (Pipes 1996). As Hamid Dabashi, Columbia professor of Iranian History, said

in a documentary film titled *Nation of Exiles* (Bavand Karim [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm4297492/?ref=tt_ov_dr], 2010):

There is this fear of a foreign intervention that has degenerated into a pathology of conspiratorial theories because the American and the British combined their intelligence and intervened in the domestic affairs of Iran. We have become, until recently, very scared of foreign intervention, to a form of pathology, to the point of really disabling, and paralysing, conspiratorial theories; that everything that happened in our history is the work of the British and the Americans, and rightly so.

The final facet of the Iranian trauma relates to its sense of illegitimacy. Iran is a Shia country. The Shia religion shares with the Iranian habitus the myths of grand defeat. The Shia is a minority sect in the Islamic world. It was persecuted from the earliest days of Islam, and members of Shia communities maintain the memory of defeat – especially the Battle of Karbala. To this day, the Shia – mostly concentrated in Iran – maintain their minority perspective, feeling persecuted by Sunnis and other religious denominations. In this sense, there is a close affinity between the Shia and the broader cultural trauma of the Persian people. This congruence or affinity strengthens the sense of humiliation vis-à-vis repeated affronts against Iranian autonomy and sovereignty. It is unsurprising, in this context, that the religious leaders of Iran have inculcated a culture of resistance (*moqavemat*) that attempts to buttress a sense of honour by standing against the US, Israel and the West.

The abovementioned defeats and interventions in Iran have created a wounded national habitus and a damaged self-worth. This stigma or spoiled identity, in Goffman's terminology (Goffman 1974), became common amongst the majority of Iranians, especially among youth and intellectuals. Because of the cultural trauma of humiliation – fearing of being invaded and victimised again – Iranians have developed a strong need for independence. As Iranian international relations professor Mahmood Sariolghalam of Tehran National University said: 'I think what Iran and Iranians want, is recognition, power, assertiveness and a return to an Iranian – if I may use this word – Imperial days. Iranians [...] from nationalist, Islamist to secular people have an imperial mind-set' (symposium of the Council on Foreign Relations, 5 April 2006).

This attitude is longstanding. Ali Shariati, an Iranian intellectual who wrote before the Islamic revolution, prompted the Iranians to get rid of their humiliation through national renewal:

It was the revival of the soul of the nation, the renewal of unity and affinity for history, the emphasis on purity as well as on shaping values and national pride that led the alienated, subjected and oppressed nation to believing in itself again (Shariati 2006: 80–1).

The persistence of national humiliation was actually a major reason driving the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, maintained that Zionism is the culmination of the Jewish-Christian conspiracy against Islam (Litvak 2006). His anti-colonial stance ran through his long career with statements like the following:

The source for all our troubles is America. The source for all our troubles is Israel. Israel belongs to America. Our parliament members belong to America too. America bought everyone (Taheri 1985: 169).

The evil clutches of colonialism have penetrated into the depths of the great territories of the nation of the Quran; and all our great wealth and resources which although have been nationalized, are being poured into their mouths. The poisonous culture of colonialism has penetrated into the depths of the districts and villages of Islamic states...it is necessary to avail of the opportunity and think of a solution (*Sahifeh-e-Imam*, vol. 2: 322).

Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, also said recently that, 'The Islamic Revolution wiped out the oppression and the historical humiliation that was imposed on the Iranian nation, and brought about national honour and freedom for the people of Iran' (Iran Radio, Address, 3 February 2012). Earlier, on the eve of a memorial of the Islamic Revolution, he referenced the sense of humiliation once again:

Bahman the 22th, the day of victory of revolution, was the end of the humiliation of Iran. The Iranian people had been humiliated for centuries. [...] The biggest disaster for a nation is being ignored and being insulted in their own home. [...] One of the most important aims of the people's uprising was to put an end to the (alien) domination. Therefore, in those days you see that the slogans of people were directed against the USA, England, the Shah's supporters and Israel. The collective conscience of the people had always been suffering from the dominance of foreigners (10 February 2002; extracted from his website, 21 August 2012)

Notwithstanding the sense of Islamist redemption from humiliation, many Iranians are still aware of a gap between their real geopolitical standing and their aspirations for independence. Many feel that their current position as a nation leaves much to be desired, and they still seek to recreate the glorious times of the past. In their romantic longings, many Iranians perceive the pre-Islamic period as the time of greatness and power. After the Islamic Revolution and the victory over the Shah – who was suspected of being 'the agent of the West' – there was a sense of victory. However, a few years after the Islamic Revolution the sense of humiliation crept back in and many Iranians became disappointed with their new religious rulers for failing to bring change to their humiliated habitus. Indeed, the sense of humiliation, of being colonised by external forces, remained dormant, but at times becoming apparent in counter-regime actions. Many in contemporary Iran even see the clergy, Arab influences and even Islam as sources for their prevailing weakness in global matters (Hooman 2010). Opponents of the regime perceive the Islamic leadership and especially Ahmadinejad as the latest source of their national humiliation. This was especially apparent in the Green Protest after the elections of 2009. Initial signs of change following the elections of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 are yet to be carefully analysed.

There are increasing tendencies of nationalism of Iranian society, most notably amongst the youth. The persistence of humiliation is one reason for the regime's attempt to define the Iranian nuclear program as a national program – namely, bringing honour and a sense of autonomy to a persistent wounded Iranian national habitus. A survey published by the Rand Corporation in 2009 showed that Iranians provided univocal support for developing nuclear capacities for civilian use, and expressed divided support for military use. Three years later (2012), amidst Western sanctions, a [Gallup poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll/160358/iranians-feel-bite-sanctions-blame-not-own-leaders.aspx) [http://www.gallup.com/poll/160358/iranians-feel-bite-sanctions-blame-not-own-leaders.aspx] showed that 63 per cent of Iranians think their government should continue its efforts to develop nuclear capacities.

The Israeli Trauma of Annihilation: The Holocaust

The Israeli diplomatic offensive against Iran is post-traumatic just as its threat to engage in a pre-emptive strike. Israeli leaders, army generals and the lay public are driven by cultural scenarios of doom that are often associated with the Holocaust (Schwartz, Zerubavel & Barnett 1986; Yair 2011; Zerubavel 1995; 2002). Indeed, the founding fathers of Zionism portrayed Israel as the permanent solution following the long trail of Jewish exile, persecution and anti-Semitism. They envisioned an independent and strong Israel as the only solution for the Jewish predicament. However, Israel was never free of persecution or from continued attempts at annihilation. Repeated wars and promises to erase Israel from the map strengthen the Israeli existential anxiety while creating a deep sense of impending doom. Driven by this traumatic worldview, the Israelis see Iran as the new Third Reich and Ahmadinejad in the guise of Hitler. Therefore, they expect that the imminent outcome of the Iranian nuclear campaign will eventuate in a second Holocaust (Yair 2011). In this way, the ghosts of their past continue haunting the cultural psyche of the Israelis, setting them steadfastly against any real or imagined threat.

Prior studies of Israeli culture have indeed suggested that it is constituted by trauma, whether ancient or recent, historical or mythical (Abulof 2009; Ben-Yehuda 1995; Zerubavel 2002). Some scholars have directed attention to the role that the Holocaust plays in constituting Israeli culture and identity (Cohen 2011; Feldman 2008; Kidron 2010; Lazar, Litvak-Hirsch & Chaitin 2008; Resnik 2003). Others have exposed the ways in which values and ideals in contemporary Israel are constituted by Biblical roots (Ben-Yehuda 1995; Schwartz et al 1986; Zerubavel 1995). Yet other scholars have pointed to the centrality of post-trauma (D. Bar-On 2000) or to the role of perpetrator trauma (D. Bar-On 2008) on the Israeli national psyche.

Past traumas lead Israelis to perceive Iran through the cultural prism of annihilation, magnifying minor events into cataclysmic dangers. Prime Minister Netanyahu is the main speaker of the Israeli trauma – suggesting time and again that Iran aims for a second Holocaust. In 2009, for example, Netanyahu said, ‘We will not allow the Holocaust deniers to carry out another Holocaust against the Jewish people. This is the supreme duty of the state of Israel. This is my supreme duty as prime minister of Israel’ (Netanyahu in the Yad Vashem Memorial, April 2009). Netanyahu’s address at [the American Israel Public Affairs Committee \[http://www.aipac.org/\]](http://www.aipac.org/) (AIPAC) in March 2012 again focused on Iran. He once more referenced the multi-layered trauma of the Israelis in referring to the story of Zionism: ‘It is a story of a powerless and stateless people who became a strong and proud nation, able to defend itself.’ Talking to Israel’s deepest fears, he proclaimed that, ‘As Prime Minister of Israel, I will never let my people live in the shadow of annihilation.’ In his address, Netanyahu made a clear reference to the Holocaust and Auschwitz, saying:

My friends, 2012 is not 1944, the American government today is different [...] But here’s my point: the Jewish people are also different. Today we have a state of our own, and the purpose of the Jewish state is to defend Jewish lives and to secure the Jewish future. Never again will the Jewish people be powerless.

He then added that, ‘When it comes to Israel’s survival, we must always remain masters of our own fate.’

Netanyahu is not the only Israeli leader to reference the years of exile, Jewish persecution and the Holocaust in explicating Israel’s strategic actions. President Shimon Peres reiterated those traumatic lessons, as did former Defence Minister Ehud Barak. Right-wing governments do so, just as left-wing coalitions did so. This common traumatic vision – the future being held captive by past ghosts of annihilation – is also shared by Israeli generals, by people in the media and by common citizens, who remain convinced that anti-Semitism is alive and well; that threats of annihilation are imminent and real. Consequently, many adopt the ‘never again shall Masada fall’ narrative (Ben-Yehuda 1995; Schwartz et al 1986), clinging to independence, realism and standing strong against external intervention. Indeed, in an attempt to explain the Israeli strategy of

blockading Gaza, *The Economist* typified the Israeli habitus as being locked in a 'siege mentality'. As the editors suggested, 'Israel is caught in a vicious circle. The more its hawks think the outside world will always hate it, the more it tends to shoot opponents first and ask questions later, and the more it finds that the world is indeed full of enemies' (3 June 2010).

The chronic statements that Israeli leaders make about existential threats reflect and fuel fears of annihilation in the general Israeli public. For example, a recent national survey exposed that 77 per cent of Jewish Israelis believe that 'the Iranian threat constitutes an existential threat to Israel' (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs 2012). A survey by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 2008 found that young Israelis see that destruction is imminent, reporting that:

A growing number of Israeli youth – 30 per cent – believe that "Israel is under a serious threat of destruction" compared to 24 per cent in 2007, while 52 per cent said they believe "Israel is under 'a certain threat of destruction", a slight decline from 59 per cent in 2007.

A recent review of fear amongst Israelis exposed the persistence of this feeling across time and its very high levels (Bar-Tal, Halperin & Oren 2010). Overall, fear of annihilation and a constant sense of probable doom loom large in Israeli private and public spheres alike.

In a critical take against the Israeli preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear campaign Ram named the syndrome as *Iranophobia*, calling it an irrational obsession or a 'moral panic' (Ram 2009). Professor Martin Van Creveld, an Israeli military historian, buttressed this position in saying that, 'Most Israelis – because they are really afraid, or as a matter of policy – reinforce each other's' fears' (quoted by Peterson 2010b). The Israeli public is indeed bombarded with government-inflated messages about possible doom, and it responds in legitimating a hard line against Iran.

These cultural traumas indeed colour the Israeli perception of Iran; they also direct its preparation for a future clash with the Islamic regime. The past few years have generated many examples of the role that the trauma of annihilation plays in dictating Israeli actions. Repeated calls from Tehran to annihilate Israel ('Israel must be wiped off the map') awaken memories of the Nazi regime. Descriptions of Israel as a 'cancerous tumour' that is 'a stain over the Middle East' strengthen the Israeli fear of a rerun of history. Tehran's denial of the Holocaust and its statement that the Holocaust is a 'great deception' ignite Israeli anger. Its statement that Israel was founded upon 'a lie and a mythical claim' touches the innermost cultural nerves of the Israeli habitus, and Ahmadinejad's statement that 'this germ of corruption will be wiped off' reawakens old horrors. In responding to those moral assaults against their existence or legitimacy, the Israelis cling to their primordial Biblical rights in Israel and remind the world of its horrific predicament – and its power.

Unique glimpses into the fear of annihilation are also offered by the Israeli cultural scene. During the past decade, artists have represented Israel's deepest anxieties. For example, a leading Israeli theatre played *Ghetto*, *Holocaust* and *Fiddler on the Roof* – all explicitly referencing the mythological and historical roots of Israeli existential anxiety. Furthermore, television talk shows and comedies continually speak to the Israeli existential anxiety about an Iranian attack. A recent satirical presentation of 'The State of the Nation' show ended its fourth season in 2012 with a fitting message:

In the bomb we will all die together
Lying down peaceful and smiling
Even if we hated each other tremendously

In the bomb we will all die together
All Israel – a common grave

Discussion

This analysis of the interlocked cultural traumas of Israel and Iran set out to exemplify the role of cultural trauma in explaining international conflicts (Linklater 2011a; 2012; Ross 1997). In doing so we introduced ideas from the pioneering work of Norbert Elias, who suggested that the task of sociology is to shed light on mythic situations and to set people free from the ghosts of the past (Elias & Scotson 1994). 'A people's past,' he suggested, 'also points forward: knowledge about it can be of direct use in forging a common future' (Elias 1996: 20). The task of our analysis, following Kalberg's direction, was to expose how 'an idealized view of the future [is] captive of an idealized view of the past' (Kalberg 1992: 118). We suggest, indeed, that analyses of past traumas might open up new vistas for political theory, pragmatic decision-making and moral critique. By bringing into the open the Iranian and Israeli traumas we hope to show the extent to which the present conflict results from a double-bind process of interlocked traumas, where fears, hallucinations and fantasies amplify strategic interests while becoming major, if unintended, drivers into conflict (Ram 2009).

The Iranian attempt to re-create a potent sense of autonomy – responding to the trauma of repeated humiliation by foreign intervention – is leading Tehran towards nuclearisation. As Blackwill said: 'In a peculiar way, the nuclear program and Iran's national identity are fused in the imagination of many Iranians' (Blackwill 2012). The regime's post-colonial stance celebrates the autonomous capacity to create a nuclear infrastructure. Indeed, the Iranian 'leadership systematically highlights the indigenous nature of the programme and the fact that it has been achieved in spite of the hardship imposed by the "enemy"' (Ariane Tabatabai, Royal United Services Institute, 29 March 2012).

However, the Israelis perceive the Iranian nuclear strategy as a build-up process towards a second Holocaust. Consequently, the Israelis act on their own trauma with a 'never again' narrative – promising to engage in a pre-emptive strike. However, Israeli aggressiveness leads the Iranians to perceive the Israeli threat as another instance of Western colonial intervention in their internal affairs. In this context, warfare and economic sanctions have the same effect, namely national humiliation. As a result, the Iranians engage in ever-more secretive, ever-more opaque tactics – in an effort to increase their freedom of action in the international arena and their emancipation from American restrictions – thereby regaining their self-worth. The more they hide their true intentions, however, the more suspicious and aggressive the Israelis become. This creates a double-bind process, a classic catch-22 syndrome.

Paradoxically, the higher the level of perceived fear on both sides, the lower the possibility of controlling this self-perpetuating dynamic. Once the double-bind process was set into motion in the Iranian-Israeli context, it became almost impossible to sidestep. Because they read the present through the lenses of their traumatic past, both parties are driven by fantastic contents or perceptions about the other side (Linklater 2011b; Pipes 1996; Ram 2009). Some analysts suggest that both parties see ghosts and shadows rather than real dangers (Hymans 2012). Such irrational visions were described by Pipes, suggesting that:

Fears of a grand Zionist plot imply that Israel lacks ordinary state interests, and this discourages diplomacy. Israel might be seen as intent on building Greater Israel or as the great puppeteer deciding what Western states should do. In either case, conspiracy theorists have built Israel into something so large and monstrous; they cannot imagine making peace with it. Israel becomes too large to fit the Middle East and too threatening to accommodate (Pipes 1996: 28).

Commentators indeed suggest that the image the Islamic and the Zionist regimes have of each other is based on fear of invasion and traumatic imaginations of annihilation. Consequently, both parties try to dehumanise the other side (Parsi 2007). As a result, they increasingly lose the ability to estimate real threats and to react with a realistic temper (Buzan, Waeber & Wilde 1998). Hence, in order to restore their security, both sides adopt means that increase the probability of the use of violence by the other party.

This analysis should now be taken forward. Specifically, what would be the consequences – from the perspective of cultural trauma – of an Iranian/Israeli conflict? Is there a way out of this catastrophic path? Is there a way for both countries to reverse the double-bind process of escalating blows? Can they be free from the haunting spectres of national humiliation and fear of annihilation? The following notes portray few possible future scenarios.

One strategic scenario is for a pre-emptive strike by Israeli, American or coalition forces against Iranian nuclear sites. In that case, the Iranian trauma of national humiliation will be strengthened, creating deeper and more urgent motivation for Persian self-determination. The Iranians would likely seek other means – more secretive, perhaps, and more powerful than the current program – in order to redeem their defeated national identity. Another scenario is for the Islamic leadership of Iran to step back from the nuclear program. However, having invested their identity in nuclearisation, such a turn would likely be interpreted as another form of surrender to colonial powers. In other words, such a turnaround would be perceived as one more defeat in the long chain of external interventions in Iran's history. Therefore, it would likely strengthen the Iranian national humiliation too. From the perspective of cultural trauma, therefore, the Iranians seem locked in their own double bind. Whatever course of action they might adopt, they are likely to remain humiliated and defeated. Under these conditions, peaceful, rational and accommodative strategies are unlikely to arrive on the negotiation table.

Our perspective suggests that the Israelis are caught in their own double bind and are also likely to maintain their traumatised perspective. If Iran strikes – whether first or second would make little difference – the Israelis will be reassured that 'nothing is new under the sun.' They would remain convinced that the idea of a 'final solution' for the Jewish question is still valid in anti-Israeli circles; that anti-Semitism and the unquenched will to annihilate Israel or 'erase it from the map' are still pulsating deep and wide. However, the Israelis are likely to uphold those beliefs even if Iran peacefully stepped back from nuclearisation. After two decades of Iranian build-up to atomic capacities, the Israelis have identified Iran with Nazism. Consequently, a simple Iranian stepping back would leave Israelis highly suspicious of Tehran's true motivations. Just like the Iranians, then, the Israelis are locked in a traumatised past, and their future actions are most likely to respond to current strategic dilemmas through their post-traumatic worldview.

It seems, therefore, that there is a need for a new 'psychoanalysis' of this double-bind traumatic impasse. The parties need to 'transcend' simple either/or resolutions to the conflict (Galtung 2010). Such transcendence can only take place if each side engages in a reflexive analysis of its own traumas, while simultaneously acknowledging the pain, humiliation and fear of the other. In other words, the parties would only be able to transcend the military predicament to the extent that they bring into the open the ghosts which haunt them. By shedding light on those spectres, it might be possible to imagine new and peaceful means for blocking the double-bind process. Such means might enable the Iranians and Israelis to take command over their futures, having some degree of freedom within the claws of their historical traumas. While this is an unlikely endeavour, it is important to try this possible historical socio-analysis.

There are social carriers who might bring about a turnaround in this doomsday scenario. While the Iranian regime builds atomic facilities, one can still discern a strong peaceful and democratic movement in Iran. The Iranian middle class breeds resistance groups – especially those identified with the Green Protest of 2009–

2010 – which call for democratic reforms and for control over the Islamic nuclear campaign (Hooman 2010). Members of reform movements are trying to overcome the gap separating their realistic sense of national habitus and their ideal of a Persian past. They are also trying to synthesise the different layers of their identity, namely being Moslem, Iranian, and progressive at the same time. In post-revolutionary Iran, some citizens are using their traumatic past in a surprising turn: they consider Israel as a possible ally against the Arabs and their colonial representatives, namely the Shia clergy. Therefore, it is possible that non-governmental, democratic forces could lead to a turnaround in the current enmity with Israel. For this to happen, however, those counter-movements need to subvert the cultural bases of the Iranian penchant for colonial conspiracy theories.

Similarly, while the Israeli government is engaging in offensive tactics against the Iranian regime, there are significant pro-peace voices among the Israeli public too. Colonels and media leaders voice alternative assessments to the government's official line. Micro-level protests are also apparent: a popular Israeli internet campaign ('Iranians we love you'; see picture 1) set out to enlist grass-root support against war and received wide backing in both countries. Indeed, pro-peace movements in Israel have a long tradition (M. Bar-On 1996). The 'Four Mothers' protest was a main cause for the retreat of Israeli forces from South Lebanon (Lemish & Barzel 2000; Lieberfeld 2009). The 'Women in Black' movement had significant effects too (Helman & Rapoport 1997). However, right-wing reactions often setback significant peace efforts – the assassination of Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin being the most significant example (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Consequently, Israeli pro-peace movements need – as is the case in Iran – to subvert the cultural roots of fear of annihilation.



[\[/h/humfig/images/11217607.0003.204-00000003.jpg\]](https://humfig/images/11217607.0003.204-00000003.jpg)

Picture 1: The 'Iranians, We Love You' Facebook Campaign

Such a turnaround in the path of destruction definitely requires a historical and social foundation. Surprisingly, until the 1990s, Israel and Iran maintained secretive relations; until the 1970s, the two countries cooperated in modernisation projects and had cultural and sport collaborations. 'When one scratches the surface of the ferocious Israeli-Iranian enmity,' wrote Trita Parsi, 'an affinity between the two cultures emerges. In many ways they are more alike than different' (Parsi 2007: 5). We can also extend Elias's approach in saying that the two societies are similar in that they are modern, where 'the personality structure of the great majority of people forming the kind of state-societies that threaten each other with the wholesale destruction, with the mass killing and mass poisoning of a nuclear war, is entirely geared to peaceful pursuits' (Elias 1992: 157). Based upon those cultural and modern affinities, it is not unreasonable to expect a turnaround in the current stalemate between the two nations.

Nevertheless, transcending this impasse requires conscious acknowledgement of the traumas of both parties. US President Barak Obama made such an attempt in his Cairo address of 4 June 2009, titled 'On a New Beginning'. In this attempt to bring a de-civilisational process back under control, Obama openly acknowledged the traumas of both parties. He generally faulted the West for engaging in colonial projects which injured Islamic and Arab countries. He more specifically admitted the wrongs made by the USA against Iran, and invited Tehran to open new avenues to turn away from the past. While acknowledging their trauma of humiliation, he insisted that Tehran should forsake its attempt to develop nuclear weapons. As he said:

This issue has been a source of tension between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. For many years, Iran has defined itself in part by its opposition to my country, and there is in fact a tumultuous history between us. In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically-elected Iranian government. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has played a role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against US troops and civilians. This history is well known. Rather than remain trapped in the past, I've made it clear to Iran's leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward. The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build.

Obama also acknowledged the Israeli national trauma. He spoke to Israel's fears of annihilation, and criticised attempts to downplay the role of the history of persecution of the Jews or to deny the Holocaust. He said that without the Arab world and Islam acknowledging the role of the Israeli trauma, one could hardly engage in truthful peace negotiations. As he said:

Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust. Tomorrow, I will visit Buchenwald, which was part of a network of camps where Jews were enslaved, tortured, shot and gassed to death by the Third Reich. Six million Jews were killed - more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, it is ignorant, and it is hateful. Threatening Israel with destruction - or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews - is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve.

As several commentators suggested, however, the US is unlikely to play the role of an objective negotiator between Iran and Israel (Y. Alexander & Hoenig 2008; Gasiorowski & Byrne 2004; Parsi 2007; Sick 1985). The Iranian memory is not only better than American administrations tend to maintain - it is also annexed to the mythical and historical traumas of colonial intervention and the Iranian national humiliation. Israel too is unlikely to embrace American gestures uncritically. Therefore, the American belief that it is possible to embark on 'a new beginning', one based on future interests but without addressing the cultural traumas of both parties, is naïve (Mennell 2007). To this day, both sides view the collective trauma of the other as a 'security issue' and not as one of interrelated fear and trauma (Buzan et al 1998). Without a cultural analysis, future-facing programs that are set to de-securitise the conflict are unlikely to undo the double-bind process that locks the Iranians and the Israelis in their path toward the violent recreation of their traumas.

Such unlocking of the current trajectory toward war should take a strong grip on the cultural traumas of both parties. Resolutions should create collective narratives that mitigate the national habitus of both parties. Substantially, the Iranians would need reassurance concerning their sovereignty; they need to feel that they freely choose their actions, without international intervention, extortion or pressure. At the very least, they

need to no longer feel humiliated; they even need to feel trusted and appreciated. The Israelis, on their part, need to hear clear voices from Iran – voices that repeal the promises of annihilation, that revoke past challenges to Israel's legitimacy and future existence. They would also seek the hard facts to show that there are no hidden, underground programs that create conditions for the materialisation of past promises of their annihilation. As Obama suggested, future resolutions must come to terms with the traumas of both parties. However, the time span for this recognition is millennial and negotiators should deal with the fundamentals of national trauma, collective identity and mythic aspirations for redemption.

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Biographies

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