

# Twitter and transformative diplomacy: social media and Iran–US relations

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On 12 January 2016 two US Navy patrol boats wandered into Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf. Iranian military forces detained the ten mariners on board on Farsi Island. Parallels were quickly drawn between Iranian actions in this instance and the similar episode in 2007 when British sailors and marines entering Iranian waters were detained for over two weeks.<sup>1</sup> A swift resolution seemed extremely unlikely, particularly given an incident in December 2015 when an Iranian military vessel fired on a number of ships including a US aircraft carrier and destroyer.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, remarkably, by the next morning Iran had released the two vessels and their crews. While some suggested the quick resolution was due to gains made through US President Obama's strategy of engagement with Iran, others such as Senator John McCain suggested that such an inference was 'ludicrous' and that the 'administration's craven desire to preserve the dangerous Iranian deal at all costs evidently knows no limit'.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of opinion on how it came about, the swift and peaceful solution to the intrusion into Iranian sovereign territory by US sailors came as a surprise to many. Even Secretary of State John Kerry, himself a key figure in diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the mariners, alluded to the unprecedented nature of Iran's decision, stating: 'We can all imagine how a similar situation might have played out three or four years ago.'<sup>4</sup> Kerry and his counterpart in Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, were central to the surprising release of the US sailors, speaking on the phone at least five times in the hours immediately following the incident and announcing the successful outcome

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, 'Iran's swift release of US sailors hailed as a sign of warmer relations', *New York Times*, 13 Jan. 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/world/middleeast/iran-navy-crew-release.html?action=click&contentCollection=Middle%20East&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 16 Feb. 2017.)

<sup>2</sup> *Guardian*, 'US accuses Iran of conducting "highly provocative" rocket test near warships', 30 Dec. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/30/us-accuses-iran-of-conducting-highly-provocative-rocket-test-near-warships>.

<sup>3</sup> McCain quoted in Sanger et al., 'Iran's swift release'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Iran's Revolutionary Guards release 10 US sailors detained after straying into territorial waters', ABC News, 14 Jan. 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-13/iran-revolutionary-guards-release-us-sailors/7087470>.

on Twitter. Kerry posted that the ‘peaceful and efficient resolution of this issue is a testament to the critical role diplomacy plays in keeping our country secure and strong’, while half an hour later Zarif stated that he was ‘happy to see dialog and respect, not threats and impetuosity, swiftly resolved the #sailors episode. Let’s learn from this latest example’.<sup>5</sup>

These exchanges are significant because they illustrate vividly the growing role Twitter has come to play in contemporary diplomacy. Not only was Twitter used to communicate the positive outcome; the ability of Kerry and Zarif to communicate so freely—a ‘relatively new’ but ‘extraordinarily important’ situation<sup>6</sup>—is arguably the result of a relationship built through both personal interaction and sustained Twitter communication during the P5+1 nuclear negotiations between 2013 and 2015. Given the difficulties of high-level diplomatic interaction between Iran and the United States since the severing of diplomatic ties in 1980, social media have become a significant platform on which diplomats can communicate.

Social media are thus changing the space within which diplomacy unfolds. Yet diplomacy in all its complexities continues to be perceived as grounded in personal interaction. Recently the renaissance of diplomacy as an academic subject has seen an increase in studies on its practices and the competing roles of structure and agency in its culture and traditions, exploring the pivotal role of political leadership in reaching diplomatic breakthroughs.<sup>7</sup> Important contributions from neuroscience suggest how we can understand this ‘mind–body and ideational–materialist divide’.<sup>8</sup> Yet these analyses concentrate on the individual and interpersonal aspects of diplomacy, rather than exploring the new technology through which diplomacy unfolds. An emerging body of work contributes to understanding the powerful role of technology in world affairs by positioning cyberspace as the new frontier of warfare, identifying technological dimensions of threats to security moving beyond terrorism and into the realm of governance.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have ventured beyond the idea of technology challenging state sovereignty to examine the power of social media in contemporary statecraft, in what they term ‘e-diplomacy’ and ‘digital diplomacy’.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in focusing on social media and public diplomacy such studies give only very limited attention to the tools diplomats employ in their day-to-day engagement with their counterparts.

The question of how social media facilitate interstate dialogue has not yet been given sufficient attention. There is also a corresponding dearth of empirical studies

<sup>5</sup> ‘Iran’s Revolutionary Guards’.

<sup>6</sup> Sanger et al., ‘Iran’s swift release’.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Holmes, ‘Diplomacy after policy-making: theorizing hyper-empowered individuals’, *International Studies Review* 17: 4, 2015, p. 708.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Holmes, ‘International politics at the brain’s edge: social neuroscience and a new “via media”’, *International Studies Perspectives* 15: 2, 2014, p. 221; Jonathan Mercer, ‘Emotional beliefs’, *International Organization* 64: 1, 2010, pp. 1–31.

<sup>9</sup> Julien Nocetti, ‘Contest and conquest: Russia and global internet governance’, *International Affairs* 91: 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 111–30; Rex Hughes, ‘A treaty for cyberspace’, *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 523–41.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Seib, *Real-time diplomacy: politics and power in the social media era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, *Digital diplomacy: theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2015); Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst, *Understanding international diplomacy: theory, practice and ethics* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 161–5; Nigel Gould-Davies, ‘Review article: the intimate dance of diplomacy: in praise of practice’, *International Affairs* 89: 6, Nov. 2013, p. 1464.

on this issue, despite a growing policy focus on digital diplomacy. Two questions arise here. First, how effective are social media in developing interpersonal trust between individual diplomatic counterparts? Second, can this medium be an effective platform for dialogue when traditional face-to-face diplomacy is difficult? Understanding the increasingly prominent and powerful, yet largely unknown, variable of social media as a tool of diplomatic practice provides insight into the recurrent question of how diplomats effect change beyond upholding the status quo in the international order.

If diplomacy is the 'art of communication',<sup>11</sup> then Twitter is another platform for dialogue between states. Yet this technology challenges traditional notions of diplomacy according to which it occurs through formal channels of communication and informal face-to-face social engagements. Diplomats are increasingly relying on Twitter in their daily practice to communicate with their counterparts. These exchanges occur in front of a global audience, providing an added level of scrutiny that is unique to this form of communication.

This article seeks to fill a gap in the study of digital diplomacy by examining how Iranian Twitter posts in the lead-up to the 2015 nuclear deal helped Iran to indicate its intention to work towards a positive outcome, an intention that was key to the successful implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Previous work on the Iranian nuclear issue has shown how openings towards *rapprochement* were closed off by political and security considerations on both sides. For instance, the call by former Iranian President Khatami for a 'dialogue of civilizations' corresponded with the relaxation of US sanctions against Iran under the Clinton administration. However, a few years afterwards, and despite Iranian expressions of sympathy following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration labelled Iran as part of the 'axis of evil', prompting Iran to invest massively in its nuclear programme and triggering wide-ranging concerns in the West as to the true nature and purpose of its development. From 2002, when the existence of a heavy water reactor in Arak and a uranium enrichment plant in Nantaz were first publicized, until 2013, both the Bush and the Obama administrations followed the 'basic American formula for dealing with Iran since 1979':<sup>12</sup> that is, attempts to curtail Iran's development of its nuclear programme, involving various 'sabre-rattling' threats of military invasion or statements of 'official reluctance to contemplate such an outcome', and the imposition of increasingly harsh US and UN sanctions against Iran, with limited success.<sup>13</sup>

Explanations of Iran's agreement to the surprisingly successful JCPOA suggest that Tehran's strategy of nuclear hedging ultimately reached the limits of the state's feasible development of its nuclear programme.<sup>14</sup> A key component of these

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Investigating diplomatic transformations', *International Affairs* 89: 2, March 2013, p. 477.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Takeyh and Suzanne Maloney, 'The self-limiting success of Iran sanctions', *International Affairs* 87: 6, Nov. 2011, p. 1298.

<sup>13</sup> Wyn Q. Bowen and Joanna Kidd, 'The Iranian nuclear challenge', *International Affairs* 80: 2, March 2004, pp. 257–76; Adam Quinn, 'The art of declining politely: Obama's prudent presidency and the waning of American power', *International Affairs* 87: 4, July 2011, pp. 817–18; Wyn Q. Bowen and Jonathan Brewer, 'Iran's nuclear challenge: nine years and counting', *International Affairs* 87: 4, July 2011, pp. 923–43.

<sup>14</sup> Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran, 'Living with nuclear hedging: the implications of Iran's nuclear strategy',

analyses concerns Iranian identity and how this has influenced its hedging strategy and stance of nuclear defiance.<sup>15</sup> Core aspects of Iranian identity are well understood—its desire for independence, perception of justice and resistance to western dominance, and the interplay of Persian heritage and revolutionary Shi'ism.<sup>16</sup> Iran effectively integrated the dual-track strategy employed by the United States into its self-image of resistance to western interference and strengthened sovereign independence and progress.<sup>17</sup> The question arises here of how, given the strong ideational character and domestic popularity of its nuclear stance, Iran came to agree to the JCPOA. Nevertheless, concern has continued to focus on how to contain Iran at a sufficiently low level of latency, minimizing hedging risks and regional proliferation, rather than turning to examine what precisely has changed on the Iranian side to allow this agreement to come to fruition.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that the role of Twitter as a key part of negotiating strategy is a crucial demonstration of how social media can shape the struggle for recognition, and thereby legitimize political possibilities for change. Recognition provides a positive affirmation of identity that maintains an actor's self-esteem.<sup>19</sup> Our identity is formed through reflexive patterns of how others recognize us. When a state believes it is recognized in a way that is different from how it represents itself, it may engage in a 'struggle for recognition' to convince others it should be represented, and recognized, in a different way.<sup>20</sup> Social media are implicated in this intersubjective policy–identity process. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among other user-generated sites, effectively 'cultivate communities of identity performance that reaffirm more than question' the parameters of state identity.<sup>21</sup> Statements made on social media can reflect 'us and them' demarcations, framing state identity and difference and a state's desire for recognition from others. How a state represents itself and recognizes others via social media can make particular foreign policy options possible and rule out others.

If we are attuned to shifts in representational patterns communicated through Twitter during high-level negotiations as part of the struggle for recognition, we can also ascertain political possibilities for change earlier than might normally be the case. Prior to the advent of social media, diplomacy largely enjoyed a 'cushion of time' between manoeuvre and response.<sup>22</sup> The collapse of space and time brought about by these new channels of instant communication has added to

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*International Affairs* 91: 4, July 2015, pp. 687–707.

<sup>15</sup> Wade L. Huntley, 'Rebels without a cause: North Korea, Iran and the NPT', *International Affairs* 82: 4, July 2006, p. 735.

<sup>16</sup> See Constance Duncombe, 'Representation, recognition and foreign policy in the Iran–US relationship', *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 3, 2016, pp. 622–45; Manuchehr Sanadjian, 'Nuclear fetishism, the fear of the "Islamic" bomb and national identity in Iran', *Social Identities* 14: 1, 2008, pp. 77–100.

<sup>17</sup> Takeyh and Maloney, 'The self-limiting success of Iran sanctions', p. 1306; Dina Esfandiary and Arine Tabatabai, 'Iran's ISIS policy', *International Affairs* 91: 1, Jan. 2015, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Bowen and Moran, 'Living with nuclear hedging'; Huntley, 'Rebels without a cause'.

<sup>19</sup> Duncombe, 'Representation, recognition and foreign policy'.

<sup>20</sup> Duncombe, 'Representation, recognition and foreign policy'; Erik Ringmar, 'Performing international systems: two East-Asian alternatives to the Westphalian order', *International Organization* 66: 1, 2012, pp. 1–25.

<sup>21</sup> Craig Hayden, Don Waisanen and Yelena Osipova, 'Facilitating the conversation: the 2012 presidential election and the public diplomacy of US social media', *American Behavioral Scientist* 57: 11, 2013, p. 1635.

<sup>22</sup> Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, p. 86.

the complex environment in which diplomacy occurs. Contemporary diplomacy is characterized by greater frequency of communication and wider dispersal of information through social media. Diplomats and political leaders will often have limited time to digest and evaluate information posted on social media.<sup>23</sup> What results is a slow realization of change, as the nuances of social media communication may be overlooked due to time constraints.<sup>24</sup> Yet if Twitter posts are examined closely as another vehicle for information in addition to official policy statements, we can begin to see how possible openings for dialogue have formed over time.

I build my argument in three steps. First, I examine International Relations (IR) approaches to social media and diplomacy. Overall the literature neglects to examine fully how states use social media to connect with one another beyond public diplomacy. Second, I analyse the recent intervention of neuroscience in IR regarding face-to-face diplomacy. In doing so I suggest that social media are key to developing a level of trust that might otherwise be difficult to attain, particularly when face-to-face diplomacy is challenging. Third, I illustrate my conceptual argument by examining Iranian Twitter posts by President Rouhani, Supreme Leader Khamenei and Foreign Minister Zarif between May 2013 and July 2015, the period spanning the final stages of the P5+1 negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, I demonstrate that Twitter use by Iranian state representatives allowed for recognition framed through positive representations of both Iran and the United States, a significant shift from previous Iranian representation–recognition dynamics. This shift indicates that political possibilities for change were evident before the deal was implemented and despite recurrent tensions during the negotiations. Finally, I suggest that the correlation between Twitter use and the implementation of the successful nuclear deal illustrates the need for greater understanding of how social media potentially shape and transform diplomacy and political possibilities for change.

## **International Relations, social media and the state**

States have increasingly been employing social media as part of a more interactive engagement with foreign publics. Yet state-to-state diplomatic engagement through social media remains underexamined, despite being 'often implicitly present in many arguments' in IR literature.<sup>26</sup>

IR scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of social media in world politics.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, most focus either on the 'two-way street' dynamic of communication in relation to greater agency for the individual in interna-

<sup>23</sup> Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Although Rouhani's and Khamenei's staff generally tweet for them, these tweets can be considered representative of the principals' views on the P5+1 negotiations.

<sup>26</sup> Stefan Fritsch, 'Technology and global affairs', *International Studies Perspectives* 12: 1, 2011, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> See Gould-Davies, 'Review article', p. 1464; Simone Molin Friis, "'Beyond anything we have ever seen": beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS', *International Affairs* 91: 4, July 2015, pp. 725–46.

tional affairs, or on the impact of social media on the processes of public diplomacy wherein policy-makers seek to influence foreign publics. Both refer to the widespread and 'converging set of technologies' that include user-generated consumer content-driven platforms and micro-blog sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.<sup>28</sup> Social media constitute an important technological tool that has material power precisely because of how its users employ it, similar to any other technology.<sup>29</sup> Thus they are implicated not only in the increasing political empowerment of the individual, but also in the relationship between policy-makers and their domestic and foreign publics.

Scholars in IR and public diplomacy have more recently turned their attention to social media engagement with foreign publics. Public diplomacy is a tool of foreign policy that is centred on diplomatic engagement with other publics. It is an important aspect of the development of a state's international reputation, used to persuade and influence foreign publics according to the particular agenda of that state. The power of reputation, and the connected pursuit of a particular status, has long been a focus of IR scholars because reputational aspirations are directly implicated in justifications for war.<sup>30</sup> What has changed in such approaches is an acknowledgement that domestic and foreign publics are key to the pursuit and attainment of reputation and status. With publics more informed about foreign policy-making through online networks, the power of the audience has increased with the amplification of its ability to 'confer acceptance of actors' authority and [its] participation in the diffusion of communicative power'.<sup>31</sup> Put simply, publics matter in policy-making even more since the end of the Cold War precisely because of the highly mediatized environment within which foreign policy-making occurs. A state's pursuit of certain ends through particular means is quickly and easily debated by domestic and foreign publics alike, given the speed and diversity of social media channels of communication.<sup>32</sup> As Nicholas Cull argues, the significance of public opinion in foreign policy-making is largely attributable to this 'communications revolution'.<sup>33</sup>

Yet only rarely, and recently, have scholars ventured into the realm of traditional diplomacy to examine the power of social media in contemporary state-

<sup>28</sup> Manuel Castells, *The rise of the network society. The information age: economy, society, and culture* (New York: Wiley, 1996), p. 30; Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, pp. 9, 2–3; Nicholas J. Cull, 'The long road to public diplomacy 2.0: the internet in US public diplomacy', *International Studies Review* 15: 1, 2013, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, p. 3; Manuel Castells, *The power of identity. The information age: economy, society, and culture* (New York: Wiley, 2011); Fritsch, 'Technology and global affairs', p. 39; James Der Derian, 'Global events, national security, and virtual theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30: 3, 2001, pp. 669–90; Sadaf R. Ali and Shahira Fahmy, 'Gatekeeping and citizen journalism: the use of social media during the recent uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya', *Media, War and Conflict* 6: 1, 2013, pp. 55–69.

<sup>30</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Unipolarity, status competition, and Great Power war', *World Politics* 61: 1, 2009, pp. 28–57; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon and Paul Huth, 'Reputation and status as motives for war', *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, 2014, pp. 371–93; Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Revisiting reputation: how past actions matter in international politics', *International Organization* 69: 2, 2015, pp. 473–95.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Ellen Graham, 'Emotion and public diplomacy: dispositions in international communications, dialogue, and persuasion', *International Studies Review* 16: 4, 2014, p. 522.

<sup>32</sup> Fritsch, 'Technology and global affairs', p. 34; see also Jan Melissen, *Beyond the new public diplomacy* (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2011); Hayden et al., 'Facilitating the conversation'; Tim Aist-ropo, 'Social media and counterterrorism strategy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70: 2, 2016, pp. 121–38.

<sup>33</sup> Cull, 'The long road to public diplomacy 2.0', pp. 124–5.

craft, in what they term ‘digital diplomacy’.<sup>34</sup> What these studies show is that digital outreach through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook enhances the reach of communication campaigns, although the effectiveness of this engagement (and the continued one-way street of communication) is still debated. Within the small but increasing engagement with ‘Diplomacy 2.0’,<sup>35</sup> specific communication practices—the ‘symbols, appeals and discursive moves that sustain such relations within networked environs of new public diplomacy’—remain vague.<sup>36</sup> There are different facets of diplomacy—linguistic and symbolic images that certain actors project as part of their image management—that are becoming increasingly central to managing changing power dynamics. These symbolic elements—which represent how a state wishes to be recognized by others—have become a progressively important part of diplomatic engagement: so much so, in fact, that T. Camber Warren asserts that modern states are built not only on ‘force and wealth’, but also on their capacity—through social media technology such as Twitter—to ‘more effectively communicate normative demands for state loyalty and national unity’.<sup>37</sup> These demands, I suggest, are couched within the struggle for recognition.<sup>38</sup>

Still, there remains a very limited consideration of the tools these various diplomats employ in their day-to-day engagement with their others. The full capacity of diplomacy as a tool for change, rather than just management of the status quo, is thereby largely overlooked.

I suggest that social media and diplomacy interact on two planes: top-down, from state policy-makers to foreign publics; and horizontally, between state policy-makers and their counterparts. Some scholars would suggest that the nebulous nature of public diplomacy encompasses this state-to-state dynamic. I believe this is not the case: there is an overwhelming focus on top-down approaches in relation to how states manipulate their domestic and foreign publics, but comparatively very little conceptual and empirical consideration of the horizontal plane. Of critical importance to this latter dimension is the capacity of Twitter to frame representations of state identity that are integral to the struggle for recognition, easily accessible and quickly disseminated to diplomatic counterparts. Ignoring this aspect of social media in the practice of diplomacy thus overlooks a significant aspect of state interest that is key to effective negotiating strategies and political possibilities for change.

<sup>34</sup> Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, pp. 120–21; Corneliu Bjola, ‘Diplomacy as a method of change management’, *Digital diplomacy: theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 3–4; Gould-Davies, ‘Review article’.

<sup>35</sup> Cull, ‘The long road to public diplomacy 2.0’, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> Hayden et al., ‘Facilitating the conversation’, p. 1627; see also Bjola, ‘Diplomacy as a method of change management’, pp. 4–5; Seib, *Real-time diplomacy*, p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> T. Camber Warren, ‘Not by the sword alone: soft power, mass media, and the production of state sovereignty’, *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Nel, ‘Redistribution and recognition: what emerging regional powers want’, *Review of International Studies* 36: 4, 2010, pp. 951–74; Ringmar, ‘Performing international systems’.

## Trust, Twitter and transformative diplomacy

In this section I analyse the nascent IR literature on face-to-face diplomacy and ‘costly signalling’, which makes important contributions to understanding the intricacies of trust development in diplomacy during political crises. Despite such multidisciplinary approaches, there has hitherto been no deeper examination of how we might employ this knowledge in situations when personal, face-to-face contact at the ‘highest level’ of diplomacy is difficult to achieve. In such circumstances, Twitter can be a useful communication tool. Continuing to focus on the individual overlooks the new tools available in the everyday practice of diplomacy, which allow for potential intuition of another’s intentions through representation.

Interpersonal interaction is extremely important for diplomatic practice.<sup>39</sup> Communication through face-to-face diplomacy can alleviate diplomatic crises through the development of interpersonal trust.<sup>40</sup> A feeling of trust between adversaries can make manoeuvres for peace, or even threats to respond with military action, seem more credible.

Although IR has traditionally been hesitant to accord great weight to emotions and emotional dispositions as key elements of international politics, in recent years the ‘emotional turn’ has seen a proliferation in work that situates emotions and affect at the heart of understandings of global politics.<sup>41</sup> Rational judgement relies on how we feel about a particular actor, situation or experience: ‘optimal “rational” judgement in fact depends, fundamentally, on an emotional system, which informs us, physically, about how we feel about the choices we confront’.<sup>42</sup> Not only are emotions central to rationality and cognition; they are also implicated in how and what we believe.<sup>43</sup>

One way we can understand how emotions are implicated in rational judgement is by analysing the brain. Recent work on mirror neurons provides a deeper understanding of the psychology of emotional dispositions, and how this influences personal communication. While such work is not new to the world of neuroscience and psychology, scholars have begun to draw on this research in IR and political science.<sup>44</sup> As Marcus Holmes suggests, ‘brain structures affect social

<sup>39</sup> See Seanon S. Wong, ‘Emotions and the communication of intentions in face-to-face diplomacy’, *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 1, 2015, pp. 144–67; Marcus Holmes, ‘The force of face-to-face diplomacy: mirror neurons and the problem of intentions’, *International Organization* 67: 4, 2013, pp. 829–61; Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, ‘The personal touch: leaders’ impressions, costly signaling, and assessments of sincerity in international affairs’, *International Studies Quarterly* 56: 3, 2012, pp. 560–73; Keren Yarhi-Milo, ‘In the eye of the beholder: how leaders and intelligence communities assess the intentions of adversaries’, *International Security* 38: 1, 2013, pp. 7–51.

<sup>40</sup> Wheeler, ‘Investigating diplomatic transformations’, p. 479.

<sup>41</sup> See Paul Saurette, ‘You dissin me? Humiliation and post 9/11 global politics’, *Review of International Studies* 32: 3, 2006, pp. 495–522; Emma Hutchison, *Affective communities in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

<sup>42</sup> Rose McDermott, ‘The body doesn’t lie: a somatic approach to the study of emotions in world politics’, *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, p. 558.

<sup>43</sup> Mercer, ‘Emotional beliefs’; Holmes, ‘International politics at the brain’s edge’, p. 222; McDermott, ‘The body doesn’t lie’, p. 558; Yarhi-Milo, ‘In the eye of the beholder’, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> See Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ error: emotion, reason and the human brain*, 2nd edn (New York: Penguin, 2005); Holmes, ‘International politics at the brain’s edge’; Holmes, ‘The force of face-to-face diplomacy’;



behaviour and social behaviour affects brain structure: the two represent a constitutive and dynamic relationship'.<sup>45</sup> The concept of 'neuroplasticity' allows us to understand that behaviour influences the structure of the brain and vice versa, particularly when considering the intersubjective effects of social and biological mechanisms on emotions and emotional dispositions.<sup>46</sup> The practice of face-to-face diplomacy is where we see the contribution of social neuroscience and 'neuroplasticity' in IR take shape.

Face-to-face diplomacy is thus an important signalling mechanism, unique in world politics.<sup>47</sup> We can never really know what is going on in the mind of another person. Yet we can intuit what others may be thinking or feeling through the impressions we gain from personal interactions.<sup>48</sup> When one person meets with another a connection is established through mirror neurons that replicate, or mirror, 'what is going on in each partner's head'.<sup>49</sup> This replication allows a person to grasp how another might be thinking or feeling in response to a particular event, or when talking about a specific topic.<sup>50</sup> Not only can such replication offer us access to how someone else might be thinking or feeling; mirror neurons also allow one person to assess whether or not the other person is attempting to deceive them.<sup>51</sup> This measuring of intentions is a key facet of diplomacy: 'individuals simulate the specific intentions of others in face-to-face contexts'.<sup>52</sup> Personal meetings can therefore make 'a material difference in intention understanding'.<sup>53</sup> In fact, diplomats and leaders are more likely to make decisions on the basis of 'vivid' information that is 'personalized and emotionally involving' than they are to rely on the strategic calculations of their state's intelligence community.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, state leaders determine the credibility of both allies and adversaries on the basis of their own personal impressions, which are informed by feelings about the other.<sup>55</sup>

What happens, then, when personal impressions are developed at one remove? One way we can attempt to intuit another's credibility is through representation. Representation—the construction of signs, signals, symbols and language to convey understanding of the world around us—is part of the performance of identity. The representations we use to communicate with one another set out a particular framework of who we are—and who our others are—at any

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Renée Jeffrey, 'The promise and problems of the neuroscientific approach to emotions', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 584–89; Jonathan Mercer, 'Feeling like a state: social emotion and identity', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 515–35.

<sup>45</sup> Holmes, 'International politics at the brain's edge', p. 210.

<sup>46</sup> McDermott, 'The body doesn't lie', p. 559; Jeffrey, 'The promise and problems of the neuroscientific approach to emotions', p. 587; Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', p. 830.

<sup>47</sup> Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', p. 830.

<sup>48</sup> Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 'The personal touch', p. 560.

<sup>49</sup> Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', p. 830.

<sup>50</sup> Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', pp. 830–39; Chris Walsh, *Cowardice: a brief history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Marco Iacoboni, 'Imitation, empathy, and mirror neurons', *Annual Review of Psychology* 60, 2009, p. 666.

<sup>52</sup> Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', p. 839.

<sup>53</sup> Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy', p. 840.

<sup>54</sup> Yarhi-Milo, 'In the eye of the beholder', p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 'The personal touch'; Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy'.

given time.<sup>56</sup> Foreign policy works in the same way—it is socially and politically constructed through language. It is possible, therefore, to perceive how a particular reality is socially performed on the part of a state, because of the intertwined ontological connections between policy and identity.<sup>57</sup> Such identity parameters therefore provide particular avenues for foreign policy, whereas other options are precluded. Social media are implicated in this intersubjective policy-identity process as states express representations of themselves they desire to be recognized. Using Twitter to express particular concerns through representations of identity may also provide an element of distance that helps to reduce tension before it becomes a crisis.

Consider the acrimonious Twitter exchange between Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu in November 2015 during the EU–Turkey refugee summit. Tsipras used Twitter to criticize Turkey’s continued violation of Greek airspace and its perceived unwillingness to help the thousands of refugees crossing the Aegean Sea each day. Tsipras tweeted: ‘To Prime Minister Davutoğlu: Fortunately our pilots are not as mercurial as yours against the Russians #EUTurkey’.<sup>58</sup> Davutoğlu, in return, tweeted that ‘Comments on pilots by @tsipras seem hardly in tune with the spirit of the day. Alexis: let us focus on our positive agenda’. Against the background of the complex summit agenda, Tsipras’s taking the time to ‘publicly troll’ the Turkish Prime Minister marks quite an unusual diplomatic manoeuvre.<sup>59</sup> Although his tweets were eventually deleted from his English-language account (remaining on his Greek handle), Tsipras had the last word with a final tweet: ‘We are in the same neighborhood and we have to talk honestly so we can reach solutions #EUTurkey’. Tsipras used Twitter to criticize Turkish actions through representations of the state as unpredictable and volatile.<sup>60</sup> Davutoğlu resisted this recognition of Turkish identity and instead represented Turkey as a ‘good Euro-Muslim actor’, laying claim to common regional interests.<sup>61</sup> In doing so, he avoided escalating tension into conflict between Greece and Turkey.

While we cannot discount the possibility of Davutoğlu and Tsipras meeting face to face at the summit prior to or during this Twitter exchange, we can see how policy-makers increasingly employ Twitter alongside formal meetings to reach out directly, and publicly, to their counterparts. The space restrictions of Twitter force targeted communication around an issue of interest to a desired

<sup>56</sup> Ty Solomon, ‘The affective underpinnings of soft power’, *European Journal of International Relations* 20: 3, 2014, pp. 720–41; Jennifer Milliken, ‘The study of discourse in international relations: a critique of research and methods’, *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 2, 1999, pp. 225–54.

<sup>57</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as discourse: discourse analysis and the Bosnian war* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1, 15.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Tsipras in Twitter outburst after Turkey downs Russia plane’, BBC News, 30 Nov. 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34962348>.

<sup>59</sup> Rob Crilly, ‘Alexis Tsipras trolls Turkish prime minister on Twitter’, *Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/12024065/Greek-prime-minister-trolls-Turkish-counterpart-on-Twitter.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Bill Park, ‘Turkey’s isolated stance: an ally no more, or just the usual turbulence?’, *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2015, pp. 581–600; Philip Robins, ‘Turkey’s “double gravity” predicament: the foreign policy of a newly activist power’, *International Affairs* 89: 2, March 2013, pp. 381–97.

<sup>61</sup> Robins, ‘Turkey’s “double gravity” predicament’, p. 383.

audience.<sup>62</sup> Diplomacy pursued through this channel becomes a public resource, ‘as opposed to the traditional view of diplomacy as “behind closed doors”’—such as a private meeting between Davutoğlu and Tsipras.<sup>63</sup> Thus Twitter is implicated not only in structural change—shifts in the social practice of diplomacy—but also in how, and for what purpose, diplomats appropriate this technology in the pursuit of their own duties.<sup>64</sup>

Social media thus provide insight into patterns of representation that merge to reflect a particular form of state identity, which in turn are central to processes of recognition. How state policy-makers represent—in this case, tweet about—events and experiences is key to assessing their intentions when interpersonal contact is not, or may not be, possible.

### **(Re)tweets, representation and recognition**

Drawing on the arguments presented above, we can reflect on how representations of state identity projected through social media can shape recognition, and thereby legitimize political possibilities for change. Statements made on Twitter by state representatives can certainly mobilize the politics of difference as part of the struggle for recognition. However, if we are attuned to shifts in representational patterns communicated through social media during high-level negotiations as part of the struggle for recognition, we can also identify political possibilities for change.

The first step in this process of understanding the role of Twitter in transformative diplomacy is to examine representations projected by a state during difficult negotiations. Here I examine Iran’s representations of itself and the United States posted on Twitter as part of a struggle for recognition. Using Leximancer,<sup>65</sup> I have undertaken a content analysis of 930 tweets posted by Ayatollah Khamenei (213 tweets), President Rouhani (644 tweets) and Foreign Minister Zarif (73 tweets) that related specifically to the nuclear issue between 5 May 2013, when Rouhani opened his account, and 25 July 2015, when the nuclear agreement was formally agreed.

I am not offering a comprehensive account of Iran–US relations, or of the strategic and diplomatic intricacies of the nuclear negotiations. It would be impossible to do so in so confined a space as this single article. Rather, I aim to demonstrate the insight provided by Twitter into how Iran recognizes the United States and seeks recognition for itself through particular representations. These representations are essential for understanding how the seemingly intractable nature of hostilities between the two states was arguably overcome through the signifying of Iran’s intention to work towards a positive outcome to negotiations.

<sup>62</sup> Cull, ‘The long road to public diplomacy 2.0’, p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> James Pamment, ‘The mediatization of diplomacy’, *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 9: 3, 2014, p. 264.

<sup>64</sup> Cristina Achetti, ‘The impact of new media on diplomatic practice: an evolutionary model of change’, *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 7: 2, 2012, p. 188.

<sup>65</sup> Leximancer is a software package that identifies high-level concepts and trends within text-based data, significantly reducing researcher bias in content analysis research.

Diplomacy between Iran and the United States has been significantly hampered by a lack of high-level diplomatic engagement: since 1980, the closest an Iranian and a US president have come to personal official communication is the 2013 phone call between Obama and Rouhani. Iran's wariness about engaging with the United States is largely attributable to two notable historical grievances, the 1953 coup and the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s. The 1953 coup saw the popularly elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh overthrown by the British and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a violation of Iranian sovereignty. During the Iran–Iraq War the United States supported Iraq despite knowledge of its chemical weapons attacks against Iran. Various attempts at communicative outreach, such as the annual Nowruz addresses from presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama,<sup>66</sup> and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's acknowledgement in 2000 of the US role in the 1953 coup, have been shaped by these historical grievances, which give credence to representations of the United States as a bully intent on undermining Iran. The issue here is how far diplomatic engagement between high-level diplomats, such as Zarif and Kerry, goes towards easing tensions when state leaders—Rouhani, Khamenei and Obama—cannot personally intuit the intentions of their respective 'adversaries'. A question arises about what role social media might play in this process.

Representational themes of mutual respect, and of Iran as peaceful, progressive and law-abiding, and as an independent and powerful state, discursively emerge from tweets by Rouhani, Zarif and Khamenei. While these posts follow a pattern of representations that feed into the way the country desires to be recognized,<sup>67</sup> I suggest that Iran has communicated positive aspects of its identity rather than overly emphasizing the negative aspects of US identity as has occurred in the past, shifting the dynamics of its struggle for recognition. Overall, Iran has attempted to move beyond ingrained forms of (mis)recognition by emphasizing how it wishes to be recognized. Alongside this slight shift in representation–recognition dynamics, Rouhani and Zarif have directly engaged US policy-makers through Twitter to demonstrate continual support for the nuclear negotiations, a trope that emerges strongly through their Twitter posts. These actions can be reasonably understood to facilitate an understanding of Iranian intentions that enabled the implementation of the JCPOA and the quick release of the detained US sailors in January 2016.

### *Mutual respect is win–win*

Mutual respect is an important trope that emerges from Iranian Twitter feeds. It redefines the terms of the negotiations as a win–win opportunity for both Iran and the United States, in direct opposition to the Cold War concept of a zero-sum game. These interconnected Twitter tropes signify that if the United States were to give adequate consideration to aspects of Iranian identity, this would affirm the worth and value of that identity, confirming that Iran's concerns regarding the

<sup>66</sup> Nowruz is the Persian New Year.

<sup>67</sup> See Duncombe, 'Representation, recognition and foreign policy'; Sanadjian, 'Nuclear fetishism'.

nuclear issue were being taken seriously. Doing so would signal that Iran would be treated with respect based on its identity:

Rouhani: #Rouhani: If US shows goodwill & intentions based on mutual respect & equal footing without hidden agenda way for interaction will be open.

Zarif: Committed to start drafting the comprehensive nuclear deal immediately. All will be served by a serious agreement based on mutual respect.

The representational schema of mutual respect has been central to previous Iranian attempts to establish dialogue between Iran and the United States. Consider the call for a 'dialogue among civilizations' by former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in December 1998. Khatami maintained that in order to overcome the ingrained hostilities present in the Iran–US relationship, both sides should have recognized 'the need for the other to complement oneself and the commonalities that bind us together, [and] then we can pursue an evolutionary path based on mutual respect, peace and non-violence'.<sup>68</sup> In making this appeal for mutual respect, Khatami sought recognition of Iran as a reasonable state that shared with the United States a desire to overcome their acrimonious relationship, which Rouhani has also emphasized:

Rouhani: #Win-win outcomes are not just favourable but also achievable. A zero-sum, Cold War mentality leads to everyone's loss

Here, in countering the zero-sum understanding of the P5+1 and Iran nuclear negotiations, Rouhani emphasizes the progress of world politics beyond this antiquated idea. Apart from specifically referencing this Cold War mentality as backward and not appropriate for the leaders of today, as Rouhani suggests, Javad Zarif also explicitly and publicly engaged with US Republican Senator Tom Cotton in an attempt to counter the claims made in the open letter issued by 47 US Senate Republicans in March 2015. The signatories to this letter, drafted by Senator Cotton, stated that any executive agreement between Obama and Khamenei relating to the nuclear negotiations could be 'revoked with the stroke of a pen'.<sup>69</sup> Zarif tweeted at Cotton on 10 March and again on 30 April 2015:

Zarif: .@SenTomCotton ICYMI my response. In English. [http:// goo.gl/OOU7Ha](http://goo.gl/OOU7Ha)

Zarif: Serious diplomacy, not macho personal smear, is what we need. Congrats on Ur new born. May U and Ur family enjoy him in peace. @SenTomCotton

Reaching out to Senator Cotton is a unique move on the part of Iran. By engaging with Cotton personally, Zarif challenges the representation of Iran as threatening and irrational, and suggests that such statements do not represent serious contributions to foreign policy but are merely weak bluster. Iran, as embodied in

<sup>68</sup> K. L. Afrasiabi, 'Conversation with . . . Mohammad Khatami on the dialogue among civilisations', *UN Chronicle* 43: 4, 2007, pp. 69–70; Pinar Bilgin, 'Civilisation, dialogue, security: the challenge of post-secularism and the limits of civilisational dialogue', *Review of International Studies* 38: 5, 2012, pp. 1099–115.

<sup>69</sup> 'Letter from Senate Republicans to the leaders of Iran', *New York Times*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/09/world/middleeast/document-the-letter-senate-republicans-addressed-to-the-leaders-of-iran.html>.

Zarif's response, does not thereby return to previous representations of the United States as aggressive and meddling, but advocates continued diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear dispute and reach a deal that is acceptable to both sides.

This type of communication was not unusual for Zarif. During the initial stages of the nuclear negotiations, when the French vetoed a draft agreement, Zarif tweeted at Kerry to express both dismay at the outcome and Iran's continued commitment to reaching a mutually agreeable deal:

Zarif: Mr. Secretary, was it Iran that gutted over half of US draft on Thursday night? And publicly commented against it Friday morning?

Thus Iran's Twitter use during the P5+1 negotiations is particularly significant in the challenge it poses to traditional notions of diplomacy. Instead of relying on formal channels of communication, Iranian state representatives publicly reached out to their US counterparts using social media. Zarif used the instantaneous nature of Twitter to represent Iran as progressive and peaceful, contesting dominant narratives of the country and its behaviour. Communicating a response to the French veto of the draft deal outside the formal negotiations enabled him to articulate Iran's frustration at one remove, and arguably thereby to communicate such a feeling publicly without jeopardizing the negotiations. Being able to 'talk honestly' during the negotiations is a significant step towards developing a trusting relationship both between diplomats and on an interstate level. Trust develops through such openness, as revealing one's position signifies a level of vulnerability: 'Trust is acceptance of vulnerability to harm that others could inflict, but which we judge that they will not in fact inflict.'<sup>70</sup> While trust in the Iran-US relationship is not unconditional, particularly given each side's historical grievances, the risk Zarif took in complaining directly and publicly to Kerry suggests an attempt by Iran to represent itself as a progressive and peaceful state, desiring constructive engagement, countering recognition of itself as dangerous and irrational.<sup>71</sup>

### *Peaceful and progressive Iran*

The strong and progressive nature of Iranian identity is represented through a focus on the importance of international law. During the nuclear negotiations, Khomeini, Rouhani and Zarif emphasized that Iranian behaviour is consistent with the constraints of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA). Through this representation Iran seeks to be recognized as a law-abiding international citizen, countering US representations of Iran as irrational and acting outside international law.

Since the Mujahideen-e Kalq revealed in 2002 that Iran was undertaking clandestine work on its nuclear facilities in Nantaz and Arak, the country has

<sup>70</sup> Annette Baier, quoted in Jan Ruzika and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'The puzzle of trusting relationships in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty', *International Affairs* 86: 1, Jan. 2010, p. 72.

<sup>71</sup> Ruzika and Wheeler, 'The puzzle of trusting relationships', p. 81; Aaron M. Hoffman, 'A conceptualization of trust in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 8: 3, 2002, p. 382.

been under immense international scrutiny regarding its nuclear programme.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, it has continued to represent its enrichment rights under Article IV of the NPT as a national issue supported by all Iranians,<sup>73</sup> a 'red line' that is represented not just as a diplomatic manoeuvre but as an extension of the national identity it wishes to be recognized. Thus the emphasis on Iran's 'red lines' through Twitter is not a proscriptive threat, as is usually assumed with conceptualizations of red lines, but an attempt to overcome US representations of Iran as dangerous and a concern for international security. This representation further emphasizes the Iranian desire for recognition as a strong, progressive state:

Rouhani: For us, there are red lines that cannot be crossed. Our national interests are our red lines—incl enrichment & other rights under intl law

Khamenei: US need for the #talks—if not more—is not less than #Iran's. Negotiators should observe red lines& tolerate no burden, humiliation &threat.

Iranian national interests are represented as in line with those of the international community: Iran wants to continue its enrichment programme under the auspices of the NPT. The representation of 'red lines' is thus employed to emphasize that Iran is a progressive state acting in accordance with international law, not outside the normative and legal constraints of what is expected of a powerful state. Iran is speaking to its role in the international community as a strong, progressive state—progressive in that it abides by international law and does not seek to dismantle that regime, in contrast to representations to that effect. In doing so, Iran counters suggestions that its behaviour is irrational by continuing to insist that its behaviour is well within the terms of the NPT agreement.

Representation of Iran's 'red lines' under international law is also used to reject sanctions as bullying and irrational. The Islamic Republic considers the sanctions enforced against it as not related to its behaviour and continued enrichment activities. Rather, they are perceived to stem from an antipathy towards the Iranian nation as a whole. Iran continues to employ the representation of the United States as a bully attempting to undermine Iranian technological progress:

Khamenei: I say it clearly that there's no one in #Iran who wouldn't favor a solution to the nuclear issue; but Iranians don't accept #US bullying.

Zarif: Pres. Obama's presumption that Iran is negotiating because of his illegal threats and sanctions is disrespectful of a nation, macho and wrong.

Iran recognizes the United States as aggressive and hypocritical, denying it the recognition as a world leader and a force for good that is at the core of US self-representation. Yet rather than continuing the same representational schema—wherein the United States is dehumanized—Iran introduces another, more conciliatory representation frame relating to its own desire to participate in the negotiation process. Iran is thus signifying through this representational trope that it is willing to come to the table on the nuclear deal. However, in doing so, Iran

<sup>72</sup> Bowen and Moran, 'Living with nuclear hedging', p. 687.

<sup>73</sup> Sanadjian, 'Nuclear fetishism', pp. 79–80; Bowen and Brewer, 'Iran's nuclear challenge', p. 937.

is also signifying that it is taking part in these negotiations of its own accord, not because of pressure from other parties, further emphasizing the desired recognition of Iran as a strong, independent state.

## Negotiations as opportunity

Given the continued representation of Iran as a progressive and peaceful state, the nuclear negotiations are discursively framed as an opportunity for both states, emphasizing Iran–US dialogue based on mutual respect. For Iran, the potential opportunity to relieve the stress of sanctions while at the same time being recognized as independent and powerful represents a significant chance for transformative change in Iran–US relations.

Iranian representations of itself as independent and powerful extend from a general discourse emerging from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Shah and established the Islamic Republic of Iran as the first theocratic Islamic state. The Revolution ensured Iran was free from external interference, a key concern shared by both the Pahlavi shahs and the Islamic Republic. Over the last two decades, radical conservative factions within the Iranian government have hindered previous attempts at accommodation under Rafsanjani and Khatami.<sup>74</sup> Apart from a revolutionary Shi'ite ideology that drives this desire 'to cultivate loneliness and retain a closed system', the perceived 'hubris' of US foreign policy naturalizes the Iranian position of resisting imperialism.<sup>75</sup> In this context, the Iranian Revolution is used to represent the strength of Iran in resisting interference from other states, most notably neo-imperialists such as the United States. Thus the trope of independence through revolution could be read as reaffirming both ideological zealotry and the complete rejection of overtures from the United States:

Rouhani: We defended our independence on the battlefield & defend it at the #negotiating table~on anniversary of #Revolution.

Khamenei: Our #negotiators are children of the #Revolution. We strongly support those in charge of our diplomacy.

A small shift in discourse is evident in the Twitter representation 'children of the Revolution'. We can certainly understand the 'children of the Revolution' as those whose ideals and values have been shaped by the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and their political engagement in developing Iran as a strong, independent Shi'i state. Yet employing the term 'children' implies a dualistic identity. It indicates, first, freedom from constraint by the increasingly divisive factional politics that have characterized the Islamic Republic's governance since the reformist President Ayatollah Khatami lost to hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2004.<sup>76</sup> Second, it implies a championing of what is good and right about the Revolu-

<sup>74</sup> Maximilian Terhalle, 'Revolutionary power and socialization: explaining the persistence of revolutionary zeal in Iran's foreign policy', *Security Studies* 18: 3, 2009, p. 565.

<sup>75</sup> Terhalle, 'Revolutionary power and socialization', pp. 570, 567.

<sup>76</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, 'Has Iran's Islamic Revolution ended?', *Radical History Review* 2009: 105, 2009, pp. 135–6; Bowen and Brewer, 'Iran's nuclear challenge'.



tion itself, fostering an inspirational image of political struggle on behalf of the Islamic Republic.<sup>77</sup> In the present context, this representation both harks back to the struggle for Iranian independence from western interference and looks forward to a new political order in which Iran's power is recognized.<sup>78</sup> Here we can see a clear support for the negotiating team, which was uncertain in previous outreach attempts. Whereas previously Khamenei was not supportive of efforts to normalize relations between Iran and the United States—particularly under the Ahmadinejad-led government—this representational trope suggests an implicit shift towards encouraging the development of dialogue over the nuclear issue. What evolves from this trope is an impression of trust in the negotiators as brave 'children of the Revolution' and support for their engagement with the West and the United States in particular. The negotiators are taking risks in pursuing greater *rapprochement* with the United States on behalf of Iran. Here the idea of compromise emerges as a signifier not of capitulation to western demands, but of the carving out of a new path of independence. Thus the negotiations are an opportunity, rather than a hindrance to the progress of Iran as a strong, independent state. Such independence both resists the sanctions imposed by the international community and also offers an alternative basis for *rapprochement* rooted in the principles of the Iranian Revolution.

Rouhani: We want the world to know that our nuclear activities are solely for peaceful purposes, & that we're ready to address any rational concerns.

Zarif: As #IAEA has once again confirmed, we're keeping our pledges—intend to continue doing so. Expecting reciprocity in this regard. #JPA

From this brief discussion of Iranian Twitter posts, we can see how representations of state identity projected through social media can shape recognition, and thereby legitimize political possibilities for change. While Iranian Twitter posts continue to employ dominant representations of the United States as, for example, a hypocritical bully, to express frustration at negotiation roadblocks, these have been tempered by positive representational framings of Iran. By emphasizing positive aspects of Iranian identity rather than always returning to negative US representations, Iranian Twitter posts suggest political possibilities for change through efforts to move beyond ingrained forms of (mis)recognition. In particular, the ways in which Rouhani and Zarif have engaged their US counterparts have demonstrated sustained support for the nuclear negotiations, signifying Iran's intention to work towards a positive outcome as the negotiations continued.

## Conclusion

Social media are now a central component of diplomacy. From 'digital diplomacy' as the new public diplomacy to cyberspace as the new frontier of warfare, information communication technology is an inescapable tool of international relations.

<sup>77</sup> Alison M. S. Watson, 'Children and International Relations: a new site of knowledge?', *Review of International Studies* 32: 2, 2006, pp. 237–50.

<sup>78</sup> Arjomand, 'Has Iran's Islamic Revolution ended?', p. 138; Bowen and Moran, 'Living with nuclear hedging'.

Arguably, social media are implicated in moments of transformative diplomacy. We must ask how effective this medium is in developing interpersonal trust between individual diplomatic counterparts, and whether it can be a productive platform for dialogue when traditional face-to-face diplomacy is limited or difficult to achieve.

The answer to these questions lies in considering how the role of Twitter in diplomatic interactions can delimit the terms of debate surrounding difficult negotiations, such as those undertaken as part of the JCPOA framework. Twitter can shape the struggle for recognition, and thereby legitimize political possibilities for change. Posts by state representatives reflect and frame state identity and how a state wishes to be recognized by others. If we are attuned to these dynamics, shifts in representational patterns communicated through social media during high-level negotiations allow us to identify political possibilities for change.

The dynamics of representation, recognition and social media are especially powerful. Yet this relationship is largely overlooked, to the detriment of a deeper understanding of post-modern diplomacy. Such interplay should be taken seriously, as Twitter is another platform for dialogue between states in cases where face-to-face diplomatic interactions are limited. Twitter provides insight into how Iran recognizes the United States and desires recognition for itself through particular representations. These representations are essential for understanding how the seemingly intractable nature of Iran–US hostility was nonetheless surmounted and resulted in a successful nuclear deal. Representational themes of mutual respect, and of Iran as a peaceful, progressive, law-abiding, independent and powerful state, discursively emerge from tweets by Rouhani, Zarif and Khamenei. Iran communicated positive aspects of its own identity rather than excessively emphasizing the negative aspects of US identity, shifting the dynamics of its struggle for recognition. This is a significant change, and one that is accessible through analysis of social media posts. Another unusual element is the direct social media engagement between Iranian policy-makers and their counterparts. Even though such engagement was not face to face, interpersonal trust between policy-makers arguably emerged in correlation with positive steps in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations. Future work will reveal whether transformed representations emerged from both sides during the P5+1 nuclear negotiations, potentially producing further openings for political change.

This is not to suggest that official diplomatic practices are less important, or that material considerations such as the imposition of sanctions or opening of new trade deals do not play a part in bringing states to the negotiating table and keeping them there. Rather, I propose that we should look at the broader picture of state interaction and take into consideration the space social media platforms such as Twitter allow for dialogue. The in-the-moment speed of communication through social media necessarily breaks with bureaucratic practices that often constrain communication between diplomats and states. Given such developments, the importance of social media in transformative diplomacy demands consideration.