

IRANIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS:
MUTUAL MYTH MAKING, THE MEDIA, AND FOREIGN POLICY
CONSTRAINTS

By

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Abstract

The importance of the role the media plays in the process of conflict resolution has been established in a number of scholarly publications. However, despite Iran's geopolitical importance in the Middle East and its contentious relationship with the United States, study of the media's effect on the prospects for conflict resolution between these two states has traditionally been an area of neglect. This paper attempts to determine the nature of this coverage and the implications for the development of this bilateral relationship. It analyzes 96 transcripts from three American news outlets, representing a range of political ideologies, and over 400 minutes of video from the Iranian news channel Press TV. The findings of this examination include the presence of a clear distinction in coverage produced by news sources with differing ideological leanings, an increase in the use of enemy images following the 2002 State of the Union Address, and the overall dysfunctional nature of the current media portrayals. The last finding and the relevant literature suggest that reconciliation between the two states is unlikely in the foreseeable future and that conflict will continue to be the norm.

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“All participants were involved in mythmaking to justify their positions, and it is these myths, rather than the complex reality of the events, that have continued to influence politics and relations”

-Ali M. Ansari

Introduction

The state of US-Iran relations has been the topic of intense media coverage and its effective management is a central concern for policy makers in both countries. While Iran has historically held a position of geopolitical importance, being positioned on vital trade routes and possessing large amounts of natural resources, its role in international affairs has only increased in recent years with the rise of the nuclear issue, its escalating verbal conflict with Israel, and its alleged support of radical groups, even in the face of a global war on terror. These positions have brought Iran into conflict with the global hegemon, and have demonstrated a potential to destabilize the region as a whole.

These issues have been shaped by a complex and dynamic shared history between the United States and Iran. This relationship has transformed from periods of only sporadic engagement, characterized primarily by religious missions, to a functioning client state – superpower arrangement, and later to hostage-taking and open hostility. Throughout this history, the development of the relationship has been affected by the creation of myths by members of both sides. In fact, the Persian historian Ali Ansari asserts that it is “these myths, rather than the complex reality of the events, that have continued to influence the politics and relations” between the two states (41). These myths lead to the creation of stereotyped images of one’s adversaries, which in turn can affect the way policy makers approach one another and may shape their interpretations of the actions of their counterparts. The scope of this paper consists of defining the nature of the media’s coverage of this bilateral relationship, attempting to

understand the process by which these myths are created (specifically the way the media formulates and perpetuates particular storylines), and their repercussions in this particular case study.

In studying the role of media coverage in this relationship, the attention will fall primarily on the actions of various television media outlets and the distinct myths that they present to the public. As such, this paper will not attempt to directly analyze the relationship between the two countries, however a description of the historical development of relations between the two countries is given, as this context is necessary for understanding the various interpretations of this history presented in the media and their specific biases. This historical perspective is also useful when attempting to understand the origin of these myths and their relative currency in foreign policy circles.

This type of analysis is, by definition, multidisciplinary in nature, as it combines the fields of international relations, conflict studies, communication, and journalism. This is responsible, in part, for the relative neglect of this type of analysis, as it presents an array of challenges to a potential researcher and requires an appropriate theoretical framework that incorporates the salient parts of all four fields to produce relevant results. As such, there are very few studies of this sort, resulting in a general lack of research on the media's effect in the Iranian-American case. The basis for this case study consists of the model developed by Eytan Gilboa in *Media and Conflict Resolution*, with additional emphasis on the nature of stereotyped enemy images from Janice Gross Stein's *Image, Identity, and Conflict Resolution*, which provide the necessary elements for a meaningful examination.

In addition to the problems addressed above, there are several other constraints placed on this research. First, while the study attempts to understand the mutual mythmaking processes at work in both states, an analysis of the Iranian media has its inherent complexities. While media outlets in Iran can be either privately or publicly owned, both are under the control of the Iranian government and subject to restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This would likely result in the projection of only a single set of myths supported by the Iranian government and may lead to increased cynicism among the population regarding these messages if the Iranian people are aware of this control, thus diminishing their impact on public opinion. Furthermore, while Persian is the official language of Iran and the study attempts to understand how mass opinion is formed and developed, for practical purposes this study will only look at English language sources within Iran. While it is possible that a different interpretation of history is present in each of the various language sources, this is not likely to be the case because of the censorship described above.

Despite these challenges, this paper will attempt to increase the understanding of the dynamics that drive this bilateral relationship, which have allowed for the escalation of tensions in recent years. While the primary focus will be on the role of the media, attention will be paid to the constraints placed on policy makers as a result of this process of myth creation, the impact that this has on the overall relationship, and the costs associated with these repercussions.

Historical Background

Iran and the United States share a dynamic history that provides context for their current policy disputes, while also presenting ample opportunity for distortion for those engaged in supporting their political and ideological agendas through myth-creation. A proper understanding of this history is necessary if one is to grasp how the relationship developed, and thus how the current state of affairs was reached. It is also useful in deciphering the merits of various media interpretations of these events, as one cannot truly understand the implications of differing accounts without this historical perspective. For this reason, this paper will attempt to focus primarily on those events that have had a significant and continuing impact on relations, and also provide a reasoned description of each affair.

A. Pre-1953 Relationship

Although Iran has played an important role on the international stage (as host to vital trade routes and a source of natural resources) for some time, and official relations between the two countries extend back to opening of the first American legation in Tehran in 1882, the outbreak of the Second World War provided the first opportunity for significant contact between the two states (Lytle 4). During this conflict, Iran became a crucial supply route for the allies and a source of petroleum to fuel the war effort. The development of strong ties initially favored both sides (8).

For Iranians, the American delegation represented a source of funds and a potential third power that could be used to lift Iran out of the influence of the traditional imperial forces in the region, namely Britain and Russia. The United States provided several advisory missions to the Iranian government and attempted to help reform the police, military forces, as well as the

finances of the Middle Eastern state. This role was largely supported by the United Kingdom, which saw the limits of its own continued power in Iran and preferred the Americans fill the resulting power vacuum, at the exclusion of the Soviets. According to historian Mark Hamilton Lytle, the Americans justified this increased presence in Iranian affairs with three beliefs, some of which still underlie much of American foreign policy (16). The first was a belief in American Exceptionalism, which postulates that America alone is able to transcend the “self-serving imperialism” that had previously shaped Iran’s relations with other states and act as a disinterested presence. The second was a belief (as elaborated in the Riga Axioms) that the Soviets sought worldwide, communist revolution and domination, and that American intervention was needed to keep the Soviets from establishing a hold in the country. The third was the idea that the American institutions of liberal democracy and capitalism would be able to transform and stabilize the Iranian state. These core beliefs would be tested by changes in the relationship, and some of these assumptions would later prove to be incorrect, negatively affecting the development of relations.

As both the inevitable result of Second World War and the increasing importance of Middle Eastern oil became apparent, American interests in Iran shifted. The war proved that industrialized states would require large amounts of resources from third world countries to fight their conflicts. It was also becoming evident that the reserves in the Western Hemisphere would be insufficient to meet the wartime needs of the allies, as well as the civilian needs after the end of hostilities (Lytle 71). At the same time, Iran sought increased political ties with the United States through oil concessions (73). The subsequent negotiations, however, lead to an increase in “big power” rivalry and the emergence of Cold War tensions in the region, as Soviets and Anglo-American interests vied for the oil rights, and the potential economic gains of the deal

undermined the disinterested presence the Americans claimed to seek (75). In fact, this emerging conflict saw one of the first uses of the domino theory to justify American intervention, as Iran was seen as a bulwark against Soviet territorial aims in the Middle East (139). These increased tensions and conflicting interests contributed, in part, to the political crises to come.

B. 1953 Coup and Its Implications

For years, the Iranians had felt that the poor terms of the concession given to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (originally in 1901 and renegotiated in 1933) were unacceptable and represented an insult to national pride. It was widely known that the British government received more in taxes and dividends from its shares in the company than the government of Iran received in royalties. This, coupled with the fifty-fifty profit sharing deals struck by Venezuela and Saudi Arabia with various oil companies in the years after the agreement, convinced many Iranians that the concession needed to be terminated (Lytle 196). Mohammed Mossadeq and his National Front party opposed any attempts to amend the deal and sought to nationalize the country's oil interests. After the assassination of Prime Minister Razmara, the nationalization bill quickly passed both houses of parliament and Mossadeq was soon named Prime Minister with a mandate to implement the new law (200). Despite attempts by both British and American interests to intervene and bring about a compromised resolution to the situation, both sides remained defiant in their positions and in July of 1951 Mossadeq broke off negotiation. Then, on October 4th, 1951, AIOC was subsequently expelled from Iran (192).

This act was seen as unacceptable by British (and later American) policy makers and they began to work on bringing down the Mossadeq regime. This act was further justified in their minds by Mossadeq's shift to the left. British attempts to undermine Mossadeq's support in the parliament allegedly resulted in the defection of more moderate elements of his coalition,

resulting in his increased reliance on pro-Tudeh demonstrators and more radical elements of the population for political support (Limbert 76). American interests had always feared the creation of an opportunity for the Soviets to make economic and political gains in Iran, and Mossadeq's implicit threat of a communist takeover in May of 1953 confirmed their fears (75). British officials recognized these growing concerns as well as the shift in American attitudes regarding intervention after the election of President Eisenhower and the appointment of the Dulles brothers. In turn, the British responded with a shift in their argumentation, from their "right to oil" to a focus on the Soviet threat. Operation Ajax was then put into place in August and despite initial failures resulting from a delay in the delivery of Mossadeq's dismissal (which caused the shah to flee the country and almost caused the mission to be abandoned) eventually anti-Mossadeq elements prevailed (77).

From the Iranian perspective, the coup of 1953 is seen as the most important event in this shared history (Limbert). This foreign intervention has been interpreted as a repudiation of the idea of a disinterested American presence and as confirmation of America's desire to control Iranian domestic politics and to secure access to Iran's vast petroleum resources (Limbert 81). It has also had dire consequences for the future of the relationship, as from 1953 to 1979, many saw the Iranian government as a client state of the U.S. and the shah as an American puppet (Ansari 41). This led to extended periods of domestic unrest, notably during the modification of the Status of Forces Agreement in 1963-64, and continues to be a point of contention for Iranian citizens (Limbert 81). This act did, however, result in increased American missions and aid to Iran, as from 1952 to 1961 the United States provided \$1.1 billion in grants and loans to the Iranian government and oversaw a period of Westernized development (Ansari 41). Additionally, from 1953 onward, the shah became the linchpin of America's anti-Soviet containment policy in

the Middle East. Overall though, this increase in American influence led to a dramatic increase in distrust between the people of the two states and a long-term decline in relations.

C. 1979 Revolution and the Resulting Hostage Crisis

Just as the 1953 coup defines the nature of the relationship from the traditional Iranian perspective, the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the hostage crisis that followed formed the foundation of the American viewpoint. By 1978, the shah had been in power for some 25 years since the removal of Mossadeq, and while he had had to contend with various uprisings in the past, his reign had survived these tests and he appeared to remain a secure ally for America in the region. This would change quickly, however, as a year of increasingly significant demonstrations and outbreaks of violence, together with his rapidly deteriorating health as a result of leukemia, would result in the shah's departure from the country on January 16th, 1979. Two weeks later, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile to jubilant crowds and soon all remaining elements of monarchial rule were defeated (Limbert 89-90).

The United States initially proclaimed that it would accept whatever government came out of this revolution and that it would support them against their common foe, the Soviets. After the removal of the shah, however, the coalition of nationalists, Marxists, religious ideologues, and others brought together by their opposition to the monarchy began to fight amongst themselves for control (Limbert 91). The American Congress then passed the Javits resolution. This nonbinding resolution, which condemned the summary executions and other harsh tactics being employed in the streets of Iran, greatly angered the Iranians and resulted in the rejection of the new American Ambassador, Walter Cutler (92).

At the same time, the shah requested admittance into the United States for medical treatment. Despite clear warnings that such an act would inflame popular opinion against the United States and put embassy workers in danger, upon hearing of the shah's diagnosis and after receiving minimal commitments from the Iranian provisional government to ensure the safety of the American mission in Tehran, the Carter administration allowed the shah to arrive in New York on October 23rd (Limbert 100). Less than two weeks later the American embassy was overrun by angry student protesters. After confirming that it was not a power grab by his political rivals, Khomeini endorsed the take over and the provisional government, unable to provide any type of security for the embassy, collapsed (102). Khomeini used this crisis to solidify his own power, as documents from the embassy detailing talks between Iranian officials and American diplomats were released to discredit his political foes (104).

With their representatives held hostage and no provisional government to negotiate with, the Americans had little recourse to solve the hostage situation. Despite several negotiation attempts, the freezing of Iranian assets, and a failed rescue mission, the United States was largely relegated to waiting the crisis out (Limbert 109). Eventually, after hard-line conservatives had solidified their parliamentary position in the February-May elections and the passing of the shah in Egypt in July 1980, Khomeini decided that the continued detainment of the hostages was no longer beneficial to his interests (114). True negotiations for their release began, which eventually resulted in their liberation on the last day of Carter's term and the first day of Reagan's administration, January 20th, 1981 (116).

The implications of this crisis are clearly evident in the current state of the relationship. An environment of distrust and hostility had developed, as each side had sought ways to undermine the interests of the other. A policy of forced Iranian isolation and an implied desire

for regime change in the Islamic Republic have characterized the American position since 1979. In turn, Iranian policy makers have sought to frustrate American efforts in the Middle East and to develop the military capabilities to discourage further intrusion into their internal affairs. These policies have had a variety of applications in recent decades, and their ultimate consequences are not yet fully known.

D. Recent Historical Developments

The period after the Islamic Revolution has been host to a wide range of events that have greatly affected the dynamics of this bilateral relationship, and while open military engagements have been rare, hostilities between the two countries have generally remained high. This was especially true during the Iran-Iraq War. This conflict and the diplomatic missions surrounding it displayed the United States' ability to use its position in the world system against its enemies. Despite Iraq being the clear aggressor in the dispute, almost no country took Iran's side in the conflict and, in fact, by the end of the war Iran was fighting an international coalition that came to include the United States (Limbert 107). During this war, the U.S. provided intelligence and economic aid to the Iraqis, normalized relations with that country, and imposed the first of many rounds of sanctions on Iran (Global Policy Forum). It also became directly involved during Operation Praying Mantis and attacked Iranian ships and oil infrastructure, as well as a commercial airliner, Iran Air Flight 655 (Sorenson 196). This conflict provided a clear example of the lengths the United States was willing to pursue to weaken the Iranian regime.

This is not to argue that the legacy of the Iran-Iraq war was this simplistic. During the conflict, the Reagan administration also sought, through Israeli channels, to facilitate the sale of arms to the Iranian government, in violation of an arms embargo. This was part of a deal that aimed to secure the release of American hostages held by Shiite militants in Lebanon, who had

the backing of the Iranians (Limbert 123). The resulting Iran-Contra scandal shed light on the limitations of aggression between the two countries, as both countries appeared to be willing to negotiate with one another if it was in their immediate self-interest, despite legal restrictions.

The situation further escalated in the 1990's, however, after reports of renewed Iranian nuclear ambitions emerged. In 1997, Israeli estimates put the Iranian government 6 to 24 months away from a nuclear weapon. While this estimate proved to be inaccurate, fears of Iran's nuclear ambitions continued. Reports have also surfaced that this nuclear program was accelerated following the American invasion of Iraq, as Iranian officials believed that the conflict would not have happened if the Iraqis had possessed weapons of mass destruction (Sorenson 209).

This arms development was in stark contrast to the efforts of Iranian President Khatami to begin a dialogue between the two countries. In 1998, the Iranian President called for exchanges between the United States and Iran (Sorenson 196). The American State Department under Madeleine Albright responded positively, but domestic opposition in both countries stalled progress. Another effort to ease tensions was attempted again by the Khatami government in 2003. This initiative, which sought to place all substantive issues between the countries on the table, was rebuked by the Bush administration (Limbert 204).

Ties between the two states were further compromised by the 2002 State of the Union address, which President Bush used to implicate Iran (along with Iraq and North Korea) in an Axis of Evil. This charge was met with anger and large-scale demonstrations in Iran, and has further hindered improved relations between the two countries (Sorenson 197). Today, the expressed interests of the two states continue to clash heavily, with Iran supporting radical groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, supplying arms and goods to the Palestinian Authority,

and continuing to pursue nuclear technology, albeit allegedly in the name of peaceful power (Puri 2007). America continues to support the development of pro-Western governments in Iraq and Afghanistan (both of which share borders with Iran) and the implementation of further sanctions against the Islamic regime. Episodes like the arrest of the three American hikers detained in 2009 demonstrate that relations between the two countries have remained decidedly hostile.

Theoretical Framework

The future development of this relationship will be affected, in part, by the way the conflict is portrayed in popular media sources. Underlying attitudes of hostility expressed by political elites and media sources tend to be mutually reinforcing, and one is typically not possible without the other (Frank 3). While news outlets have been credited with affecting the course of international affairs for centuries (including newspaper magnates William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer's role in the Spanish- American War in 1898), it is commonly argued that the media's influence in the foreign policy arena has increased since the inception of the twenty-four-hour news network. This enhanced "CNN effect" is due in part to the development of new technologies that now allow contributors to globally disseminate live reports from any location in the world, at any time of day (Livingston 1). It has been argued that television is a particularly compelling means of mass communication, as it jumps the illiteracy barrier and creates an "immediate and powerful emotional impact" (Frank 7). These facts allow television sources to potentially influence the policy agenda formation of states, accelerate the response-development process, and act as an impediment to both military actions and attempts at reconciliation (Livingston 2).

This is not to suggest that the media's role is uniform across all forms of conflict. Different forms of military engagement have different sensitivities to media coverage, as the implications of reporting on a hostage rescue operation are inherently different from those involving coverage of a humanitarian intervention (Livingston 10). As such, the evolution of a conflict from one form to another will cause a similar change in the effect of the media coverage. Understanding the nature of the relationship between two states is a precondition for a meaningful discussion on the implications of media coverage, and the nature of the coverage

may lead to consequential inferences about the state of the relationship. The relationship between the United State and Iran can be characterized as one of strategic deterrence, with particular periods of instability rising to the level of a low-intensity conflict, and is thus subject to the media effects associated with these conflicts (Livingston 11).

As an example of strategic deterrence, this relationship is particularly susceptible to media influence (Livingston 11). This type of interaction involves persuading one's enemy that the relevant costs associated with a potential course of action (in this case nuclear weapons development) outweigh any benefits. This process requires communication, and as formal relations between the two countries have been suspended since the hostage crisis of 1979, this task is often accomplished with carefully constructed, official statements, disseminated through mass media (Livingston 4). This rightly suggests that the media can also be used as an asset for resourceful policy makers determined to send a message to their foreign counterparts. Coverage of this type of conflict is often routinized, only capturing the attention of the wider public in times of particular instability. Thus the public dialogue is left primarily to political elites, who define the contours of the debate and discuss any developments (Livingston 11). Given the nature of strategic deterrence described above, this small group of policy insiders thus has the ability to influence the course of the relationship and affect the way both sides view one another.

The question then arises, what is the nature of this coverage and what are the implications for the relationship. Much has been written about the role of the media and the various aims that news outlets have when covering conflicts. There has been a recent rejection of traditional coverage techniques, labeled as the "low road of war journalism" by critics who favor more active journalistic procedures. This traditional type of coverage focuses on the actions of elites and win-loss outcomes of armed conflicts and is often characterized as "chasing" wars, merely

“keeping score” in lives and material damages. This type of reporting has been blamed for the escalation of conflicts, the dehumanization of one’s enemies, and the polarization of affected groups (Gilboa 101).

This is in contrast to what proponents call the “high road of peace journalism,” with its focus on the people affected by war, win-win solutions, and conflict transformation (Gilboa 102). This activist journalism seeks to explore the reasons behind violence and aims to give a voice to all affected parties, humanizing them in the process (Gilboa 102). It attempts to cover possible conflict resolution as much as the developing violence. Critics of this method label it as dangerously activist in nature and unrealistic given the economic, bureaucratic, and societal limitations surrounding the journalistic profession (Pauly 2009).

This paper does not aim to argue in favor of either method, but rather to merely analyze which “road” is found more prevalently in the coverage of the Iranian-American relationship and determine the implications that that may have on its development. The question posed will be whether or not the overall nature of the coverage is functional or dysfunctional according to the functional theory of communication, defined as the performance or dereliction of the roles set out for the institution, which are designed to meet the needs of the individuals and societies it serves (Gilboa 104).

This question is important to the development of the relationship, as the images created in the media outlets have profound effects on the populations of both countries. In short, beliefs matter in the policy arena, and once created, embedded enemy images are very difficult to change. Former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger once remarked that the United States often made foreign policy decisions in response to “impulse and image,” and this reality makes the

nature of media coverage a more salient issue (Livingston 1). The beliefs that policy makers have about one another affect their interactions and stereotyped images about another country's citizens often affect public opinion on foreign policy decisions. These images are often constructed as a response to apparently hostile actions (Stein 93). This can be the result of genuine aggression or simply a function of human psychology. Egocentric biases tend to lead people, including policy makers, to greatly overestimate the degree to which they are the target of another's actions and ambiguous actions in an unstructured environment (like the international arena) can often be seen as threatening (96). Also, in an attempt to understand the world around them, humans have developed a basic need for identity, and thus if another actor is not well understood, the need to label this individual or group may lead to the acceleration of the image formation process, resulting in the creation of an enemy image before all considerations are weighed (94).

Once formed, these images are often self-reinforcing and difficult to change. Stereotyped enemy images tend to generate behavior that is hostile, as treating another state as an enemy is often met with antagonistic acts. This only confirms the initial assessment, resulting in a self-fulfilling loop (Stein 98). A parallel process may also occur, whereby adversaries acquire the characteristics they attribute to one another, as it is argued that the treachery and cruelty of the other side demands an equal response (Frank 4). These cycles are very difficult to break, as enemy images create little incentive to seek new information, and any newly discovered developments that are inconsistent with the initial assessment tend to be discounted (Frank 4). Reconciliation is often only preceded by a generational change and political succession and tends to come when there is no other way to account for a large shift in the actions of one's opponents (Stein 104). This requires a large and irrevocable act of concession toward one's enemy, an act

that is particularly difficult to accomplish in democratic forms of governance, where an angry public could quickly remove any politicians seen as compromising with the enemy. This situation highlights the importance of image creation, as any embedded images tend to have effects that are profound and resistant to change. The creation of embedded enemy images could greatly damage relations between two states, causing great political and economic losses to the populations of both countries.

Media Analysis

The contentious relationship between the United States and Iran has been the subject of periods of intense media coverage. It is the intention of this paper to determine the nature of this coverage, the dynamics associated with any shift in the media's role, and the effects these elements have on the overall relationship. As previously discussed, this paper will seek to determine the relative frequency of functional and dysfunctional coverage in various media sources. In this particular context, functional coverage will be that which follows the high road of peace journalism, as outlined by Gilboa. This includes a focus on the people affected by the actions of either country, possible win-win solutions available to these states, attempts at conflict transformation, and investigations into the reasons behind the conflict. It will generally be characterized as de-escalation oriented in nature, and it will attempt to create "between zones" that connect the U.S. and Iran to one another, offer possible solutions to the present conflict, and manage the enemy images already prevalent in either society (Gilboa 102). Conversely, dysfunctional coverage will be that which focuses solely on the actions of elites and win-lose outcomes, and which perpetuates the embedded enemy images previously created. It is escalation oriented and will often contain misrepresentations of historical events or the systematic omission of references to pertinent incidents (101).

This analysis will look at news transcripts from both before and after the 2002 State of the Union Address (in which President Bush declared Iran a part of the "axis of evil") and seek to determine if this event had any recognizable effect on the nature of the media coverage. It will also attempt to examine the impact of political ideology on the media's portrayal of this relationship, as news organizations with differing ideological-leanings are studied separately. The three American news outlets selected are NBC, CNN, and Fox News Channel. They

represent left-leaning, moderate, and right-leaning news sources respectively. It is worth noting that MSNBC was originally intended to be used as the left-leaning news source; however a lack of sufficient transcripts required a change in this selection. The political positions of the various media organizations were determined by a study of media bias in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, in which CNN was found to be the second most moderate news outlet with a score of 56.0 (where 50.0 is the most moderate) and Fox News and NBC were both found to have significant political leanings, albeit in differing directions (39.7 and 61.4 respectively) (Groseclose 1220). Transcripts were compiled by LexisNexis under the search terms “Iran,” “United States,” and “conflict,” and totaled 96 overall (with CNN contributing 40, Fox adding 35, and NBC responsible for 21). The analysis of the Iranian Press TV was slightly more anecdotal, relying on their official youtube page, which has over 6,700 videos of news coverage. A search for videos containing the terms “Iran” and “United States” revealed 50 videos, containing roughly 400 minutes of footage.

Like all the other American news outlets, NBC primarily discussed Iran in terms of its role in other conflicts, namely focusing heavily on Iran’s part in supplying support to Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi insurgents, and Afghan warlords, while also addressing the growing concerns surrounding their nuclear program. However, this news organization did seem to provide Iran with slightly more deniability, using qualifying terms like “accused” and “allegedly” more often than their professional counterparts (Wolfe 2008). This was likely a product of an ideological break the news outlet had with the Bush administration, which was in power for 18 of the 21 transcripts and which was the source of the claims against Iran. Although it was likely unintentional, this domestic political disagreement resulted in less escalation oriented coverage. Other examples of this type of coverage include the criticism of hostile rhetoric, including

calling the use of the term “axil of evil” “misapplied,” and the offering of nonviolent solutions to the present conflict, which involved supplying Iran with nuclear power, while containing the nuclear material (Brokaw 2004). The history of the conflict was also examined during a trip to Iran by NBC anchor Matt Lauer, and this segment served to humanize the Iranian population, as it made reference to their “great culture” (Vieira 2007). The coverage also provided some voice to the Iranian people, as it quoted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saying that America does not hate Muslims and that Muslims do not hate America (Williams 2010).

Despite these examples, NBC’s coverage was not fully functional in nature. Many escalatory terms were used to describe Iran. These included naming the Islamic Republic a “rogue state,” and “a serious threat with a growing arsenal of even more deadly weapons” and with its “finger always on the trigger” (Williams 2008). Iran was typically characterized as the sole aggressor in the relationship and as a state that was determined to “take us down” (Lauer 2007). These terms reinforce the image of Iran as a violent, aggressive state determined to undermine the interests of America and its allies in the region, and this image acts as a significant impediment to future negotiations, as will be seen later in the analysis. Also, while the Iranian people were mentioned on rare occasion, the overwhelming majority of the coverage was not concerned with the well-being of ordinary people but on the actions and movements of political elites. This has a tendency to personalize problems in the relationship in ways that are not beneficial to conflict resolution and it reduces the focus on human suffering that results from these disagreements.

CNN also provided interesting material for this analysis. Its focus was also on Iran’s previously discussed support of terrorist groups and organizations seen as hostile to the United States, as well as its pursuit of nuclear weapons; however these claims tended to be far more

specific in nature, describing the precise tonnage of explosives sent to the Palestinian territories and the particular warlord supported by Iran in an attempt to destabilize the interim government of Afghanistan (Phillips 2002). In short, these allegations were less frequently assumed to be true and more likely to be verified and elaborated on in CNN reports. Also, CNN was the only organization with transcripts that predated the 2002 State of the Union Address. Their reports taken as a whole provide a clear delineation between the coverage before and after this event. Prior to 2002, while the coverage still mentioned Iran's support of terrorist groups, including naming it the world's "most active state sponsor of terror," the overall tone of these news accounts was optimistic in nature (Woodruff 1998). Talk of "unprecedented cooperation" between the United States and Iran in Afghanistan was present, as reports highlighting the role Iran had in facilitating the delivery of tons of American wheat to the Afghan population were offered (Phillips 2002). One piece also mentioned Saddam Hussein's worry that Iran was moving toward Washington and away from his regime (Callaway 1999). It is apparent that the current embedded enemy images were not fully utilized before 2002, as reports of Iran's rearmament were not seen as alarming but as a natural expression of its power in the region (Begleiter 1992). Also, Iran's purchase of nuclear technology from China was seen as only a "question mark" in the relationship, not as an existential threat to the United States or its allies. This lack of stereotyped imagery resulted in more positive coverage of Iran and its actions.

This time period did not exclusively contain functional coverage, however, as there was a persistent focus on elites to the exclusion of the general population and misrepresentations were also present. One story focused on Saddam Hussein's claims that Iran was responsible for the war between his country and the Islamic Republic, which resulted in the death of close to one million people, with no rebuttal or reference to Iraqi belligerence being made; this despite

widespread agreement that it was in fact Iraq that was the aggressor in that conflict (Callaway 1999).

CNN's post 2002 coverage was similarly bimodal in nature, with both functional and dysfunctional coverage present. While functional coverage was far more prevalent before the speech, the high road of peace journalism was taken at several points in later years, as a "between zone" was created when a report cited Iran and the United States' similar victimizations at the hands of Saddam Hussein (Mackey 2002). Dysfunctional coverage was closer to the norm in this period, however, as there was a continued use of escalatory terms used to describe Iran and its actions, including "nefarious" and "axis of evil" (Hemmer 2002). Also, despite clear attempts to humanize Hezbollah and the Afghan population, no such overtures were made to the Iranian people and no discussion about the effects of economic sanctions on their daily lives was made. This was the result of an exclusive focus on the actions of elites, which was sometimes taken to illogical extremes. At one point in the transcripts, the movement of an elliptical machine used by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was "watched closely," as it was believed that it may have provided a "good insight" into when she was arriving in Jerusalem (Kagan 2006). The attention paid to this piece of exercise equipment may have been more productively spent on humanizing coverage, or other reports which could aid in conflict resolution.

In contrast to the previous news outlets, Fox News' coverage contained only limited attempts at de-escalation, and these were primarily in the form of questions posed by liberal co-anchors which were often dismissed by the show's guests and more conservative host. In various segments, the effects of over-hyped rhetoric and the need for negotiations were explored; however these questions were typically quickly dismissed as naïve (Hannity 2007; Hannity

2006a). When asked about the relevant worth of searching for a peaceful solution, the guest on the program, Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, replied that any agreement would not result in peace but merely be a “truce between the violence,” serving only to give the Iranians and their allies time to rearm (Hannity 2006b).

Far more common than talk of peaceful resolutions was escalation oriented arguments. There was a continual framing of the relationship between the United States and Iran as a “defacto war” or a “war by proxy” (Gibson 2006). While other outlets covered Iran’s support of both Hezbollah and Hamas and the existence of the American-Israeli alliance, the description of the conflict in these terms was almost completely unique to Fox News. There was also the presence of strong stereotyped enemy images throughout the coverage, and these served to illustrate the self-reinforcing nature of this way of thought. A discussion of the goals of the United States was presented, and the options provided were either the defeat of terrorists or the ability to have diplomatic talks with people “as they plan to kill us” (Hannity 2006b). It is clear that when one believe that their own destruction is the sole goal of their opponent, the value of negotiations vanishes entirely. This study also served to illustrate another point in the literature of enemy images. The uncertainty inherent in the international arena and the difficulty this poses to analysts attempting to decipher the actions of their enemy was clearly evident, as there was clear confusion over whether or not Israel’s various conflicts with Hezbollah and Hamas were part of a “grand plan” or just isolated conflicts (Hannity 2007).

These transcripts also tended to exhibit another trait of dysfunctional coverage, a focus on merely keeping score in lives and destruction. While the costs of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict were reasonably discussed in various reports, this insistence on keeping track of the winners and losers in any altercation was evident when the pundits engaged in an evaluation of casualties in a

hypothetical conflict between the United States and Iran (Hunt 2006). This focus solely on win-loss outcomes tends to increase the extent to which one views their counterparts as enemies that must be defeated.

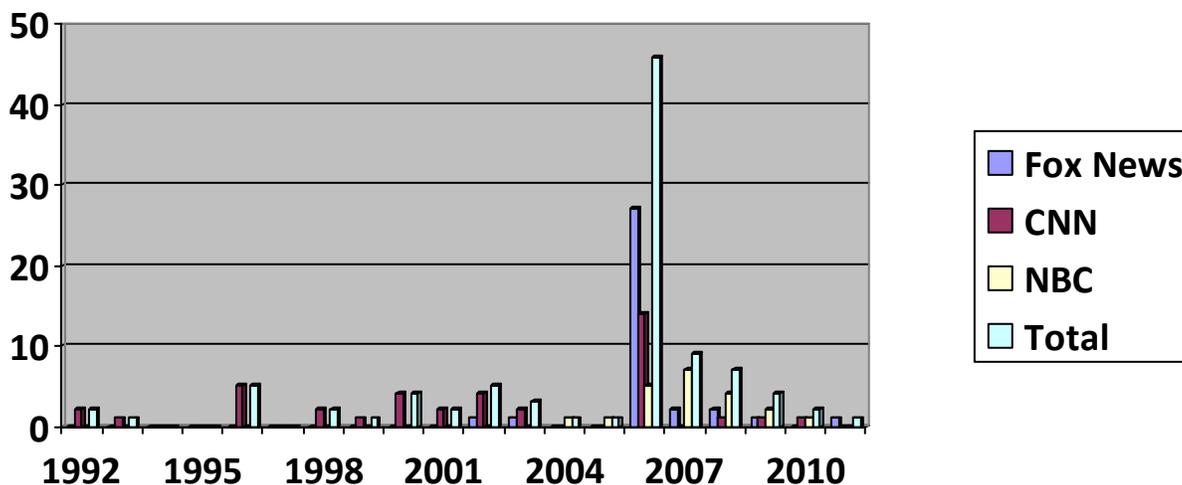
Fox News also contained far more references to the need for regime change, a particular area of concern for nearly all Iranians. In various ways, it was argued that political, economic, military, and intellectual pressures were needed, and the goal of these efforts should be the eventually realization of a more “acceptable government” in Iran. It was also argued, with no rebuttal, that when faced with an opponent who is unwilling to change, “one must either decide to live with it or decide to find a way to replace them.” It was clear in the resulting conversation that the latter method was preferred, and although it was argued that this could be the result of non-violent means, this bloodless path to change was in no way insisted upon (Van Susteren 2009).

Other types of escalation oriented arguments were expressed, as the Iranian President was compared to Osama bin Laden, in that both could not be negotiated with (Hannity 2006a). Adolf Hitler was also mentioned as a parallel leader, as it was reasoned that both men could only be met with military force (Angle 2006). These comparisons obviously do little to humanize the enemy and lead to only more extreme positions. This type of escalation argumentation was seen elsewhere, however, as the question was posed, whether or not the Israeli-Lebanese encounter constituted an “opportunity for a wider conflict,” one in which the United States could “get Syria and Iran” (Colmes 2006). This suggestion was received favorable, with the contention being that the war on terror was global in nature and therefore could not be found in a single country and that the United States must remain aggressive in fighting its enemies.

Overall, American coverage tended to differ significantly between news outlets and time periods. The media's portrayal of the relationship was inclined to be more functional before the 2002 speech and in left-leaning organizations. That being said, a large proportion of coverage in all periods and across the ideological spectrum was dysfunctional in nature. Throughout all the transcripts, Iran was seen as the clear and only aggressor. News pieces also tended to deal less with Iran directly and more with its support of various groups and its involvement in other conflicts. There was a pervasive exclusion of coverage about the general population and few attempts to humanize them were made, while at the same time a strong tendency to follow the movements of the political elites emerged.

The varying volume of the transcripts also suggests several conclusions about the dynamics behind media coverage. The number of stories was far from uniform across the time period studied, as they differed significantly year to year. These changes in the number of stories were largely responses to new developments on the ground, namely increases in the degree of violence. In fact, most stories in this analysis occurred during or immediately after Israel's conflict with Hezbollah. This implies that media attention follows official actions; it is not a precursor to it. This would suggest that news outlets have little agenda-setting power of their own, and that they are limited to reacting to the maneuverings of political elites and possibly creating constraints on policy makers after the initial decisions are reached. This would indicate that the media's effect on global affairs largely comes from its role as an accelerant or an inhibitor to the political process, not as an agenda-setting agent.

Number of Transcripts Per Year By News Outlet



There was also a troubling lack of emphasis on the historical context of the relationship. The events of 1953 were only mentioned twice in 96 transcripts (once in a CNN piece and once more in a transcript by NBC). Similarly, the Shah was only mentioned three times (twice on Fox and once in the same CNN piece that discussed the 1953 coup). This preference for discussions that only pertain to the current state of the relationship and its connection to other conflicts serves to rob the audience of a historical perspective on the issues faced by today's policy makers. Even more alarming than this near-systematic omission of pertinent historical events is the few situations where they were discussed. In an attempt to find a Fox transcript discussing the 1953 coup, I conducted a wider search of the available database. I found only one mention of this event in the search results, but its presence is illuminating. In it, the following argument is made by Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard*: “[I]n 1953, was it a mistake to back the overthrow of the government then? I don't think so. Saved Iran from being a communist country, a Soviet satellite, and so on. Backing the shah for 20 years or so -- was that wrong? Not at all. It

kept -- it held back this wave of Islamic extremism for a number of years” (Snow 2000). This quote demonstrates a misrepresentation of the threat posed by Mohammad Mosaddegh and the implications of the intervention required to remove him. It is also an example of the escalation-favoring opinions found in various news outlets.

Unsurprisingly, the Iranian news source studied in the analysis provided a very different narrative. It must first be mentioned that Press TV, the English language news source owned by the Iranian government, was only launched in July of 2007, and thus it does not provide the same variety of reports as the other news sources. This means that the resulting examination of this media outlet was far more anecdotal in nature. That being said, a clear stereotyped image of the United States emerged from the videos available. The U.S. was consistently portrayed as an overconfident, weakened power that was prone to miscalculations of their own interests and the implications of Iranian actions. American military capabilities were strongly questioned, even to the point of asserting that America would “be finished” if it attacked Iran (Afrasiabi 2010). America was also referred to numerous times as being controlled by pro-Israel interest groups, which supposedly had a significant voice in the foreign policy formation process, with one commentator describing Israel as “the tail that wags the dog” (Afrasiabi 2010).

Also, similar to how the American media focused on the illegal actions of Iran and the groups they support, Press TV repeatedly called attention to instances where the United States and Israel were seen as breaking international law. This involved America’s alleged violation of the terms of both the Algiers Accord and the UN Charter in interfering with Iranian domestic affairs and Israel’s attacks on the Gaza Strip and disparaging assertions about both countries’ human rights records (Hanafi 2011). America was also called the “primary rogue nation” in the world, which has a “warmongering attitude” and uses “bullying tactics” to get its way

(Loewenstein 2010; Mojtahedzadeh 2010). The United States was further seen as focused only on causing harm to and the destruction of the Iranian state. America's focus on toppling the Iranian government was mentioned several times, including one piece that showed several American headlines calling for regime change (Beeman 2010). In several pieces, Iran was seen as wrongly attacked for a nuclear weapons program it did not possess and as being targeted only because of their rejection of American hegemony in the region, going so far as to argue that there was no evidence that an Iranian nuclear weapons program even existed. In stark contrast to American reports, Iran was portrayed in its own media as an extremely peaceful nation, having not attacked another country in over 250 years (Loewenstein 2010).

There were some elements of the Iranian coverage which suggested themes of de-escalation, however all of these suggestions aligned exactly with Iranian geopolitical interests. Several videos focused on the suffering of the general population as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran. The restrictions on cancer medications and airplane parts were blamed for the deaths of many Iranians (Hashemi 2011). These sanctions were also seen as counterproductive to American interests, as they only encouraged the Iranian government to spend more on its military. Overall, the coverage argued for the removal of sanctions, although this was likely due to the benefits this would have on Iran, not because of any inherent desire to lessen tensions.

There were other de-escalation statements made which may have had more substance. President Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying that negotiations were possible if the Americans were considerate and committed to improving the world (Hashemi 2011). The Supreme Leader Khamenei was also seen saying that "if you change, our behavior will change too." That being said, Obama's recent overture was portrayed as insufficient, as it was claimed that he had not

followed up on his call for dialogue with satisfactory action (Weisman 2009). Rather, it was argued that Obama's true nature was shown by his continued pursuit of "crippling sanctions" (Afrasiabi 2010). These statements from Iranian officials might therefore be seen as either genuine opportunities for dialogue or meaningless political maneuverings.

While the presence of some de-escalation coverage existed in the media of both countries, strong, embedded enemy image remained persistent. Both countries appeared to see the other as the clear aggressor in the conflict. They both saw their opponent as a state which was determined to seek their destruction or the destruction of their allies. Also, the media in both countries tended to focus exclusively on the allegedly illegal actions of the other, while excusing the previous mistakes of their allies and their own state. Furthermore, the use of pejorative terms to describe one's enemy was prevalent, and this trend only increased after the rise in tensions in 2002. This would suggest that the current political environment is not conducive to any attempts at negotiation. This type of effort is only likely to be successful if one side makes a dramatic, irreversible and unmistakable move toward reconciliation, similar to that described by Stein. Given the nature of each state's media coverage of the relationship, a concession of this type would be extremely difficult politically.

Conclusion

This paper has found that despite diffuse attempts at de-escalation, the overwhelming majority of coverage in the American and Iranian media sources studied were escalation oriented in nature. The historical background of the relationship was consistently ignored and embedded enemy images persisted throughout the many news segments. Each side tended to focus exclusively on the wrongdoings of the other state, portraying their adversaries as irrational, dangerous, and prone to illegal actions. Given that this type of myth-creation process is present in the media sources of both states, what are the implications for the future of the relationship? When the other side is continually portrayed as an aggressive, rogue state whose people may be moral but whose leaders are at best dangerously misguided and at worst outright evil, acting without any concern for international laws or norms, it places significant constraints on policy makers. What can be the benefits of negotiating with such a foe? If left alone, this situation is likely to lead to only further hostility and distrust between the countries.

It could certainly be argued that the situation appears to be intractable. With their fears of imposed regime change, expressed in numerous media reports and based on the country's unique historical perspective, Iran's leaders continue to feel threatened by foreign intervention. A tenuous negative peace has persisted, where an American or Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear, military, and political facilities remains a very real possibility. According to Stein, threatened identities are highly conducive to hostile imagery, which only reinforces the negative enemy images perpetuated by media sources and furthers the decline in this bilateral relationship (107). At the same time, the United States has pursued more peaceful means of coercion, through the use of economic sanctions. These have been limited in scope and severity by Russia and China, however, who both hold veto powers at the UN Security Council (Iran 2006). Even without these

limitations, the effectiveness of these sanctions in bringing about the policy change they seek from Iranian leaders is highly questionable.

With the rise in tensions in the last decade and the ineffectiveness of other means of resolution, the military option may be considered by policy makers. The implications of this course of action have been investigated in a number of war games, perhaps the most interesting of which was conducted by the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. This simulation demonstrated the “tremendous [and] unpredictable costs” of even a successful initial attack on Iranian nuclear installations (Storbel 2010). The former senior U.S. officials that portrayed the Iranian leadership answered with a robust response, attacking Israel directly and through its proxies and eventually mining the Straits of Hormuz, cutting off the “world’s chief oil entry.” This would have resulted in a dramatic increase in world oil prices, dealing a significant blow to the global economic recovery (Smith 2007). This strong response has a base in reality, however, as Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, have vowed to respond to any American blow “with double the intensity” and have expressed a willingness to “harm U.S. interests anywhere in the world” (Iran 2006). While its organizers are quick to point out that war games are only “imperfect mirrors” of reality, this simulation hardly demonstrates the worst case scenario for American policy makers (Strobel 2010). As the initial attack was launched by Israel, Iran refrained from directly attacking U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and the long term implications of the attack were also not examined. Former U.K. Ambassador in Tehran, Sir Richard Dalton, argues that an attack on Iran would only encourage it to pursue nuclear technology in the long run by confirming its fears of intervention and demonstrating its need to defend itself (BBC 2007).

With the high price of a military intervention and the intolerability of the current state of affairs, the potential costs of mutual myth creation and the persistent enemy images it produces have become apparent. These processes have resulted in a situation in which the benefits of negotiation cannot be reached and where a decline in the relationship is the norm. If this situation is to be overcome, the psychology of the relationship must be changed. Both sides must decide that the benefits of cooperation outweigh those of antagonism and a basic level of trust must be maintained (Frank 5-6). According to Stein, this will require a large and irrevocable act of concession by one side, and may only succeed after a generational shift in political leadership (99). Given the nature of media coverage of this relationship, an act of this magnitude would appear to be politically impossible.

While the current enemy images found in media portrayals contribute to an environment of hostility and may place significant constraints on policy makers, the results of this analysis do not entirely preclude reconciliation. It was also found that the volume and tone of media reports were inclined to follow elite actions. The 2002 State of the Union Address was followed by a change in the nature of media coverage of the issue, resulting in coverage that largely reinforced the assertions found in the speech. If this causation continues, a courageous political leader may be able to make such an irrevocable concession and again change the tone of relations to conform to their contentions, thus avoiding much of the condemnation such an act would receive from the media in the current environment. This act may come in the form of an increase in formal relations between the countries (perhaps first with the establishment of a consulate), as this would have the additional benefit of addressing the lack of communication between the two states, which was found to have caused profound misunderstandings in the previous war game (Strobel 2010).

Even with this potential avenue for reconciliation, the overall assessment of media coverage in this bilateral relationship remains negative. Although differences were found between ideologically distinct media outlets and in the same organization over time, the overwhelming majority of coverage was dysfunctional in nature and would likely result in persistent enemy images and a dehumanization of one's adversaries. Until these concerns are addressed, the declining nature of the relationship is unlikely to change.

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