

A Discourse Analysis of Elite American Newspaper Editorials

The Case of Iran's Nuclear Program

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This study employs Said's concept of Orientalism and van Dijk's concept of the ideological square to analyze three elite American newspapers' editorial coverage of Iran's nuclear program. A critical discourse analysis of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* editorials from 1984 to 2004 identified six Orientalist themes. The study finds that *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* more predominantly drew on Orientalist arguments than did *The New York Times*.

Keywords: Orientalism; Iran; Middle East; Islam; discourse; newspaper editorials

Using critical discourse analysis, this study attempts to elucidate the ideological representation of U.S. policies toward Iran's nuclear program in the editorial positions of three elite U.S. newspapers. The study focuses on whether these representations contribute to the formation of in- and out-group identities based on Orientalist images of Islam and Muslims. Ideology is defined here as "the mental frameworks, [i.e.] the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 26) that different groups use to understand and explain the workings of society. More significant, ideologies function as symbolic systems of thought to organize, maintain, and stabilize particular forms of power relations (Hall, 1996; van Dijk, 1998a). Orientalism, as an ideology, is defined here as a "discursive conception of the Orient . . . [that] involves a binary opposition that finds the West as central in modern, enlightened thought, and the Orient as the mysterious and often dangerous Other" (Hartley, 2002, p. 170).

Studying editorials is of special significance when analyzing the ideological role of news media because editorials are expressions of "the broader ideological stance of the

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newspaper's owners and managers" (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 93). Unlike news discourse, editorials are conversations among a society's economic and power elites, with the public being less of an addressee than spectators (Henry & Tator, 2002). Such significance is more pronounced in the case of editorial coverage of the less familiar, yet more complex area of foreign policy because such coverage influences how the public and policy makers perceive other peoples and regions of the world and "define the parameters of the global political environment" (Malek, 1997, p. 225).

This research follows the guidelines set out by van Dijk (1988), who recommends that an analysis of media texts include three parts: "the description of argumentative structures; the explication of presupposed (tacit) assumptions, norms and values; and an analysis of style and rhetorical features" (p. 126). The analysis focuses on the argumentative structures used to promote a certain perspective on events, players or agents, and policy recommendations. Van Dijk (1995) writes, "The study of numerous argumentative fallacies has shown that powerful arguers may manipulate their audiences by making self-serving arguments more explicit and prominent, whereas other arguments may be left implicit" (p. 29). Because of the style and rhetorical features of editorials, arguments and themes form two more elements that make up the findings.

The following questions are advanced:

Research Question 1: How are events, players, and policies about the Iranian nuclear program portrayed in these three U.S. elite newspapers?

Research Question 2: Are Orientalist arguments used as premises for advancing policy recommendations?

Henry and Tator (2002) consider critical discourse analysis as "a tool for deconstructing the ideologies of the mass media and other elite groups and for identifying and defining social, economic, and historical power relations between dominant and subordinate groups" (p. 72). Media studies scholars have used critical discourse analysis to discover the underlying ideologies of mediated racist representations of minorities and immigrants (Hall, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2002; van Dijk, 1987, 1991a, 1992, 1993). In addition to sustaining and reproducing the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" (van Dijk, 1991a, 1993), the discourse of "democratic racism" (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 23) in effect reproduces a lack of support for policies and practices that "require changes in the existing social, economic, and political order" (p. 24).

Whereas democratic racism (Henry & Tator, 2002) underlies the ideology of media representations of racial minorities, Orientalism functions as a Eurocentric ideology for media representations of Islam and Muslims (Said, 1978, 1981). Although Orientalism has received substantial scholarly criticism (Abdel-Malek, 1963; Alatas, 1977; Djait, 1985; Hodgson, 1993; Said, 1978, 1981; Tibawi, 1963), few studies (e.g., Karim, 1997) have used critical discourse analysis to study Orientalism in the news media.

Media, Ideology, and Orientalism

Understanding the ideological functions of news media has been the subject of much scholarly interest. Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that commercial media institutions form and define people's norms and beliefs according to the social, political, and economic interests dominating the state. Thus, the media mobilize the public to support the social interests of the elite. Societies' dominant ideology operates as their criteria for common sense and rational understanding. The dominant ideology also tends to expel those contesting beliefs, values, and worldviews that undermine each specific society's worldview (Knight & Dean, 1982). Gramsci (1971) contends that the ruling groups in democratic societies gain dominance through a double process of coercion and persuasion and that the media are among the key institutions of persuasion in modern societies.

Gitlin (2003) notes that "in liberal capitalist societies, no institution is devoid of hegemonic functions, and none does hegemonic work only" (p. 254). He and Madrid (1986) argue that the media have become the dominant sources of hegemony in the civil societies of the modern capitalist states. Gitlin (2003) considers influential media such as the networks and the major print media organizations as part of the corporate elite, committed to the maintenance of the existing system. However, he contends that this hegemonic process is subtle and indirect:

Every day, directly or indirectly, by statement and omission, in pictures and words, in entertainment, news and advertisement, the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete. (p. 4)

As a consequence, with ideology defined as "the ways in which the meaning conveyed by symbolic forms serves to establish and sustain relations of power" (Oktar, 2001, p. 320), far from being neutral agents, "the media perform a function that is both ideological and political" (p. 320). In addition, the idea that media criticism is bound by boundaries acceptable to the ruling elite receives substantial empirical support (Bennett, 1990; Billeaudeau, Domke, Hutcheson, & Garland, 2003; Entman, 1991, 2004; Lee, 2003; Malek, 1997; Mowlana, 1997).

Bennett (1990) introduces the concept of indexing, suggesting that news media limit their coverage of events and issues to elite views. Although the journalistic normative self-image of media as watchdog does encourage the media to be more oppositional at times of cultural ambiguity, journalistic routines constrain the formation of counter frames to the White House line of argumentation (Entman, 2004). Even at times of cultural ambiguity, the media tend to provide "procedural rather than substantive" (p. 78) criticism—resorting to what Tuchman (1972) called objectivity as a strategic ritual.

Scholars, including Said (1978, 1981, 1994), Sardar (1999), Karim (2000), and Little (2002), argue that Orientalism is the dominant ideology of Western relations with the Islamic world. Orientalism employs a realistic narrative, which assumes a distinct social and cultural reality about the Orient, discovered by the efforts of Orientalists and assumed to be “true”: a reality that is different from its counterpart, the West (Said, 1994).

Tracing the prevalence of varying Orientalist representations of the Middle East from 1945 to 2000, McAlister (2001) argues that such demonization “has been a consistent feature, from policymakers’ disdain for Nasser to the public outrage against ‘oil sheiks,’ ‘terrorists,’ and ultimately Islam itself” (p. 270). In *Islamic Peril*, Karim (2000) looks at how the transnational media of the Western countries have sustained a global narrative on Islam that reconstructs the Muslim East as the archrival of the West. Karim argues that in the post–Cold War era, media narratives present Islam as the source of Third World countries’ instability and violence against the New World Order. Karim demonstrates the recurrence of Orientalist images of Islam and Muslims in the Western media and argues that this image of Islam as a threat has developed into a dominant global discourse.

An important characteristic of Orientalist discourse is its reliance on binary language (Said, 1978). According to Said, Orientalism, as a style of thought, is a dichotomous Western worldview based on “an ontological and epistemological distinction” (p. 2) between the so-called Orient and the West. Sardar (1999) argues that such a dichotomy is “the life force of Western self-identification” (p. 13).

In addition to using a dichotomous language, Orientalism uses an essentialist discourse, universalizing certain traits and characteristics to the Orient and the Islamic World (Said, 1978). Said considers the numerous writers, novelists, journalists, philosophers, political theorists, historians, economists, and imperial administrators, who have accepted the basic Orient/Occidental distinction as the foundation for their work concerning the Orient, as Orientalists. Most significant for this study, Said says, “The Middle East experts who advise [U.S.] policymakers are imbued with Orientalism, almost to a person” (p. 321). According to Macfie (2000), Orientalism has come to signify an ideology justifying and accounting for Western imperialism.

The notion of dividing the globe into dichotomous categories originates from a structuralist view of language (de Saussure, 1959). de Saussure argues that the universal structuring principle in all human language is that of binary oppositions. Language, viewed as a totality and as a social construction, is formed by the meanings assigned to objects and by those objects’ relationship to their opposites, for example, black versus white, man versus woman, and so on. Objects are understood as to what they are not. Therefore, a dichotomous system governs the formation of language, and the numerous possibilities of meaning are restricted. According to Switzer, McNamara, and Ryan (1999), news narratives are primarily based on binary signs, reducing reality to “discrete, dichotomous ‘facts’” (p. 33). Switzer et al. contend that binary language and

the tendency to define the world in terms of opposites provide the sociocultural foundation of ideology.

Similarly, Said (1978) argues that the process of identity formation and maintenance in every culture entails the existence of “another, different and competing alter ego” (p. 331). Said argues that, in the process of Western self-presentation, Orientalism is constructed as the West’s alter ego. The binary vocabulary of Orientalism includes East versus West, despotism versus democracy, cruelty versus fair treatment, irrational versus rational, and cunning versus trust (Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn, & Smith, 2000, p. 171). By the absolute fixing of the meaning of the Orient, Orientalism functions as a Foucaultian discourse of power and domination (Said, 1978).

Van Dijk’s (1998b) “ideological square” (p. 33) explains the dichotomous character of the prevailing discourses in societies. The ideological square gets its label from the four dimensions that make it up and acts as a justification for the presence of inequality in the society by polarizing in-groups and out-groups through a double process of emphasis and mitigation. Ideological discourses emphatically present the good properties/actions of “us” and the bad properties/actions of “them.” The discourse also mitigates the bad properties/actions of the in-group and the good properties/actions of the out-group. Van Dijk (1995) maintains that ideologies are often articulated on the basis of the ideological square.

Orientalism: The Case of Iran

U.S. policy makers and strategists have repeatedly stressed Iran’s important geopolitical and strategic position in the Middle East. In the words of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (2001), “There are few nations in the world with which the United States has less reason to quarrel or more compatible interests than Iran” (p. 197).

Heiss (2000) highlights the role Orientalism played in U.S.-Iran relations during Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq’s era in the early 1950s. Between 1951 and 1953, Iran was the first country in the Middle East to struggle to gain control of its oil industry. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, renamed The British Petroleum Company in 1954, was Britain’s largest overseas investment (British Petroleum, n.d.). According to Heiss (2000), “The end result of the Orientalization of Mosaddeq was an increasingly rigid Anglo-American position on the oil crisis that eschewed compromise or concessions and ultimately saw removing him from office as the only acceptable course of action” (p. 184). Ultimately, the Anglo-American coup in Iran in 1953, which toppled Mosaddeq, brought back the Shah after he was deposed and enabled Western companies to regain control of Iranian oil (Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004).

In *Covering Islam*, Said (1981) identifies media coverage of postrevolutionary Iran a case in point concerning the prevalence of Orientalist depictions of Islam and Muslims. Likewise, McAlister (2001) contends that the threat of “Islam” and “terrorism” (p. 275) has supplied the cultural logic of U.S. foreign policy since the

events of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Although Iran is not an Arab country, according to McAlister, "Anti-Iranian sentiment in the United States drew heavily on the stereotyped representations of the Arab Middle East that had become so prevalent in the 1970s, particularly the image of 'Arab terrorism'" (p. 214).

With this theoretical framework, this study employs the concepts of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and ideological square (van Dijk, 1998b) to analyze the editorial coverage of elite American newspapers with regard to U.S. foreign policy toward Iran's nuclear program. A brief discussion of Iran's nuclear program precedes the critical discourse analysis.

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Background

Iran initiated its nuclear program in the mid-1960s under the authoritarian and pro-American regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with U.S. support for the program. In 1967, the United States supplied Iran with a 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor to establish the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (Tarock, 2006). Iran signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, known as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), on July 1, 1968, the first day the treaty was circulated for signatures. Iran subsequently ratified the treaty on March 5, 1970, the same day that the treaty was ratified by the United States (Sahimi, 2003).

The objectives of the international treaty are "to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to foster the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to further the goal of achieving general and complete disarmament" (International Atomic Energy Agency, n.d., p. 1). The treaty allows the non-nuclear weapon states to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes under the inspection of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The member countries with nuclear weapons (United States, Russia, China, Britain, and France) were allowed to keep the weapons but agreed to refrain from spreading them to other countries and promised to work toward nuclear disarmament. Israel, India, and Pakistan are the only nuclear countries that are not parties to the NPT. On March 12, 1993, North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT; however, it suspended its withdrawal in June of that year (World Nuclear Association, 2004). Although it is still a party to the treaty, North Korea refuses to allow IAEA inspections of its nuclear activities (El Baradei, 2004).

Iran's logic for starting a nuclear facility was based on a 1972 study by Stanford University that "recommended the building of nuclear plants capable of generating a 20,000 megawatt nuclear-energy program" (Howard, 2004, p. 98). As a consequence, the United States encouraged Iran to expand its non-oil energy base and proposed that Iran needed nuclear reactors to acquire the electrical capacity that the Stanford Research Institute had suggested. In addition, the United States expressed interest in providing technical and educational support for the program (Sahimi, 2003). As a result, with American, French, and German support, the Shah started an ambitious nuclear program to build as many as 23 nuclear reactors (Tarock, 2006)

that were to be operational in the 1990s (Howard, 2004). The three supporting countries also made contracts to train Iranian nuclear scientists (Tarock, 2006).

Today, Iran is still using the same argument it used in the 1970s: It needs nuclear power "in the context of rising domestic energy consumption rates and a desire to preserve oil and gas to generate foreign currency" (Squassoni, 2004, p. 2). With reduced resources and a lack of international support for its nuclear program, Iran is pursuing a third of its prerevolution nuclear energy goals. It plans to construct six nuclear power plants with a total capacity of 6,000 megawatts within two decades.

The centerpiece of Iran's nuclear program includes the construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant on its southwestern coast. The Shah's government had awarded the contract to Kraftwerk Union (a subsidiary of Siemens) of West Germany to construct two 1,200-megawatt nuclear reactors at the site. The construction began in 1974. By the time of the 1979 revolution in Iran, the first reactor was 90% complete with 60% of its equipment installed. The second reactor was only 50% complete. The program was halted after the revolution as a result of Iran's internal turmoil and Germany's refusal to complete the project (Sahimi, 2003). The partially completed reactors were severely damaged due to six separate Iraqi attacks launched between 1984 and 1987 (Howard, 2004).

Under pressure from the United States, Kraftwerk Union refused to resume the Bushehr project when Iran restarted its nuclear program after the Iran-Iraq war had ended. Germany also refused to ship the reactor components and technical documentation that Iran had paid for. Iran's subsequent attempts to acquire technological support for its nuclear program from other Western companies in Argentina, Spain, Italy, and Czechoslovakia were thwarted as a result of U.S. pressure (Sahimi, 2003).

After many unsuccessful attempts to find a supplier in the West that could complete Iran's nuclear power plants at Bushehr, Iran turned to Russia (International Crisis Group, 2003). In 1995, Iran signed a contract with the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy to finish the reactors at Bushehr. Russia also agreed to build a 30- to 50-megawatt thermal light-water research reactor and a gas centrifuge uranium-enrichment facility, to train about 15 Iranian nuclear scientists per year, and to provide 2,000 tons of natural uranium. In the same year, under U.S. pressure, Russia cancelled the deal for the construction of both the research reactor and the centrifuge facility (Sahimi, 2003).

In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (a front group for the Mojahedin-e Khalq), which has been on the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations since 1997, presented evidence that two nuclear facilities had been set up but not declared to the IAEA. The group argued that the Natanz uranium enrichment facility and the Arak heavy water production plant were parts of a clandestine nuclear weapons program. The Iranian government formally admitted the existence of the two plants in February 2003, but it maintained that they were for peaceful purposes only (Kemp, 2003).

In a 2003 report to Congress, Sharon Squassoni, a specialist in national defense at the Congressional Research Service, acknowledged that the resistance council's record on providing accurate information is mixed, but he argued that this information is valuable because it gives leverage to the IAEA to exert additional pressure on Iran and to probe deeper into its nuclear program. According to Squassoni's report, the Iranian opposition group had made similar claims in February 1992. Subsequently, with Iran's open invitation, the IAEA had made four special visits between 1992 and 2000 but had found no evidence to confirm the opposition group's claims (Zak, 2002).

In response to the opposition report, "the international media focused heavily on the newly discovered facilities and their impressive sophistication and advanced state" (International Crisis Group, 2003, p. 1). However, only if Iran had signed the NPT's Additional Protocol would it have violated the NPT by not declaring the construction of the facilities. Under its original safeguards agreements, Iran was not required to declare new nuclear facilities unless Iran started processing nuclear material in those facilities. Therefore, the IAEA had to show that such a violation took place.

In its 2004 environmental sampling, the IAEA inspectors found traces of highly enriched uranium at the Natanz facility and at another nuclear site, which were enriched to 36% and 54% (El Baradei, 2004). Iran argued that the contamination was not a result of nuclear activity in Iran but that it had originated from imported used centrifuge parts.

Subsequent IAEA reports indicated that Iran's argument was plausible. In a September 1, 2004, report, IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei stated, "From the Agency's analysis to date, it appears plausible that the HEU contamination found at those locations may not have resulted from enrichment of uranium by Iran at the Kalaye Electric Company Workshop or at Natanz" (p. 10). The report continued, "Iran maintains its assertion that it has not enriched uranium to more than 1.2% using centrifuge technology" and that such enrichment had occurred at a centrifuge research and development program in Tehran, not at Natanz (Annex, p. 6). These findings are significant because they mean that the declaration of the Natanz facility was not required because no nuclear material was either stored or processed there. Nevertheless, Iran's decision to continue its uranium enrichment program has resulted in an ongoing "tug-of-war between the IAEA, Iran, the European trio, namely Germany, France, and Great Britain, and the United States" (Tarock, 2006, p. 92).

Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

The data for this study include editorials from three U.S. newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. Because this is a case study with a focus on the Iranian nuclear program, it was feasible to conduct a thorough analysis of editorials appearing over a relatively long period. Thus, the study examines all editorials on the subject appearing from 1984 (the date of the first

editorial on Iran's nuclear program) to 2004 (which marked a change in Iranian commitment to its suspension of uranium enrichment). *Lexis/Nexis* and *ProQuest* databases were used to collect the editorials.

The Wall Street Journal, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* were selected for a number of reasons. All three are considered elite newspapers and are among the largest media outlets in the United States, ranking second, third, and fifth, respectively, in terms of circulation size. They are leading newspapers with regard to the coverage of international news and views, drawing readers from every state and around the world. *USA Today* ranks first in terms of circulation but is last among the top five in terms of international news coverage and editorials. *Los Angeles Times* ranks fourth in terms of circulation but is considered to be a regional newspaper and does not have the same effect among policy makers. *The Washington Post* is not a national newspaper but is the leading newspaper in the nation's capital (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2006). In addition, elite newspapers such as *The New York Times* serve an intermedia agenda-setting function for other news sources, in particular with regard to the coverage of international events and issues (Golan, 2006).

Editorials

Ideological representations usually "express or signal the opinions, perspective, position, interests or other properties of groups" (van Dijk, 1991b, p. 112). Because the main function of editorials is "the expression and persuasive communication of opinions" (van Dijk, 1996, p. 13), they make up a relevant body of text for the examination of predominant ideological assumptions in a society (van Dijk, 1992). Thus, the emphasis on the difference "between 'Us' and 'Them'" will depend "on the political orientation of the newspaper" (p. 245).

Editorials are usually organized along three schematic categories. They define the situation and give a summary of the news event. They present an evaluation of the situation—especially of actions and actors. They advance pragmatic conclusions in the form of expectations, recommendations, advice, and warnings (van Dijk, 1992).

The achievement of the ideological roles of editorials is a function of persuasive moves, of which semantic content is the most direct form (van Dijk, 1995). According to van Dijk, other strategies include the use of polarized vocabulary to describe political actors and events and specific rhetorical structures of discourse. These rhetorical structures include imagery, overstatements, understatements, hyperbole (exaggeration), euphemism, and mitigation. These techniques are used to make information that is unfavorable to "us" less prominent and to emphasize negative information about "them."

van Dijk's Method of Analysis

The first research question asked about the portrayal of events, players, and policies in the three elite newspapers. To answer this research question, the authors

looked at the two linguistic elements of naming choices and lexical choices. In analyzing the articles for naming choices, the authors examined the ways in which the participants of the events were referred to as ways to establish in- and out-group identities. According to Fowler and Kress (1979), "the different possibilities [of naming] signify different assessments by the speaker/writer of his or her relationship with the person referred to or spoken to, and of the formality or intimacy of the situation" (p. 200). The different possibilities for naming choices include extreme formality, such as using the complete unabbreviated title of an official, for example, "President Mohammad Khatami"; a neutral naming choice, for example, "Mr. Khatami"; and naming choices that reflect the biases of the writer, examples of which would be stereotypical or ideologically guided naming choices such as "the mullahs" or "the fundamentalist Islamic regime." The editorials' naming choices were analyzed for the different actors as a means to identify "different ideological affiliations" (Sykes, 1985, p. 87) of the newspapers with the participants.

In addition to naming choices, the authors looked at the lexical choices used to portray events, players, and policies with regard to the Iranian nuclear dispute. Fairclough (1989) stresses the ideological significance of lexical choices and argues that "a text's choice of wordings depends on, and helps to create, social relationships between participants" (p. 116). Sykes (1985) also contends that the choice of different words for referring to the same thing by different speakers reveals "different ideological affiliations" (p. 87) on the part of the speakers. An example is the choice of *freedom fighter* versus *terrorist*.

To explore the second research question, which asked whether the portrayal of the Iranian nuclear dispute in the three newspapers reflected elements of Orientalism, the authors consider whether and which of the eight Orientalist themes, first categorized by Alatom (1997), serve as the premises for the assumptions made and the arguments advanced in the three newspapers' editorials. To do so, the authors analyzed the naming choices, lexical choices, and argumentative features that each paragraph of the editorials may have used as means for the construction of Orientalist descriptions of us (i.e., the United States and its allies) versus them (i.e., Iran and those friendly to Iran). The individual paragraph was the unit of analysis. The following paragraph briefly explains the guiding definitions the authors derived from Said's (1978) work to identify the eight Orientalist themes.

The theme of Oriental untrustworthiness underlies the belief that the Orientals are by nature untruthful and therefore should not be trusted. The theme of Islam as a threat asserts that the Orientals are threatening because of their adherence to an Islamic ideology. The theme of Oriental inferiority questions the basic humanity of the Oriental as compared with the Westerner. The theme of Oriental backwardness makes up the argument that the "backward" Orient is the opposite of the "advanced" West. The theme of Oriental irrationality stresses the mystical and irrational nature of the Oriental. The theme of Oriental submissiveness advocates that the Oriental is by nature in a position of submission. The theme of Jews versus Arabs (or Muslims)

operates when the significance of a situation is defined in terms of the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation. The theme of Oriental strangeness stresses the oddities of Oriental individuals as compared with a normal Western standard.

In sum, the study examines the argumentative structures and lexical features that the editorials used for advancing a certain view of events, players, and policies related to the Iranian nuclear program. The researchers consider whether all or some of the eight Orientalist themes are explicitly or implicitly present in the argumentative structures of the editorial discourses of the three papers.

A Summary and Discussion of Findings

Oriental Untrustworthiness and Islam as a Threat

The three newspapers' editorials define the Iranian nuclear problem in terms of the two premises of Oriental untrustworthiness and Islam as a threat. The Islamic nature of Iran is usually emphasized through such terminology as "the fundamentalist Islamic regime" ("Iran's Bomb," 2003, p. A22), "a hard-line Islamic regime" ("Failed Preemption," 2004, p. A28), and "Iran's ruling mullahs" ("Indispensable Allies," 2004, p. 14). This portrayal of the Iranian government is most apparent in *The Wall Street Journal* editorials in which Iran is often referred to as the government of "the mullahs." Unlike *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* seldom refers to the Iranian players in neutral ways (i.e., by their official titles).

All three newspapers argue that such a government cannot be trusted with nuclear technology. Although *The New York Times* often makes the aforementioned assertion, it briefly criticizes it in one editorial ("Groundhog Day," 2004):

Stop us if you've heard this one before. The Bush administration creates a false sense of urgency about a nuclear menace from a Middle Eastern country. Hard-liners talk about that country's connections to terrorists. They portray European diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions as a feckless attempt to appease a rogue nation whose word can never be trusted anyway. Secretary of State Colin Powell makes ominous-sounding warnings about new intelligence, which turns out to be dubious. (p. 18)

The paragraph, in fact, encapsulates the main conclusion of this study: The three elite U.S. newspapers have labeled Iran "a rogue nation whose word can never be trusted." Iran is considered a rogue nation because of the nature of its government, which is Islamic. From the Orientalist point of view, Islam is a threat and, by definition, Iran's government is untrustworthy. The themes of Islam as a threat and Oriental untrustworthiness have the highest number of instances in the editorials that were studied.

Islam as a threat was the most repeated theme in *The Wall Street Journal* editorials. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial read ("The Mullahs' Promise," 2003),

Of course, longer term, Russia has no more interest in a nuclear-armed Iran than does the U.S. It would create regional instability (encouraging other states in the neighborhood to acquire their own weapons) and might make Iran bolder in spreading its version of theocracy to other Muslim-dominated areas, including parts of Russia. (p. A20)

The main proliferation problem is less nuclear technology than the nature of the regimes that have it. In Iran the danger flows from the mullahs who control the country and want to oust the U.S. from the Middle East. (p. A20)

For *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial, the issue is not making the world safe from nuclear weapons. Instead, it is the preservation of the United States's power in the Middle East. In this discourse, there is no place for a competitive regional power. The main problem is defined in terms of Iran's "version of theocracy," an instance of the Islam-as-threat discourse. As illustrated in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, overall, 43 instances of Orientalist themes were found in the 29 editorials (or a total of 214 paragraphs) that appeared between 1984 and 2004. Out of the 29 editorials, 17 had at least one paragraph with an Orientalist theme. For *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 out of 9 editorials had at least one Orientalist theme. For *The Washington Post*, 6 out of 8 editorials had at least one Orientalist theme. And for *The New York Times*, 5 out of 12 had at least one Orientalist theme. Out of the 43 instances of Orientalist themes, 22 (51%) belonged to *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 (26%) belonged to *The Washington Post*, and 10 (23%) belonged to *The New York Times*. In other words, on average, there were 2.4 instances of Orientalist themes in each *Wall Street Journal* editorial, 1.4 instances in each *Washington Post* editorial, and 0.8 instances in each *New York Times* editorial. Therefore, portrayals of Iran in both *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* can be characterized as Orientalist in nature. And although *The New York Times* had 5 editorials with Orientalist themes, its overall portrayal cannot be characterized as Orientalist.

As illustrated in Table 4, the theme of Oriental untrustworthiness appeared in 40% of all the editorials and had the highest number of instances with a total of 17. The theme of Islam as a threat appeared in 26% of all the editorials and had the second highest number of instances with a total of 11. There were 7 instances of the theme of Oriental submissiveness and 4 instances of the theme of Oriental irrationality. The themes of Oriental inferiority and Jews versus Muslims had 2 instances each, only appearing in *The Wall Street Journal* editorials. There were no instances of the theme of Oriental backwardness or strangeness.

The West Versus the Islamic Iran

In the discourse of the three papers, the concept of the West versus Islamic Iran defines the demarcation between us and them. Although in the three newspapers' editorials, dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge is said to be a global priority, the confrontation is mostly defined in terms of "the West" versus Iran, whose Islamic nature is emphasized, as exemplified in the following three quotations:

Its nuclear program appears to be both well developed and well concealed. But only the threat of Security Council or Western action has any chance of keeping the mullahs tethered to a serious inspections system. ("The Mullahs' Nukes," 2003, p. A12)

What is critical is for the winner of the presidential race, and for the three European nations, to make it urgently and abundantly clear to Iran's president, Mohammad Khatami, and his mullahs that the West will brook no further delays, and that it is serious and united about imposing stern sanctions if Iran won't abandon its nuclear fuel enrichment efforts. ("One More Round," 2004, p. 30)

Far from containing Iran, the West's cops stand to neutralize each other, further poisoning transatlantic relations while delighting Iran's hard-liners. ("Facing Iran," 2004, p. A20)

Iran's Islamic regime is deemed undeserving of international trust. The editorials stress that Iran should be denied access to nuclear knowledge and technology, even under the most stringent international safeguards. This is a clear example of the operation of the ideological square, which partly involves emphasizing "their" bad properties/actions. In this regard, the Orientalist theme of untrustworthiness, as an assumed property of Iran, is emphasized as fact. This argumentative structure becomes more significant given that, according to the International Crisis Group (2003), there is nothing in "scope and variety of Iran's nuclear program that is exclusively, or virtually exclusively, designed for military use" (p. 9). Thus, the issue becomes whether Iran can be trusted with a nuclear capability that is applicable to both civilian and military purposes.

Given the dual nature of nuclear technology, the three newspapers argue that the real danger lies in Iran's scientific and technological capabilities and not the actual diversion of its nuclear program to military purposes at present. Although advocating different strategies, the three newspapers agree that Iran should not be trusted with uranium enrichment technology, which could be used to make both reactor fuel and bomb fuel.

To counter this threat, *The Wall Street Journal* advocates regime change through covert and overt means. According to this position, the United States should support Iranian opposition groups' struggle to overthrow the government of "the mullahs." The military option should also remain open at all times. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* argue against the use of force and regime change, pointing to the impracticality of those policies. Instead, they propose that the United States should participate in diplomatic efforts with explicit multilateral incentives and threats.

The Nature of the Iranian Nuclear Program

The problem with the Iranian nuclear program is defined in similar terms in the three newspapers' editorials. The Iranian government is presumed to have nuclear weapons ambitions. Therefore, it is assumed that Iran does in fact have a clandestine nuclear weapons program. The three newspapers rely on official U.S. and Israeli

Table 1
Orientalist Themes in *Wall Street Journal* Editorials

Orientalist Theme	Date of the Editorial											Total	% of Total
	06/04/03	08/28/03	10/22/03	12/12/03	02/24/04	02/27/04	03/12/04	11/22/04	12/01/04				
Inferiority		1					1					2	9
Backwardness												0	0
Irrationality		1										1	5
Submissiveness		1	1	2				1				5	23
Islam as threat		1	2	1	1							5	23
Jews vs. Arabs				1		1						2	9
Strangeness												0	0
Untrustworthiness		3	1	1		1		1				7	32
Total	0	7	4	5	0	3	1	2	0			22	
% of total	0	32	18	23	0	14	5	9	0				

Table 2
Orientalist Themes in *Washington Post* Editorials

Orientalist Theme	Date of the Editorial										Total	% of Total
	05/01/84	09/22/03	10/24/03	11/24/03	02/20/04	06/18/04	11/09/04	12/06/04				
Inferiority											0	0
Backwardness											0	0
Irrationality				1							1	9
Submissiveness											0	0
Islam as threat	1	1				1					3	27
Jews vs. Arabs											0	0
Strangeness											0	0
Untrustworthiness	1	2	1		3						7	64
Total	2	3	1	1	3	1	0	0	0	0	11	
% of total	18	27	9	9	27	9	0	0	0	0		

Table 3
Orientalist Themes in *New York Times* Editorials

Orientalist Theme	Date of the Editorial										Total			
	01/08/95	02/26/95	04/06/95	03/14/03	06/22/03	10/22/03	11/25/03	08/04/04	08/14/04	10/22/04	11/20/04	12/01/04	Total	% of Total
Inferiority													0	0
Backwardness													0	0
Irrationality	1	1											2	20
Submissiveness							1			1			2	20
Islam as threat	1									2			3	30
Jews vs. Arabs													0	0
Strangeness													0	0
Untrustworthiness		1				1		1					3	30
Total	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	10	
% of total	20	20	0	0	0	10	0	20	0	30	0	0	10	

Table 4
**Orientalist Themes: Total Numbers in *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ),
Washington Post (WP), and *New York Times* (NYT) Editorials**

Orientalist Theme	WSJ	WP	NYT	Total	% of Total
Inferiority	2			2	5
Backwardness				0	0
Irrationality	1	1	2	4	9
Submissiveness	5		2	7	16
Islam as threat	5	3	3	11	26
Jews vs. Arabs	2			2	5
Strangeness				0	0
Untrustworthiness	7	7	3	17	40
Total	22	11	10	43	
% of total	51	26	23		

sources to arrive at this definitive conclusion. Despite the certainty with which Iran is charged with having a nuclear weapons program, *New York Times* reporters Jehl and Schmitt (2005) reveal that, according to a presidential commission report, "American intelligence on Iran [is] inadequate to allow firm judgments about Iran's weapons programs" (p. A1). The report, which was submitted to President Bush in March 2005, is based on a 14-month review by a panel that had "unrestricted access to the most senior people and the most sensitive documents of the intelligence agencies" (p. A1).

Despite the lack of definitive intelligence, the three newspapers' editorials portray the Iranian nuclear weapons program as a reality and the prospect of the nuclear bomb as a more-or-less certain prospect. Their treatment of Iran's case is similar to Dunmire's (1997) study on how *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* news reports, on August 3-7, 1990, made the invasion of Saudi Arabia by Iraq—something that never happened—seem as though it had actually taken place. Dunmire calls this discursive maneuver a "projected event": "a state of affairs that an individual or group claims will occur at some point in the near future" (p. 221). Controversial issues surrounding the nonexistent event are presented "as factual accounts of the social world" (p. 221). In the case of the first Persian Gulf War, for example, Dunmire observes, "The projected event of Iraq invading Saudi Arabia was not presented as a hypothetical scenario that could (should) be discussed and evaluated. It was immediately assumed to be part of future reality" (p. 249).

The Wall Street Journal, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* repeatedly emphatically assert not the likelihood of a covert Iranian nuclear weapons program but instead that Iran is aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons. Such assertions are explicitly displayed in their choices of headlines. Examples include *The Wall Street Journal* headlines "The Mullah's Nukes" (2003) and "The Mullah's Bomb" (2004), *The Washington Post* headline "Iran's Bomb" (2003), and *The*

New York Times headline "One More Round on Iran's Nukes" (2004). The issue is not the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb but the timing of such an event in the near future.

The three newspapers under study present Iran's capabilities as evidence of its desire to make a bomb. The predominant point of view is that because Iran's nuclear program may eventually give Iran the capacity to produce material that could be used for nuclear bombs, it must have weapons intentions. In the following paragraphs, the three newspapers suggest that the mere presence of a uranium enrichment capability is indicative of Iran's military purpose.

Iran's long resistance to giving up uranium enrichment is highly suggestive of its weapons intentions. ("The Mullahs' Promise," 2003, p. A20)

The United States has sought for years to stop construction of the plant, which oil-rich Iran hardly needs for electricity; only that freeze, and an Iranian commitment to dismantle its facilities for uranium enrichment, would seriously impede nuclear weapons development. ("Iran's European Bargain," 2003, p. A24)

The problem posed by Iran is particularly urgent because it is now widely assumed that Iranian scientists have already learned how to convert natural uranium into bomb fuel. That leaves only one sure way for Iran to persuade others to trust its repeated promises not to build nuclear weapons. It must not only suspend uranium enrichment, but also dismantle, with international verification, all of its enrichment plants. ("Encouraging Words," 2003, p. 22)

Accordingly, the problem with Iran is not that it has made or is in the process of making an atomic bomb. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that Iran's scientists have gained some knowledge that they should not be trusted to have. The problem is that they know too much and have access to technology that only "we" can be trusted with.

Policy Recommendations

The Wall Street Journal's editorial position is congruent with those in the U.S. government who, according to the International Crisis Group (2003), "may not wish to reach any agreement with Iran, persuaded that it would only tighten the regime's hold on power at a time when (they assert) it is losing its grip" (p. 28).

In support of regime change, *The Wall Street Journal* expresses what Howard (2004) calls "the illusion of popular support" (p. 35). The assumption is made that "'enemy regimes' are not merely oppressive of 'the people' but of a populace distinctly sympathetic to the United States and its values" (p. 35). From this premise, the illusion follows that "the imposition of regime change is likely to be widely welcomed inside that country" (p. 35). *The Wall Street Journal* maintains ("Tehran's Triumph," 2004),

The Iranian people may or may not like the idea of a Persian bomb, but they are, broadly speaking, the most pro-American in the Muslim world and they despise the clique of clerics who have squelched democratic reform while presiding over a sinking economy. (p. A10)

Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, however, argue that, although regime change is desirable, it is by no means practical in the current situation ("Facing Iran," 2004):

Mr. Bush's hawks command the moral high ground: They are right that the "evil" Iranian regime has suppressed its people's democratic aspirations, sponsored terrorism and violated its legal commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The problem is that they offer no realistic policy of their own. Military action short of an all-out invasion probably couldn't stop the Iranian nuclear program. The hawks speak of supporting a democratic revolution inside Iran, but none seems likely soon, and many of Iran's democrats also want the bomb. (p. A20)

Not only is regime change unrealistic, *The Washington Post* asserts, but also it is not a reliable nonproliferation strategy. In terms of the extent of change needed, *The Washington Post* goes further than *The Wall Street Journal*. The main problem appears to be the Iranian people because the paragraph asserts that even "Iran's democrats" want the bomb.

The New York Times, too, is against the regime change policy but for yet a different reason. It conveys the view that "unilateral American bullying" to destabilize Iran's government "is one sure way to rally flagging support for [the current Iranian government] among nationalistic Iranians" ("Iran's Nuclear Challenge," 2004, p. 16). In another editorial, *The New York Times* draws a distinction between the Iranian players. "There is a struggle in Iran between those who want to cooperate with inspectors and hard-liners who seek a nuclear capability," it argues. "It would be foolish to undercut the pragmatists" ("Iran's Nuclear Menace," 2003, p. 26).

According to *New York Times* editorials, stopping the threat of nuclear proliferation is "a goal that can be pursued only through truly multilateral diplomacy, in which the United States works with its European allies, rather than trying to undermine them" ("Groundhog Day," 2004, p. 18). Based on this perspective, the diplomatic approach should be based on "explicit incentives" and "explicit threats" ("One More Round," 2004, p. 30). The United States should cooperate with the Europeans now, so that the Europeans would be "prepared to stand behind Washington with a credible threat of economic sanctions when they are justified" ("Groundhog Day," 2004, p. 18). *The New York Times* argues against the military option because such an approach is unrealistic at this time and would amount to "a catastrophic mistake" (p. 18).

The New York Times evaluated the diplomatic efforts of Britain, France, and Germany as "a breakthrough" in one of its editorials ("Iran's Nuclear Menace,"

2003, p. 26). It later found the results of the diplomatic approach “not satisfying” but argued that they “still have a chance of producing positive results” (“Indispensable Allies,” 2004, p. 14). It argues that the Europeans are the United States’s indispensable allies in the struggle against Iran. The ultimate goal is to make sure Iran gives up making its own fuel.

Similar to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* finds a military solution unrealistic (“Facing Iran,” 2004, p. A20). However, it does not endorse the European diplomatic approach without criticism. *The Washington Post* criticizes both Washington and Europe for failing to refer Iran’s case to the U.N. Security Council. It characterizes the European strategy as a “fruitless diplomatic scrambling” (“Iran’s ‘Serious Failures,’” 2004, p. A24) and a “failed preemption” (“Failed Preemption,” 2004, p. A28).

The Washington Post initially argued that the Europeans should “cooperate with a more forceful approach by the Bush administration” and that the United States “must be more insistent” (“Iran’s ‘Serious Failures,’” 2004, p. A24). In later editorials, however, *The Washington Post* criticizes the United States and the European approaches to the Iranian nuclear problem. Although *The Washington Post* favors the diplomatic approach over the military option, it argues that the optimal solution lies somewhere in between the European and the American policies. *The Washington Post* criticizes the Bush administration for “feuding” internally while “watching [the European diplomatic efforts] ineffectually from the sidelines” (“Facing Iran, With Europe,” 2004, p. A26).

The only feasible strategy, according to *The Washington Post*, is for the United States to use carrots and for the Europeans to use sticks. At this point, though, “the United States won’t use carrots, nor the Europeans sticks, on their own” (“Facing Iran,” 2004, p. A20). The ultimate recommendation for policy is “a coordinated transatlantic strategy that employed both these levers—the prospect of a general Western economic boycott, or security guarantees and economic concessions from the same alliance” (p. A20).

Likewise, *The Wall Street Journal* emphasizes the inadequacy of the European talks. It, too, argues that the European diplomatic approach is misled. Europe does not want to solve the proliferation problem, *The Wall Street Journal* argues. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Europeans contend that the West just has to get used to the idea of an Iranian bomb. *The Wall Street Journal* couples its criticism of the European diplomacy with a negative explanation of their motives. *The Wall Street Journal* characterizes the European parties in terms of their economic self-interest and their desire to compete with the United States in the political power struggle. Thus, their diplomatic efforts are judged to stem from bad faith.

As a consequence, *The Wall Street Journal* finds the European parties’ lack of sincerity in pursuing nonproliferation goals problematic and argues that the Bush administration should not rely on the Europeans’ support for solving the Iran problem. America or its surrogates should act forcefully, even if it means unilateral action (“The Mullahs’ Nukes,” 2003):

Only the threat of Security Council or Western action has any chance of keeping the mullahs tethered to a serious inspections system. If the U.N. and Europe fail in Iran as they failed in Iraq, they have to understand that the only other recourse for the U.S. or Israel will be the use of force. (p. A12)

Despite their different recommendations for policy, all three newspapers under study are, at some point, pessimistic about the success of a diplomatic solution. Only *The Wall Street Journal* questions the good faith of the Europeans in the negotiations, however. *The Wall Street Journal* is also the only newspaper that questions the effectiveness of diplomacy throughout its editorials (“The Mullahs’ Promise,” 2003):

Yesterday’s European diplomacy may have bought all sides some time, but no one should be under the illusion that it removes the threat. (p. A20)

What Remained Unsaid

The focus of all the editorials revolved around the United States’s responsibility to fight the spread of nuclear weapons to Iran. The editorials attempted to show that Iran had violated its international obligations under the NPT. The two themes of Oriental untrustworthiness and Islam as threat appear to function as the ideological underpinning of this construction of us versus them. Whereas it downplays or denies Iran’s right to all nuclear technology applicable to peaceful purposes, a most central tenet of the NPT was left outside the editorials’ discourse: nuclear disarmament.

Under the terms of the NPT, the five original nuclear powers, who are parties to the NPT, were permitted to keep their nuclear arsenal but pledged to negotiate “in good faith” the end of the nuclear arms race and the elimination of their nuclear arsenals in return for other nations not seeking nuclear weapons (IAEA, n.d., pp. 1, 4).

As stated by the Washington-based Institute for Public Accuracy (2005b), 35 years after the adoption of the NPT, the nuclear weapon states have failed to live up to their part of the treaty:

[They] cynically [interpret] the NPT as a mechanism for the permanent maintenance of an international system of nuclear apartheid in which only they can possess nuclear weapons. . . . Now the Bush administration wants to add a second tier to its nuclear double standard by denying uranium enrichment—needed for both nuclear power and weapons—to countries which don’t already have it.

Today, the United States is spending about \$40 billion annually on nuclear weapons. U.S. nuclear weapons spending has grown by 84% since 1995. The United States was to spend about \$7 billion in 2005 to maintain and modernize nuclear warheads, excluding the billions of dollars it will spend to operate and modernize its delivery and command and control systems. The U.S. arsenal has 10,000 nuclear

warheads, and some 2,000 on "hair-trigger alert," each one many times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Institute for Public Accuracy, 2005a).

The New York Times reported on February 7, 2005, that the Bush administration has "begun designing a new generation of nuclear arms meant to be sturdier and more reliable and to have longer lives" (Broad, 2005, p. A1). Former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn criticized the administration's decision, saying that the United States has not set a good example for nuclear nonproliferation (Agence France-Presse, 2005). El Baradei has also criticized the U.S. nuclear policy (Giacomo, 2003). "The U.S. government demands that other nations not possess nuclear weapons; meanwhile, it is arming itself. . . . In truth there are no good or bad nuclear weapons. If we do not stop applying double standards, we will end up with more nuclear weapons," El Baradei said.

Writing in the editorial section of *The Washington Post*, former President Jimmy Carter (2005) criticized the nuclear powers for refusing to meet their NPT nuclear disarmament commitments. He argues,

The United States is the major culprit in this erosion of the NPT. While claiming to be protecting the world from proliferation threats in Iraq, Libya, Iran and North Korea, American leaders not only have abandoned existing treaty restraints but also have asserted plans to test and develop new weapons, including anti-ballistic missiles, the earth-penetrating "bunker buster" and perhaps some new "small" bombs. They also have abandoned past pledges and now threaten first use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. (p. A17)

Whereas Iran's alleged violation of its commitments under the NPT is important, the failure of the United States and the other nuclear weapon states to follow through on their promise to work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons is not deemed worthy of discussion.

Conclusion

This study supports Karim (2000) and McAlister's (2001) findings that, today, Orientalist depictions of Muslim countries and their political issues concentrate around the idea that Islam is a source of threat. This study also finds that in the case of Iran's nuclear program, the issue of trust plays a more central role than the actual existence of evidence for Iran's possession of a clandestine nuclear weapons program.

The present critical discourse analysis also reveals how the three elite newspapers' editorials selectively framed the issues surrounding the Iranian nuclear dispute by employing linguistic, stylistic, and argumentative maneuvers. Despite their differences in their policy recommendations, none challenged the underlying assumptions that Iran has a clandestine nuclear weapons program, that the Islamic nature of

its government is a threat, and that it should not be trusted with sensitive nuclear technology. Their inattention to the inconsistent nonproliferation policies of the United States and other European nuclear powers shows the limits of media criticism of official policies.

Despite the uniformity of their ideological positions, the extent to which elite media's different policy recommendations affect policy makers is an area worthy of further investigation. In addition, future studies could use a comparative approach to investigate the interdependence between news and editorial discourse about Iran's nuclear program and the discourse of policy makers. Also, using grounded theory, future studies could use in-depth interviews to arrive at a clearer understanding of the lay theories of editorial staff of elite newspapers with regard to the Iranian nuclear program. These studies could investigate whether these lay theories conform to tenets of Orientalist thinking.

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