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## Specialized Studies

# THE JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION: ALTERNATIVES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF IRANIANS

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Accordingto a somewhat cliché phrase, "perception is reality" and, therefore, public persona, regardless of its actual accuracy, makes a lasting impact on how people are perceived by others. Subsequently, this often determines how others respond to them, as well as the many extenuating outcomes that emerge from these factors.[1] This is, perhaps, no truer than within the realm of international relations. As such, the research problem at the core of this paper examines the various paths the Iranian government may choose in proceeding with the nuclear arms agreement, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and how this may translate into the realm of public perception. In response, what one may find is that the genuine credibility of assertions related to various aspects of the agreement (i.e. the underlying reason for Iran to accumulate uranium) are of lesser relevance than what may be deemed true in the opinion of the international public.[2] As a result, the actions and behaviors of the Iranian government may likely define how others (stereotypically) perceive the Iranian people, as a whole.[3]

Consequently, public perception (at least partially) impacts the public image of a nation, established predominantly upon the perception of others, as opposed to any tangible or verifiable truths. This is a problem that is even more worrisome when the outcomes that may emerge are considered, including economic detriment and other ramifications resulting from sanctions.[4] It is also a problem that is magnified and exasperated by the nature of modern media, particularly when taking into account the rapidity with which information is now disseminated in a world driven by virtual communication.[5] Thus, the findings resulting from this inquiry will have implications for all people who wish to gain a greater understanding of the natural human complexities that exist when stereotypical misperceptions are stripped away. In doing so, the pages that follow set out to elaborate on how the choices of the Iranian government in response to the JCPOA may inevitably influence the world's view of the Iranian people, while exploring the underlying role of today's media and the influence of this information regardless of its validity or accuracy.

Today, much of the world has followed the events unfolding between Iran and the U.S. concerning the nuclear agreement, which has occupied recent news headlines.[6] These events, as well as the possibility of achieving a sufficient level of cooperation between parties and brokering a mutually acceptable resolution, in and of itself, leads to an age-old dilemma. This is a dilemma that has plagued men, as individuals, to populations of people, as nations, posing a "public relations" quandary for seemingly as long as the concept of "public image" has been acknowledged.[7]

The more general question, in this case, is the historical dilemma associated with opting to cooperate and having this action be misinterpreted as an act of weakness or choosing to stand one's ground, so to speak, and having this intended display of strength translate into one of opposition or hostility in the realm of public opinion and the perception that emerges in the global arena of international relations.[8] In the court of public opinion and the perceptions that drive it, people are frequently and erroneously grouped as being of "one mind."[9] This is an occurrence that is seen on a daily basis, as the inherent tendency of humans to naturally categorize "people, places and things" results in stereotypical misperceptions.[10]

In some cases, a nation's people may be miscategorized as aligning with the philosophy of their government, even if they are victims of an oppressive regime.[11] Similarly, people of a particular culture are frequently and inaccurately associated with the more widely recognized and more "media-present" beliefs of an extremist minority, simply because that small faction gets the most news coverage.[12] The case of Iran is no different. Regardless of the beliefs of the Iranian majority or the people who comprise this country, it is the global perception of the government and its actions that will define the misperception of its people in the future.[13]

Therefore, in accordance with the information above, the intended goals of the pages that follow are, first and foremost, to explore the potential choices of the Iranian government moving forward in regards to the JCPOA and to determine how complete cooperation may impact the perception of the Iranian people and its government in the public domain internationally. The second goal is to examine how anything less than complete cooperation on behalf of the Iranian government may impact the perception of the Iranian people internationally while, thirdly, exploring the potential benefits or ramifications associated with each possible public perception outcome. Finally, while a comprehensive review of the literature serves as the method behind this inquiry, it will also consider how the contemporary nature of communication, specifically social media and the dissemination of information virtually, may influence these public perception outcomes and the extent to which they impact others.

**First: Developments Regarding the Nuclear File and the Emergence of the Public Perception Dilemma**

Assuming that people often respond to what they believe is "reality" and reality is driven by perception, then the actual beliefs of people are of little relevance, nor is the truth, when it comes to Iran's government and their position on the JCPOA. Instead, the one variable that truly matters and determines how people will be perceived (and subsequently treated abroad) is the perception that emerges and the public image that evolves from it.[14] Therefore, looking at the specific examples that are relevant to the JCPOA, the assertion of the Iranian government is that their interest in uranium is for the creation and manufacture of reactor fuel, while others assert it is intended for use in the production of nuclear weapons.[15] Similarly, what Iran may assert is simply a heavy-water facility, others claim is associated with the acquisition of plutonium that is necessary for creating a nuclear weapon.[16] Finally, while the Iranian government may contend that they have been compliant with monitoring from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the U.S. and others have communicated that this is simply not the case.[17]

As a result, mixed messages emerged in that, while the U.S. may have interpreted the JCPOA as a "historic understanding," Iranian officials indicated that no agreement was ultimately achieved and thus, as the Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif explained, the country had "no obligation."[18] This absence of agreement eventually led to the reinstitution of Iranian sanctions and, while the Iranian government contends that the agreement is unfair and sabotages the country's ability to engage in economically-beneficial activities such as their uranium operations, the U.S. and others simply portray these concerns as an issue of non-compliance.

However, the actuality of whether the Iranian government is simply trying to promote economic well-being with their operations or engage in the creation of nuclear bombs is of less relevance in the domain of public perception than the way in which such actions are interpreted. Similarly, whether the majority of Iranian people share a philosophy with their government, or if they are instead victims of a regime to which they are vehemently opposed, is of less influence in shaping others' perception of them than what is presented in the news media.[19] This is partially due to the innate human tendency to group all of a nation's people together, assuming they share beliefs simply because they share a culture. Furthermore, the information that defines how a nation is categorized or its people perceived is most frequently determined by what is portrayed in the media or who is the most frequently media-exposed group - even if the beliefs portrayed are those of an extreme minority.[20]

Thus, this leads to an intriguing dilemma in that the Iranian government's actions pertaining to the nuclear agreement will likely define the public perception of a nation regardless of whether or not these decisions reflect the beliefs of the people.[21] Additionally, this perception will be framed by the international audience's interpretation of information as it is disseminated, regardless of whether or not it is valid and in spite of Iran's possible underlying motivations.[22] As such, Iran would benefit from allies in the global arena, but the country must also present itself as being self-reliant in the face of changing political climates and volatile times.[23] Ultimately, this poses a high-stakes dilemma in that there are benefits associated with each choice the Iranian government may make related to moving forward with the JCPOA. Yet, conversely, there are equally plausible detriments that may emerge from these same actions, related to and arising from the public's perception of Iran.

More specifically, as alluded to above, a cooperative stance may be perceived as amicable and lead to the formation of necessary and advantageous strategic alliances.[24] On the other hand, it may also be interpreted as a sign of weakness or submission which could be detrimental for Iran's public image in a global capacity.[25] This could leave Iran vulnerable to opportunistic transgressions by nations or groups that perceive such behavior to be that of submission, making the country a "sitting duck", so to speak, for future threats regardless of whether this

possible public perception bears truth or not.[26] It may also translate into the government forgoing the economic well-being of its people in order to concede and become a "team player" in the international environment.[27]

Alternatively, a less flexible, more independent stance in which Iran refuses to cooperate or compromise, regarding the operations they have undertaken to protect their country, may deter the aforementioned public perception concerns.[28] However, a steadfast position of autonomy may also be perceived as oppositional or even hostile by others in the international arena and the vast domain of public perception associated with it.[29] Ultimately, in either regard, the Iranian people, regardless of their majority position or diverse philosophies, will be lumped into whatever stereotypical categorization is bestowed upon the government itself.[30]

**Second: Iran's Compliance With the JCPOA: Potential Perceptions**

As previously mentioned, the first segment of this research endeavor was dedicated to identifying how the Iranian government's complete compliance with the tenets of the JCPOA would impact the perception of the Iranian people globally. Interestingly, however, a search of the literature revealed few articles, polls, or publications that did not emphasize the importance of past perceptions in shaping the future. Thus, it is worthy of mention here that the global perception of the Iranian people, historically, provides depth and contextual insights that are relevant to the formation of current and future perceptions (or misperceptions).

More specifically, Gallup polls over the years have revealed that Americans view Iran and its people as one of the U.S. nation's "greatest enemies".[31] Upon ranking those countries that were viewed as most hostile among American citizens, Iran was frequently ranked at the top with North Korea - a finding that has held true even in recent polls.[32] This sentiment is one that has emerged over time beginning with the 1979 storming of the American Embassy in Tehran, which served as a catalyst for this perception.[33] However, the embassy incident occurred at the hands of Iranian revolutionaries, as opposed to the mainstream majority of Iranian citizens.[34] As such, it serves as a quintessential illustration of how the actions of a particular faction may define the misperception of people as a whole.[35]

This collective view of all Iranians was fueled, once again, following the events of 9/11 as President Bush's notorious "axis of evil" speech was broadcasted, specifically mentioning Iran and thereby reinforcing the existing misperceptions.[36] As a result, this negative view of Iran and its people was not limited to the U.S.[37] Instead, according to a 2013 Pew Research survey, it extended to 59 percent of all citizens polled across 39 diverse nations.[38] Yet, in spite of these assertions, a 2016 University of Maryland poll reported that 64 percent of Americans still favored remaining a party to the nuclear deal, indicating a sentiment of hope and optimism for future relations with Iran.[39]

In the more recent past, it appeared as if this "future" had indeed arrived as the views held towards the Iranian people began to improve internationally - at least for a time. According to one source, a one-year assessment of how the nuclear arms deal was functioning revealed that Iran had complied with the IAEA's regular evaluations and each time was reported as having downsized those operations that were said to be associated with their nuclear program.[40] Specifically, this entailed a reduction of its uranium inventory by a significant 97 percent, disallowing accumulation of an amount necessary for bomb fuel, while also ceasing operations at the Arak facility, which was involved in the creation of plutonium - a possible means of fueling nuclear weapons, as well.[41] Compliance with these, as well as other mandates, was confirmed at each reported IAEA inspection.[42]

In response, the growing inventory of companies that began to invest in Iran spoke volumes towards the changing (and improving) perception of the country and its people, in a global capacity[43]. This shift in perception was also manifested by the 63 percent increase in trade

between Iran and the European Union (EU) - a relationship that was at a stalemate and essentially non-existent for over three decades.[44] This also led to collaborative discussions between Iran, the EU, and others, focusing on the attainment of common international goals, such as addressing environmental issues and sustaining the global economy.[45] As a result, one could infer that Iran's reported compliance translated into a more favorable view of the country and its people within the international arena, changing the global perception of Iranians for the better.[46] Therefore, it is evident that the perception of Iran as complying with the terms of the JCPOA subsequently led to the improved perception of the Iranian people overall.

### Third: Potential Perceptions Arising From Anything Less Than Complete Cooperation With the United States

Recently, a turn of events has led to yet another shift in the American perception of Iran and, ironically, it is not a result of any change in stance by the Iranian government or the people themselves. Instead, President Donald Trump initiated an effort to reimpose sanctions on Iran and to pull out of the agreement.[47] Although nothing may have changed in terms of Iran's compliance, Trump's actions imply that something changed to initiate such a decision and, as such, the assumption of fault is inevitably bestowed upon Iran itself.[48] In reality, it was not the actions of Iran that contributed to this latest shift in perception nor was it an issue of non-compliance. Instead, it was the choice of an outside party (President Trump), coupled with the innate tendency of people in general to read between the lines, so to speak, and to fill in the blanks with what events they (perhaps erroneously) infer must have occurred behind the news headlines to spawn such a reaction.

More than likely, this inevitable shift in the view of Iran began with Trump's dissatisfaction with the JCPOA and his campaign promises to renegotiate the agreement prior to his election.[49] This was likely compounded by insinuations that Iran's compliance did not mean that the Iranian government was not simultaneously continuing to pursue an underlying agenda and to compete in ways that fell outside the confines of the agreement.[50] The mere insinuation that the JCPOA was somewhat flawed, considering Iran's alleged ability to leverage certain loopholes while complying, led to subsequent implications concerning Iran itself. More specifically, in terms of the Iranian government, these insinuations led to the subsequent assumption that the Iranian government must be less than genuine in its efforts to cooperate and likely lacking in transparency.[51] As a result, a shadow was cast over the global reputation of the country and the Iranian people despite the absence of any truth to these allegations and a lack of any evidence at all that is indicative of non-compliance.[52]

In fact, one source reported that Iran is often erroneously thought of as a nation of "anti-American zealots" whose primary objective behind creating a nuclear weapon is to leverage its use against America itself.[53] However, this misperception was refuted by the voluntary participation of the Iranian government in the JCPOA and compliance in subsequent evaluations.[54] Further, the mutual advantages were evident in that the Iranian economy would clearly benefit from the increased economic ties that would result from the successful implementation of the JCPOA globally.[55] Nevertheless, this reality was overshadowed by the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement and the growing assumptions about Iran that emerged in its wake.[56] Ultimately, in a sort of a self-perpetuating prophecy, the unexpected withdrawal served as a benefit to Iran's revolutionaries, thereby lending credibility to the inaccurate former assumptions that initially emerged from Trump's decision to withdraw.[57]

### Fourth: Public Perceptions Resulting from Trump's Withdrawal From the JCPOA

In response, this information shed light on a new revelation that transformed the very questions at the core of this paper. More specifically, President Trump's unexpected withdrawal from

the plan of action, in the face of Iran's compliance, led to a shift in the underlying inquiry that motivated this research: this is a change in view from how the global perception of the Iranian people will be impacted if Iran did not comply with the JCPOA to how the global perception of Iranian people will be impacted if Iran is perceived as not complying. Ultimately, this slight change in focus leads to a significant distinction between two very different things - in the first case, the Iranian people may fall victim to the choices of their government. In the latter case, the Iranian people are vulnerable by no fault of their own and how they may or may not be perceived by others is determined by the decisions and actions of foreign parties, such as the American President, leaving them essentially powerless in the determination of how they are perceived around the world.

When looking at the possible underlying causes of such events, some sources contend that threat perceptions are defined by differences in ideology and motivated by "political cleavages" in which America's response and President Trump's actions towards Iran's nuclear program and the JCPOA are only one example.[58] Meanwhile, the negative effects on the Iranian economy are profound as sanctions are reinstituted against Iran and supplemental sanctions were enacted in November.[59] The areas of the economy impacted include (but are not limited to) Iran's automotive industry, airplane manufacturing and precious metals, such as gold, to name a few.[60] And yet, when looking more closely at those who are most impacted by these detrimental effects, it is not the revolutionary factions or extremists, but the simple mainstream population of Iran - a population that is largely comprised of young, educated adults that do not advocate the actions of the extremists or an elitist government, leading to many protests emerging from their impatience with the policies of their regime and their distinctly different beliefs concerning both domestic and global affairs.[61]

In light of this information, it is evident that the sanctions most predominantly target a population not dissimilar from young Americans and certainly the detriment is not solely targeted towards the stereotypical extremists and the oppressive government that one would think would be impacted by these actions.[62] In response, this brings into question how such inaccurate stereotypical perceptions are created.

**Fifth: The Media and Shaping the Public Image: Role and Outcomes**

According to one study, public opinion polls from other countries and other fragments of information found in media sources provide the only source of exposure most people have to others of a certain "outgroup."[63] It is this indirect exposure through media-driven information about a group that leads to a greater general perception of a particular nation and its people as a whole.[64] These subsequent metaperceptions - though typically inaccurate - create the stereotypical perceptions held about certain "national outgroups" and, in doing so, provide support for the ingroup behaviors that are motivated by these views.[65] Within this particular study, Iran was, indeed, one of the national outgroups explored in terms of the perception formulated in response to media information provided about Iran.[66]

Thus, in this regard, it is evident once again that the perception held of a certain nation and its people has less to do with the mainstream majority and more to do with the exposure of a small faction, such as the government or an extremist group. It is also evident that the actions, decisions and behaviors of other parties (such as the U.S. and President Trump) can also be a profound influence in shaping the misperceptions of people as a whole; such is the case with the JCPOA and Trump's withdrawal. In this regard, the perceptions held towards a particular group of people may have far less to do with them or their government and far more to do with how others behave around them and towards them coupled with the innate tendency of individuals to "read between the lines" and fill in the blanks when it comes to the bits of information received pertaining to particular people, or a nation and group. Frequently, this may lead to

erroneous assumptions or stereotypical misperceptions in which a nation of people as a whole are categorized according to the behaviors, beliefs and ideologies of only a small faction who may be the proportion of the population receiving the most media exposure.[67]

This then brings about a new question involving the use and the influence of media itself. While newspaper headlines and print sources contribute to the perceptions described above, one can only wonder how the more profound reach of the virtual media may influence these outcomes, particularly considering the rapidity with which information is shared and disseminated (regardless of its accuracy) in today's most popular form of media: social media.

### 1- The Virtual Dissemination of Information and Its Influence as A Form of Media

When exploring how media influences the perceptions of people and towards people, it only stands to reason that the further information is spread and the speed by which this occurs may influence the extent of its impact. As such, one can logically assume that the widespread geographic reach of contemporary media, in its virtual form, coupled with the speed of the internet itself would only perpetuate any power of the media that formerly existed.

In order to fully comprehend the influence of media as a vehicle for the transmission of information and the subsequent formulation of perceptions, one study revealed that media served as the primary underlying mechanism for existing schemata, pertaining to Iranians.[68] Specifically, these negative perceptions towards the people of this culture were reported by approximately 40 percent of all Americans surveyed spanning a range of all 50 states.[69] While media information was the driving force behind these negative perceptions, this was somewhat offset by instances of direct communication and personal contact with Iranians, which proved to be the main source of positive schemata.[70] In other words, the information disseminated through media sources led to the profound (mis)categorization of a nation of people - a sentiment that was transformed and/or negated when an individual had actual personal contact or first-person knowledge of the Iranian people in which the subsequent perception was typically positive.

However, it is also crucial to consider the extent of the detriment that may emerge from these negative perceptions. As one source concluded, the stereotypical view of Iranians and Pakistanis as "harborers of terrorism and violence" has given rise to ramifications that extend well beyond simply finding someone not "likeable."[71] In fact, much of the population of the Western world has been found to exhibit a fear towards Iran that is both irrational and unfounded, yet established upon the information disseminated within social media.[72] In response, although the vast majority of Iranians are not represented by the small faction of extremists that receive the most media attention, this information has served to dehumanize a nation and its citizens as a whole.[73] Nevertheless, according to this same study, when individuals on social media (i.e. Facebook) were introduced or exposed to an actual Iranian individual, they were able to overcome their preconceived notions and look more humanely upon the majority of Iranians, who did not fit the existing stereotypes or categorizations.[74] Thus, once again, this research concluded that the majority of images perpetuated in media were likely not accurate, yet the emerging ramifications were profoundly detrimental.[75]

### 2- The Virtual Media and the Role of Iranians in Changing Public Perceptions Towards Themselves

When discussing the power of virtual media, no discussion would be complete without exploring the positive outcomes that may emerge, aside from the negative ones. More specifically, social media not only perpetuates stereotypes and misperceptions but can also be influential in empowering a nation of people.[76] In Iran, in particular, internet and social media was integral in allowing the Iranian people to communicate with the outside world during the 2009 elections and its resulting protests.[77] During this time, Twitter gained obvious popularity.[78]

Since then, the Iranian people have leveraged the use of social media to communicate amongst

each other, organizing protests and gathering like-minded people to mobilize for a common cause.[79] The site most commonly used in this capacity has been Telegram, which is frequently utilized for sending and receiving encrypted messages.[80] In fact, it has become so popular that an estimated 40 million people use it out of an estimated population of 80 million Iranians.[81]

Meanwhile, the Iranians are now using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) in an effort to evade government censorship.[82] This, of course, is in response to the government's efforts at limiting access to certain sites or completely shutting down social media platforms as a way of undermining the organization and facilitation of protests.[83] These censorship measures were enacted in addition to the existing restrictions, including the requirement that any form of media must first obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, thereby allowing the government some oversight over all media operations.[84]

Ironically, recent research has found that attempts to restrict access to information actually leads to more creative ways of circumventing such censorship.[85] More specifically, when governments impose restrictions on information, this increases the motivation of people to find alternative ways of acquiring the information.[86] In the context of this particular study, Chinese Instagram users were incentivized to leverage their use of private networks after the government blocked Instagram, while others become increasingly tech-savvy and found other ways to access information virtually.[87]

Finally, when examining exactly how social media fosters empowerment of particular people to broker change, this often occurs in the form of promoting protests.[88] This is a result of the dissemination of information, including protest locations and times, while also increasing the motivation to participate.[89] The latter occurs through social media information serving as a catalyst for the emergence of anger or other emotions that spawn action or trigger feelings, such as group identity.[90]

In addition, when exploring whether social media actually has a causal effect, it does appear to make an impact that supersedes that of traditional media, including the speed at which information can be retrieved, specifically searched for (as opposed to conventional news media) and the ability to actively communicate between parties.[91] Ultimately, social media can potentially derail political agendas and transform the political landscape.[92] As such, it can also potentially change and profoundly impact the way in which a nation of people is perceived in the global arena, whether such assertions are accurate or not. Or, unfortunately, as described by one source, "The advent of the digital age represents a tremendous boon for spreading hatred and intolerance."[93] Thus, with the aforementioned discussion complete pertaining to how perceptions may be formed and misperceptions perpetuated, as well as how contemporary social media influences these outcomes, it seems only fitting to end on a more positive note - one that cuts through the inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes focusing on what is real and what is the truth in reality.

## Summary

In consideration of the information set forth in the prior pages, some intriguing realizations have come to light. In the end, perhaps one of the most surprising revelations is that which relates to the core objective of this paper and its intended purpose. While the goal starting out was to discuss the perceptions and possible misperceptions of the Iranian people based upon the actions of a national minority, such as the government, instead it became clear that whatever stance the Iranian government may take (in relation to the JCPOA) is of less consequence than what others infer from "reading between the lines," as well as the actions of others when it comes to social media or media in any form.

As such, when it comes to reality, a grave truth is that it is not even necessary for the Iranian government to take a stance in either regard in order for the Iranian people (or any people) to be erroneously categorized with blanket generalizations and inaccurate stereotypes. In fact, in the case of Iran, its people are not only vulnerable to the perceptions derived from the actions of their government, they are also susceptible due to the actions of outside parties and the assumptions emerging from them. Finally, when one considers the influence of the media, particularly the power of social media, it is evident how a population of people can be victims three-fold, with the virtual dissemination of information exponentially perpetuating these misperceptions and the erroneous categorization of people at large.

In this regard, most people are surprised to realize that Iran has not had a nuclear weapon since the 1970s and, at the present time, the country has exported 98 percent of its uranium and deactivated two-thirds of its centrifuges in order to comply with the nuclear arms deal.[94] Meanwhile, a poll of the mainstream majority found that approximately one-third of those surveyed reported unemployment as the most crucial issue to Iranian citizens, demonstrating an uncanny similarity to the American population as well as that of many other nations.[95] Further, a Gallup Poll revealed that a substantially larger proportion of Iranians (41 percent) expressed disapproval towards their nation's use of nuclear power for military purposes compared to those who did approve (34 percent).[96] This is likely (at least partially) a function of a new and more contemporary generation of Iranians who are well-educated and disapprove of Islamic fundamentalism that strictly governs so many facets of life, thereby outgrowing the more traditional, stringent views of their prior generation.[97]

Yet, it is perhaps most important to acknowledge that the world and its people, as well as the nations they comprise, are complex. As some would say, the world consists of "shades of gray" in which a nation and its people may be simultaneously weak and strong, cooperative but also concerned with self-preservation, and willing to be a team player but cognizant of the need to also be autonomous.[98] However, these "shades of gray" rarely translate in the domain of public perception, where it is so easy to divide others into clearly distinguishable categories.[99] In other words, the nuances and complexities of reality - the shades of gray that comprise this world - are rarely represented in the black and white of the printed page or translate into the world of social media where a man and his nation is either one thing or the other, but infrequently both. In response, these labels define how people are perceived and how they are subsequently treated.

Therefore, in a media-driven world that is so profoundly impacted by social media, perception is everything and reputation becomes reality. Whether one is weak or strong, cooperative or non-compliant, a team player or opting for self-preservation is often irrelevant in comparison to what others believe is the truth. Thus, one's position in this world is, unfortunately, often less about the truth and more about appearances.[100] It is, therefore, the latter that determines the treatment received from others, ultimately defining the destiny of a nation and the future of each individual.

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