

Ali Basarati*
Simant Shankar Bharti

Representing Iran as a Threat: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Obama's Rhetoric

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the main concept of reconstructing and reproducing the discourse of Iranophobia in Obama's political speeches about Iran. This study employs Proximization Theory as a pragmatic-cognitive approach to discourse analysis to study fifty speeches by Barack Obama (2009–2017) in which he discusses Iran's nuclear programmes and regional policies. Our findings show that the conceptual repertoire in Obama's discourse represents Iran as a country that violates human rights, disturbs peace and security in the Middle East, sponsoring terrorism and developing hostile nuclear programmes. The research also indicates that these discursive shifts occurred in accordance with socio-political events in Iran, including the 2009 Iranian protests over the results of the presidential elections and Iran's insistence on the pursuit of nuclear programmes. We argued that systematic linguistic and pragmatic-cognitive analyses of conceptual shifts in Obama's discourse may contribute to unravelling ideological structures in portraying Iran as a cumulating and proximizing threat.

KEYWORDS: Iranophobia; conceptual shifts; Obama's discourse; Proximization Theory

* Correspondence regarding this paper should be sent to Ali Basarati (ORCID: 0000-0001-5327-1013), School of Humanities and Fine Arts, VIZJA University, Poland, e-mail: a.basaratie@vizja.pl; or Simant Shankar Bharti (ORCID: 0000-0002-9578-7066), School of Social Sciences, VIZJA University, Poland; e-mail: b.simant@vizja.pl.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Iranian 1979 Islamic Revolution – especially in the aftermath of the Iranian hostage crisis on 4 November 1979 – the Iran–U.S. relations metamorphosed from strategic friendship to pure antagonism. Ever since, due to this radical transformation in bilateral relations, the U.S. political and media discourses have been conceptualising the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter the IRI) as a destructive and threat-generating entity, negatively approaching the U.S. interest and security in the Middle East and the world. Therefore, the dominant political discourses in the U.S. are extensively utilising various concepts related to human rights, nuclear programmes, terrorism, and regional peace and security to reproduce the discourse of Iranophobia in a global scale and propagandise the IRI as a threatening entity.

Despite an extensive attention paid to the representation of Iran in Western media and political discourses, we still need to reflect on the transformation of conceptualisations in representing Iran in the U.S. political discourse.

Thus said, the present article is a discourse analytical study, seeking to examine the conceptual repertoires of representing Iran in Obama's discourse. This article adopts the Proximity Theory (Cap, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2017) as the primary analytical framework within a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. This theory enables a pragmatic-cognitive examination of how Iran is discursively construed as a proximizing threat in Obama's rhetoric. By applying this model, we trace spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions of threat construction across Obama's fifty speeches from 2009–2017. Our study is part of a bigger project that examines conceptual shifts in the representation of Iran in the US political discourse.

Methodologically speaking, this study is grounded in the main tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Proximity Theory (Cap, 2013) as its analytical framework. The timespan

between 2009 and 2017 was a critical and challenging historical period in Iran–US relations under the influence of Iran’s nuclear programmes, featured with the imposition of unprecedented economic sanctions from the U.S., Europe and the U.N. Besides, it was not until this period that the Obama administration as well as the P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany) made one of the most important agreements with Iran on nuclear programmes.

The data for the present study was collected manually through a topic-based selection from Obama’s speeches. The overall number of his speeches in the period from 2009 to 2017 was then filtered down to fifty speeches, briefings, and commentaries that specifically addressed Iran and its policies. Thematic sampling and coding were utilised to extract the pertinent excerpts for analysis.

1. IRANOPHOBIA AND THE DISCURSIVE POLITICS OF THREAT CONSTRUCTION

As a political and strategic discourse, Iranophobia is a prime example of the politics of terror which inflicts dread and fear towards the lives, values, and people’s possessions (Booth, 2008). The politics of terror seeks to attract worldwide attention to explain, react and justify certain objectives, including political, economic, and social phenomena (Hodges & Nilep, 2007; Kellner, 2004). In addition, the politics of terror dramatizes the extensively promulgated perception that social control has been broken down, thus higher security control is drastically required to halt consequential situations (Altheide, 2006).

Many scholarly studies have critically appraised the representation of Iran as a threatening entity from different viewpoints, analysing the underlying incentives for reproducing the discourse

of Iranophobia through different political and media discourses. Accordingly, these studies have widely addressed the media diplomacy of the U.S. (Jafarnezhad, 2019; Sharifi et al., 2016; Mehdizade & Sasani, 2016; Shokati Mogarab et al., 2019), Iran's nuclear programmes (Qiyasian et al., 2014; Kadkhodaei & Ghase-mi Tari, 2018; Soleimanzade et al., 2018), and cultural-religious discourse of the IRI (Nor Mohammadi & Kazemi, 2015).

Iranophobia appears to be the outcome of at least two opposing forces. On the one hand, Iran seeks to become the hegemonic force in the region so that it can both determine the dominant regional order and play a considerable role in global equations (Jamalzade & Aghaei, 2015; Ramazani, 1992); on the other hand, the West and, particularly, the U.S. are attempting to stabilise the existing power relations and global order, thus "marginalizing" the regional powers that swim against the tides (Dara & Babaei, 2016). In fact, the procedures of Iran's empowerment along with the pursuit of regional policies and programmes in the Middle East are interpreted as counter-hegemonic actions and policies: supporting Shiite forces in Iraq and Lebanon (Hosseini, 2010), supporting and reinforcing the Hezbollah in northern Lebanon and the Hamas in Palestine (Ram, 2009); insistence on the development of nuclear programmes (Kadkhodaei & Ghasemi-Tari, 2018), the rearrangement of the regional order (Sharatinia, 2010), and the export of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution to the adjoining countries (Motaghi, 2012). Put differently, Iran's regional influence is reflected in its support for Shiite militias and political groups, notably the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Iraq, these groups, some of which having close ideological and logistical ties to Iran, have played a significant role in post-ISIS security but are often viewed by the West as instruments of Iranian influence. In Lebanon, Iran's backing of Hezbollah as a dominant Shiite political and military organization is a core element of the U.S. narrative that frames Iran as a destabilising regional power. Accordingly,

Bill (2001) believes that Iran's political policies in absolute independence from the global hegemonic grid has provided the West with various alibis to foster the discourse of Iranophobia. In this connection, the European states and the U.S. have imposed preventive political and strategic measures on Iran to delimit and enervate Iran's process of empowerment. In so doing, Mehdizade and Mirhosseini (2017) believe that such strategic preclusions are administered via the extensive support of the Israel's security, authorising and authenticating the Arabian NATO, Iran's political and economic isolation, and selling arms extensively to the Arabs.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: PROXIMIZATION THEORY

The concept of "proximization" has emerged in cognitive linguistics and cognitive approaches to critical discourse analysis (Cap, 2014). Proximization Theory examines the patterns of coercive rhetoric in political interventionist discourses (Cap, 2013; 2017). Proximization is a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and affairs as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee (Cap, 2018). The construal of proximization in Cap's (2013) terms contributes the speaker to solicit legitimisation of certain actions and/or policies to neutralise the cumulating threat of the deictically peripherized (distant) entity (see Cap, 2013, 2017, 2018).

Proximization Theory, as an analytical framework of this study, holds that the threat comes from the entities at the periphery of the discourse space, known as "Outside-Deictic-Centre" (ODCs) (foreigners, enemies, evils, they, Others). It is conceptualised to be crossing the conceptual spatiotemporal as well as ideological centre-periphery distance to invade the speaker-addressee territory, the "Inside-Deictic-Centre" (IDC) (friends, allies, good, Us) (Cap, 2018, p. 97). In PT, Cap (2013) indicates that the movement and proximity of the distant entity (ODC) to the central one (IDC)

in the discourse space is systematically organised in terms of a three-dimensional deictic conceptualisation of Spatio-Temporal and Axiological axes (STA). This means that proximization is enacted in terms of the conceptual axes.

Spatial proximization involves a forced construction in which distant entities (ODCs) encroach physically upon the central entities of the discourse space (Cap, 2013). Temporal Proximization (TP), as one of the analytical elements in this approach, is a “forced construal of the envisaged conflict as not only impending, but also momentous, historic and thus needing immediate response and unique preventive measures” (Cap, 2018, p. 97). By using analogies, spatio-temporal proximization conflates the present mounting threat with the actual past catastrophic events to reinforce the threat construal and (re-)gain legitimisation for some preemptive/preventive policies and/or actions. Axiological Proximization (AP), as the value-laden strategy of discursive threat generation, is a forced construal and embodiment of the ideological mismatches, conflicts, and/or collisions between the constructed values of the home (IDC) and the values of the constructed peripheral entity (ODC) (Cap, 2013).

2.1 Data and analysis

The data for the present study comes from 50 White House addresses, statements and comments by Barack Obama, the 44th president of the U.S., from 2009 to 2017. The very selection was based on the content of Obama’s speeches in which the IRI was represented as a growing threat in the Middle East. Therefore, the core idea was to investigate the range of concepts that Obama’s discourse employed to represent the IRI. The analyses will therefore focus on investigating pertinent linguistic and pragmatic-cognitive arsenal of Obama’s discourse that not only otherises the IRI, but also construes its policies and programmes as threats to the U.S. and its allies. Nearly five months after the inauguration of Barack Obama on January 20, 2009, the tenth round of presidential

elections in Iran was held in an entirely polarised socio-political atmosphere on June 12, 2009 (Khordad 22, 1388 S.H.). After a couple of days, the IRI's Ministry of Interior proclaimed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the as the tenth president who held the office for the second term. This led to a great wave of opposition and protests domestically mainly by Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi, the other two leading nominees, and their adherents and voters across the nation, claiming that electoral fraud had occurred during the election. What followed was an agitated and uneasy social and political atmosphere in Iran, which brought about social polarisations between the supporters and protestors of the election results. The security and military forces resorted to violence to settle the demonstrations. Consequently, many were killed and arrested, including the prominent political elites, journalists, and political activists. Ever since, the opposition political leaders have been placed under home confinement.

These incidents provided a prime opportunity for Obama's discourse to re-produce and reinforce the discourse of Iranophobia, using axiological lemmas such as "human rights", "civil rights", "justice", and "freedom". But it was not the whole story. After tensions subsided in Iran's socio-political environment, these axiological concepts were replaced with the concept of "nuclear programmes", "terrorism", and "regional peace and security". However, this does not mean that the ideological concepts were entirely swept under the carpet; rather, when needed, they were employed to renew the distinctions between Us and Others and rehabilitate the waves of Iranophobia.

2.2 Construing the Outside-Deictic-Centre (ODC)

In representing Iran, Obama's discourse positions different entities associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran (the IRI) in the ODC space. Put differently, it appears that the IRI's political system serves here as an important yardstick to identify the member items of the ODC space. The noun phrases such as "some in Iran"

(see (1) below), “some in the Iranian government” (1), “Iran’s leaders” (2), and “the government” (3) are identified and located as ODC members. The rationale behind locating these entities in the ODC space lies in the statements that construct the identity and construes the characteristics of the IRI under the influence of the 2009 Iranian protests in Iran. This facilitates Obama’s discourse to use contextual specification of the 2009 protests to delineate and characterise the identity structure of the IRI. These contextual hallmarks involve the construed actions of the IRI in regard with the protests to the election results: *Iran’s tendency towards adopting the conspiracy theory* (“accusing the United States ... of instigating protests” (1)); *social distracting actions* (“they are obvious attempts to distract people from what is” (1)); and *drastic and violent actions* (“by threats, the beatings and imprisonment” (1); “Iran’s leaders govern through fear and tyranny” (2); “the government brutalized women and men” (3)).

- (1) The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, the beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days.... The Iranian people are trying to have a debate about their future. **Some in Iran – some in the Iranian government**, in particular, are trying to avoid that debate by accusing the United States and others in the West of instigating protests over the election... They’re an obvious attempt to distract people from what is truly taking place **within Iran’s borders**.

June 23, 2009

- (2) What’s taking place **within Iran** is not about the United States or any other country. It’s about the Iranian people and their aspirations for. And the decision of **Iran’s**

leaders to govern through fear and tyranny will not succeed in making those aspirations go away.

December 28, 2009

- (3) Let's remember that the first peaceful protests in the region were in the streets of Tehran, where the **government** brutalized women and men, and threw innocent people into jail. We still hear the chants echo from the rooftops of Tehran. The image of a young woman dying in the streets is still seared in our memory.

May 19, 2011

The characteristics as such are reason enough to otherise the IRI on grounds of axiological objects such as human rights. They portray the IRI as taking antagonistic, violent and rough measures against its citizens' democratic demands ("The Iranian people are trying to have a debate... some in the Iranian government ... are trying to avoid that debate" (1); "decision of Iran's leaders to govern through fear and tyranny" (2); "the government brutalized women and men" (3)). Moreover, in this period, the noun "Iran" occurring in prepositional phrases "in Iran" (1), "within Iran's borders" (1) and "within Iran" (2) is metaphorically conceptualised as a container for violent and undemocratic events and actions taken against its citizens. Such construal provides a basic picture of the ODC space in the beginning year of Obama's presidency.

One year later, the axiological concepts such as *human rights* and *social justice* co-occurred with other concepts pertaining to regional and global security, like *terrorism* and *nuclear programmes*.

- (4) Iran is the only party to the NPT that cannot demonstrate the peaceful intentions of its nuclear progress and those actions have consequence.

September 23, 2010

- (5) So far, Syria has followed its Iranian ally, seeking assistance from Tehran in the tactics of suppression.

May 19, 2011

- (6) Now, our opposition to Iran's intolerance and Iran's repressive measures, as well as its illicit nuclear program and its support of terror is well known.

May 19, 2011

- (7) Bahrain is a longstanding partner, and we are committed to its security. We recognize that Iran has tried to take advantage of the turmoil there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law.

May 19, 2011

- (8) A nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel's security interests. But it is also counter to the national security interests of the United States.

March 4, 2010

- (9) the Iranian government continues to prop up a dictator in Damascus and supports terrorist groups abroad.

September 22, 2012

With the human rights issues being tinged by the multiplicity of other concerns about the IRI, Obama's discourse updates the characterisation of the Other's space by representing the IRI as *pursuing un-peaceful and illicit nuclear programmes* ("Iran is the only party to the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] that cannot demonstrate the peaceful intentions" (4); "its illicit nuclear program" (6)), *disturbing the stability and security of the region* ("Iran has tried to take advantage of turmoil there" (7)),

threatening the security interests of the US and Israel (“a nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel’s security interests” (8); “it is also counter to the national security of the United States” (8)) and *sponsoring dictators and terrorism in the region* (“the Iranian government continues to prop up a dictator (9)). Furthermore, the nominal element “Iran” in this period is no longer conceptualised as a “container”; rather, through metonymical usage, it refers to the entirety of the political sovereignty and is construed as an active agent posing threats to the Us-group entities: “Iran is the only party” (4); “Iran has tried to take advantage” (7); “a nuclear-armed Iran” (8).

2.3 Construing the Inside-Deictic-Centre (IDC)

In response to the Iranian 2009 protests, the IDC territory in Obama’s discourse space includes “the Iranian people” as well as “the U.S.” and “the international community”. By positioning the “the Iranian people” as a member item in this space, Obama’s discourse conceptually extends the IDC territory solely based on political considerations. This inclusion is manufactured by taking the side of the entities who are construed to be affected by the Iranian government (“are trying to avoid the debate” (1); “Iran’s leaders to govern through fear and tyranny” (2); “the government brutalized women and men” (3)). Such a sympathetic discursive stance-taking represents the social and governmental spheres of Iran in pure antagonism and as two opposition forces. Thus, it can be assumed that the very inclusion may weaken the IRI’s legitimacy by conceptualising it as devoid of social credit to strengthen the pillars of its hegemony. With the weakened coherent social legitimacy, the IRI is implied to be one of the numerous examples of “minority dictatorships that are actively hated by large parts of their population but have succeeded in staying in power for decades” (Fukuyama, 2006 [1992], p. 16).

- (10) And we will safeguard America's own security against those who threaten our citizens, our friends, and our interests.

January 25, 2012

- (11) America is and will continue to be a Pacific power, promoting peace, stability, and the free flow of commerce among nations.

September 24, 2014

- (12) We have a chance to negotiate a comprehensive agreement that prevents a nuclear-armed Iran, secures America and our allies – including Israel, while avoiding yet another Middle East conflict.

January 20, 2015

After 2010, Obama's discourse updates the configuration of the IDC space. In this new organisation, noun phrases "America" (11 & 12), "America's own security" (10), "our citizens" (10), and "our interests" (10) constitute the basic configuration of the IDC space. These entities receive their identities from the value system and policies such as *supporting peace* ("America is and will continue to be a pacific power" (11)); *providing security and stability* ("safeguard America's own security" (10); "promoting peace and stability" (11)); *supporting global economy* ("promoting ... free flow of commerce" (11)), and *taking up diplomatic procedures against Iran's threatening actions* ("we have a chance to negotiate" (12)).

Besides the major member items of the IDC space, there are certain other elements that constitute another layer of the IDC space: "our friends" (10); "our allies" (12), "Israel" (12). The very configuration of the IDC space is relatively consistent in Obama's discourse, enabling us to call it a basic configuration of the space. However, in regard to multifarious political events in the Middle East, certain states and entities are positioned in the IDC space

such as Bahrain: “Bahrain is a longstanding partner” (7). Besides adding entities to the space, certain other elements are temporally excluded from the space due to political and strategic calculations, but when needed, they are restored to the IDC space. In this connection, the previously IDC-positioned entity of the “Iranian people”, which was a crucial player in the 2009 events in Iran, is now employed and included in the IDC whenever it is intended to demonise the IRI.

3. THE DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF THREAT CONSTRUCTION IN OBAMA’S DISCOURSE

It was noted earlier that Barack Obama’s first speech on Iran at the outset of his first-term presidency was made under the influence of the Iranian 2009 protests over the results of the 10th presidential election. As a matter of fact, the internal political strife within Iran underscored Obama’s discourse to brandish the discourse of Iranophobia primarily under the banner of human rights, representing the IRI as a real threat to universal axiological values and ideals.

- (13) The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, the beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days.... The Iranian people are trying to have a debate about their future. Some in Iran – some in the Iranian government, in particular, are trying to avoid that debate by accusing the United States and others in the West of instigating protests over the election. They’re an obvious attempt to distract people from what is truly taking place within Iran’s borders.

June 23, 2009

In 2009–2010, Obama’s discourse on Iran starts by establishing a sharp ideological opposition between the international community – including the U.S. and the Iranian people (IDCs) – and the Islamic Republic as well as the entities associated with it (ODCs). In this way, Obama’s discourse characterises the IRI as an entity negatively proximising the axiological values and demands of the IDC zone. In other words, Obama’s discourse pictures the IRI as a promoter of various evil policies violating human rights and democratic values and demands of the Iranian people (“the Iranian people are trying to have debate about their future” (13)). In Obama’s discourse, thus, the employment of the proximization manifests itself in construing the IRI as exerting on violence acts (“the threats, the beatings, and imprisonment of”) and resorting to the propagation of false consciousness amongst the public by manipulating the events (“by accusing the United States and others ... they are obvious attempt to distract people”). This construal marks a moderate transition from spatial to an axiological proximization towards a single event (“to have a debate about their future”).

Although the recruitment of these spatial and axiological proximization devices serves to augment the fear appeal, the two strategies differ significantly in regard to the impact they cause. Interestingly, Obama’s discourse seeks to exhibit the IRI’s spatial proximization towards axiological values of the people as universally consequential to reverberate the voice of Iranophobia. In so doing, Obama’s discourse construes the two entities “the United States and international community” as being psychologically affected (“have been appalled and outraged”) by the IRI’s coercive reaction (“by the threats, the beatings and imprisonments”) to the Iranian people’s democratic demands. It is true that the construal of the impact consequences does not involve “the Iranian people” as the real affected participant of the IRI’s coercive actions; however, foregrounding “the United States and the international community” as psychologically affected entities

conceptually expands the scope of the impacts of the IRI's spatial proximization.

Nonetheless, unlike the construal of spatial proximization, the construal of an axiological strategy does not involve any consequences; rather, it merely subsumes, as Obama's discourse construes, the IRI's recourse to conspiracy theory and condemns the U.S. and the West to exert on provocative policies and cause political unrest within Iran's socio-political sphere. In Obama's discourse, this is deemed as the technique of "trying to avoid the debate" administered by the IRI to further oppress the people by nourishing them with false consciousness. Here, therefore, drawing on reconstructing the IRI's viewpoints on the underlying provocations of protests over the election, Obama's discourse also attempts to construe the U.S. and the West as the real affected participants of the IRI's proximization, accused of intervening with domestic affairs of the country and instigating protests.

The temporal aspect of the Iranian people's demands and the IRI's reaction towards it represents them as two opposite forces involved in durative antagonism. In this, the Iranian people's action in demanding their democratic rights is construed as a progressive political demand ("they are trying to have a debate"). This leads us to believe that political demands as such have persistently been issued by the Iranian people during the IRI's domination. From a temporal perspective, his demand is construed to be continuously suppressed by the IRI's said mechanism of countering the people's movement. The conceptual blockade, therefore, opens the gates to infer that the IRI has long and systematically been plotting to suppress people's democratic demands.

During the post-2010 era, when the socio-political tensions and struggles in Iran somewhat abated, the concepts human right became less influential in echoing the discourse of Iranophobia, Obama's discourse, employed the proximization of the IRI based on the IRI's nuclear programme and terrorism. In this era, the IRI's nuclear programmes became the most important and historically

prominent, extensively propagandised as a momentous and cardinal threat.

- (14) A nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel's security interests. But it is also counter to the national security interests of the United States... Indeed, the entire world has an interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. A nuclear-armed Iran would thoroughly undermine the non-proliferation regime that we've done so much to build. There are risks that an Iranian nuclear weapon could fall into the hands of a terrorist organization. It is almost certain that others in the region would feel compelled to get their own nuclear weapon, triggering an arms race in one of the world's most volatile regions. It would embolden a regime that has brutalized its own people, and it would embolden Iran's proxies, who have carried out terrorist attacks from the Levant to southwest Asia.

March 4, 2010

The IRI's contingent nuclear threat is construed in a hypothetical space in which Iran is characterised as being armed with nuclear weapons ("a nuclear-armed Iran"). This hypothetical image finds its site of materialisation in an indefinite point in future. It thus constructs an oppositional future (Dunmire, 2011; Cap, 2021) whose probable materialisation is contingent upon Iran's obtaining the nuclear weapons.

This construal importantly conflates spatial and temporal proximization of the IRI towards the IDC's unspecified future zone with nuclear weapons. Put differently, in Obama's discourse, the IRI's hypothetical sibling, nuclear-armed Iran, is endowed with a property to encroach upon the security interests of the U.S.'s most intimate ally, Israel and even the U.S.'s own national security

affairs. In fact, using the relational clause (“a nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to”), Obama’s rhetoric construes the IRI’s alleged counter-security policies and actions as an inborn property with which the IRI is endowed with.

The consequences arising from this attributed evil character do not merely target the U.S. and Israel; rather, the transitive clause “the entire world has an interest with” carries the presupposition that the impacts of the IRI’s nuclear programmes, now paralleled with nuclear weapons, transcend the geographical and geopolitical borderlines and involves the entire world. Therefore, the prevention of a global threat appeals to global interest and necessity. This portrayal, thus, serves as a preface to hypothesise the potential repercussions that the IRI’s nuclear programmes can bring about.

In Obama’s discourse, the IRI’s nuclear programmes also serve as a major resource of different impacts and impact consequences. As a matter of fact, the IRI’s pursuit of nuclear programmes is conceptualised as posing risks and various wide-ranging impacts over broad geographical and geopolitical territories. As one possible and probable consequence – an instance of spatial proximization – the IRI’s pursuit of nuclear programmes is construed to give rise to axiological impact consequences with universal scope. In this, employing nuclear programmes and policies, the IRI is conceptualised as negatively proximizing over a preventive ideological apparatus of the West which is assumed to control nuclear arm production across the world.

Proximizing over the ideological structure of the non-proliferation regime of the West in the oppositional future would eventuate in further probable spatial and axiological proximization of the IRI as repercussions. The resultant potential spatial and axiological proximizations are conceptualised in terms of objects such as a) *expansion and reinforcement of Iran-sponsored terrorism*; b) *incidence of nuclear arm proliferation and race in the Middle East*; c) *strengthening dictatorship and brutal domestic policies*.

Furthermore, this hypothesised threat depot is construed to expand operational range of its threats (in particular, terrorism) on a vast geographical and geopolitical region in the Middle East by employing a prepositional phrase encoding start (“from Levant”) and end (“southeast in Asia”) points of the region. Importantly, recruiting the conceptual start and end points to designate the operational range of the IRI’s construed threats seems to conceptualise the entity in movement towards various targets (see Chilton, 2014). This means that the whole Middle East is exposed to the IRI’s threats.

Nevertheless, Obama’s discourse employs a rather tentative ontological stance to construe a group of impact consequences of the IRI’s spatial proximization. This construal provides the ODC with strong psychological incentive and strength besides technological and war craft facilities to exert more influential and deeply consequential impacts on the IDC territory. In other words, the semantics of the verb “embolden” conceptualises a hypothetical change of state by which the construed incentive (Iran’s nuclear programmes) finds a causative function and gives birth to the impacts that do not exist or are not thoroughly materialised yet. On this account, it can be argued that, at least, part of the IRI’s so-called sponsorship of terrorism and dictatorship rests upon the psychological incentives induced by pursuing nuclear programmes.

- (15) Its illicit nuclear program is just one challenge that Iran poses.... [T]he Iranian government has shown its hypocrisy by claiming to support the rights of protesters while treating its own people with brutality. Moreover, Iran continues to support terrorism across the region, including providing weapons and funds to terrorist organizations.

May 22, 2011

In later speeches, Obama's discourse changes its rhetorical manner and avoids re-establishing the former so-called causative connections between nuclear programmes and their resulting impacts. In this, Obama's discourse construes the IRI's nuclear threat, human right violation and terrorism as individual hostile threats and impacts without establishing any causal connection between them. What's more, Obama's discourse employs mild terminology ("challenges") to characterise the unspecified impact of nuclear programmes. Also, in this connection, it refers to human rights issue as a "hypocritical" policy, delineating the very issue in terms of an ethical marker which is counter to the (ideological) values of the IDC. Such construals, therefore, might convince one to argue that Obama's discourse attempts to smooth the rough edges of the IRI's depicted image in regard to its nuclear programmes and human rights issues. However, relying merely on the surface value of the key terms only provides a shallow and simplistic view for three main reasons.

Firstly, according to contextual calculations, it appears that the recruitment of mild and less-aggressive terminology is a rhetorical manoeuvre, at least politically influenced to open a space to start a diplomatic confrontation with the IRI. But this does not mean that Obama's rhetoric procrastinates the reproduction of Iranophobia at the expense of adopting diplomatic resolutions. Rather, through rhetorical dexterity, Obama's discourse enumerates diverse threats and consequences that target and encroach upon the IDC territory ("treating its own people with brutality"; "Iran continues to support terrorism"). This, on the one hand, implies that Obama's discourse construes the IRI as generating various threats and, on the other, using less-aggressive rhetoric, sends signals to the Iranian authorities to try out a diplomatic approach to the nuclear programme issue. In this, Obama's discourse reciprocates the less aggressive rhetoric with multiplication of the IRI's threats.

Secondly, Obama's discourse construes the IRI's nuclear programmes as one, amongst many, of the other threatening and provocative actions and policies. This view provides the audience with an insight that the demolishment of the IRI's entire nuclear programmes will not result in the neutralisation of the other threats. Since the nuclear programme no longer functions as a sole source of other threats such as human rights violations, terrorism, and arm proliferation, each of them takes its own root from independent individual sources.

Thirdly, and more importantly, Obama's discourse construed the IRI as actively involved in sponsoring terrorism in the region ("Iran continues to support terrorism" (15)). With this transitive structure, the IRI is conceptualised as proximizing certain spatial threats ("terrorism") to the IDC territory. The very proximization, as Obama's discourse construes, is manufactured by providing the terrorist with financial and logistic support ("providing weapons and funds terrorist organisation"). Therefore, portraying the IRI as openly involved in the expansion of terrorism not only makes up for a mild and less-aggressive rhetoric, but also augments the fear appeal of the IRI's regional policies. This latter implication is further aided by the lexico-grammatical toolkit. Accordingly, temporally concerned, using the habitual aspect ("Iran continues...") conceptualises the IRI as persistently and incessantly looming over the IDC space. The aspectual structure does not point to conceptual start and end points of the threat; rather, construes it as a property of the ODC entity and the given temporal space. In the same vein, the semantics of the main verb "continue" presupposes both historical involvement with the given spatial proximization and its prospective inclination. Furthermore, the modality of certainty in the transitive structure actualises the communicated proposition and furthers the appeal of the IRI's construed spatial proximization. This certainty also arises from the credible subject position. Thanks to rhetorical dexterity, Obama's discourse enumerates diverse threats and impact

consequences that target and encroach upon the IDC territory (“treating its own people with brutality”; position of the American president who is deemed to have access to reliable intelligence resources (e.g. “we are clear-eyed about Iran’s support”(16)).

- (16) We are clear-eyed about Iran’s support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, which threaten our allies, and the mistrust between our nations cannot be washed away.

January 28, 2014

The Iranian officials along with foreign ministers of the P5+1 countries sat at the negotiation table to resolve the long-existing and ever-growing challenges on the IRI’s nuclear programmes. The enduring negotiations gave rise to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by which Iran was obliged to abort its 20 percent uranium enrichment and dismantle the heavy water reactor in Arak. In response, the U.S. and the European parties pledged to lift those economic sanctions and release the Iranian frozen assets in the U.S. How JCPOA was agreed to be implemented by all parties as well as the conditions under which the agreement could be entirely nullified falls outside the scope of this paper. But what really matters is that Obama’s discourse continues to run the production line of Iranophobia even in the context of the IRI’s negotiations with the P5+1.

- (17) The Islamic Republic of Iran has been advancing its nuclear program for decades. By the time I took office, Iran was operating thousands of centrifuges, which can produce the materials for a nuclear bomb – and Iran was concealing a covert nuclear facility.... Iran is not going to simply dismantle its program because we demand it to do so. That’s not how the world works,

and that's not what history shows us. Iran has shown no willingness to eliminate those aspects of their program that they maintain are for peaceful purposes, even in the face of unprecedented sanctions.... Our concerns will remain with respect to Iranian behavior so long as Iran continues its sponsorship of terrorism, its support for proxies who destabilize the Middle East, its threats against America's friends and allies – like Israel

April 2, 2015

The reproduction of Iranophobia in Obama's threat-based rhetoric during the negotiations may extensively, if not exclusively, rest upon the appeal of the IRI's nuclear threat and Iran-backed terrorism in the Middle East. On these accounts, Obama's discourse conceptualises the IRI's spatial proximization towards the security of the IDC by construing the IRI's pursuit of nuclear programmes, its technological advancement in nuclear technology, and the taken-for-granted terrorism expansion. In addition to the conceptualisation of spatial proximization, Obama's discourse characterises the IRI as an untrustworthy and unreliable entity in standing on the agreement. This perception in regard with Iran is widespread in Obama's discourse during the negotiations, as in many instances Obama emphasises that the deal with Iran is not based on trust:

- (18) So this deal is not based on trust, it is based on unprecedented verification...

April 2, 2015

- (19) Iran is not going to simply dismantle its program because we demand it to do so...

April 2, 2015

- (20) There are no guarantees that the negotiations will succeed, and I keep all options on the table to prevent Iran...

January 20, 2015

- (21) This deal is not built on trust; it is built on verification...

July 14, 2015

Although this feature does not pose any threat to the IDC territory, it sends out a signal to global audience that the IRI's goodwill in guaranteeing its commitment to the principles of the deal cannot be trusted. Such a perception opens the gates to suspicions that the IRI is abusing the diplomatic approach and resolution to covertly follow its programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

As our analyses show, Barack Obama's 2009–2017 discourse employed variety of objects such as human rights, nuclear programmes, and terrorism to endorse the reproduction of Iranophobia. However, it is important to note that domestic contextual specificities as well as the ultimate efficiency triggered the recruitment of various objects to refuel the discourse of Iranophobia. Therefore, the transformation of objects in Obama's discourse gives rise to conceptualising the IRI as proximizing various sorts of threats, including axiological and material to the U.S. territory.

In Obama's discourse, the underlying discursive pattern to conceptualise the IRI as a threat is to zoom in the IRI's policies and measures in regard with domestic affairs (2009 demonstrations and protests), nuclear programmes, and strategic regional policies as ideologically and materially consequential not only to the U.S. but also to the entire world. Furthermore, in order to give

more weight to Iranophobia and legitimise it, Obama's discourse construes the resultant catastrophic impacts of the three cardinal threats that may be materialised in an indefinite future space.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, our analyses and findings prove the applicability of the proximization as a theory for recognising object transformations in political discourses that trigger the conceptualisation and the ODC entities' negative variable proximization to the IDC realm. This understanding therefore contributes to hypothesising about the structure of the regime of knowledge in the U.S. political discourse that construe the IRI solely as a threat and encourages global involvement with preventing the IRI's policies and programmes. Thus, our analyses and findings suggest that the proximization theory is duly applicable to investigate different conceptualisation of threat proximization towards the IDC zone during a long period of time to trace the knowledge regimes. This trend of study can possibly encourage political discourse studies to pay further attention and space to track the knowledge structures that give arose to bipolar US vs. THEM discourse configurations, threat constructions, legitimisation and prejudice enactment.

REFERENCES

- Altheide, D. L. (2006). *Terrorism and the politics of fear*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Billig, M. (2008). The language of critical discourse analysis: the case of nominalization. *Discourse & Society*, 19(6), 783–800. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926508095894>
- Booth, K. (2008). The human faces of terror: Reflections in a cracked looking-glass. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539150701879816>
- Cap, P. (2006). *Legitimization in political discourse: A cross disciplinary perspective on the modern US war rhetoric*. Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Cap, P. (2008). Towards the proximization model of the analysis of legitimization in political discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(1), 17–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2007.10.002>

- Cap, P. (2010). Axiological aspects of proximization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(2), 392–407. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2009.06.008>
- Cap, P. (2013). *Proximization: The pragmatics of symbolic distance crossing*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Cap, P. (2017). *The language of fear: Communicating threat in public discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cap, P. (2018). Spatial cognition. In J. Flowerdew and J. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 92–105). Routledge.
- Cap, P. (2021). Alternative futures in political discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 32(3), 328–345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977218>
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Chilton, P. (2014). *Language, space and mind: The conceptual geometry of linguistic meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dabbashi, H. (2015). *Persophilia. Persian culture on global scene*. Harvard University Press.
- Dara, J., & Babaei, M. (2016). Shi'e harasi va Iran harasi: Rahbord-e Amrika baray-e hefze rezhim-e sahyunisti [Shiite phobia and Iranophobia: The US strategy to maintain Zionist regime]. *Faslname-ye Motale'at-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, 13(44): 189–208. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.20085834.1395.13.44.10.0>
- Darabi, A. (2016). Hollywood va eslam harasi dar diplomasi-ye resane'ei Eyalat-e Motahede-ye Amrika pas az 11 septambr [Hollywood and Islamophobia in the U.S. post-9/11 media diplomacy]. *Jostar-haye Siyasi-ye Mo'aser*, 7(2), 1–20. https://politicalstudy.ihcs.ac.ir/article_2577.html
- Dunmire, P. L. (2011). *Projecting the future through political discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Filardo-Llamas, L. (2015). Re-contextualizing political discourse: An analysis of shifting spaces in songs used as a political tool. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12(3), 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2015.1013478>
- Ghiasian, M. S., Namvar, Z., Rovshan, B., & Soltani, A. A. (2014). Baznemayi-ye goftman-e mashru'i'yate fa'aliyat-e hasteyi-ye Iran az negah-e Amrika [Representation of the legitimization discourse of Iran's nuclear activity in America's view]. *Faslname-ye Motale'ate Siyasi Jahan-e Eslam*, 3(2), 97–122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20286/priw-030297>
- Hart, C. (2015). Viewpoint in linguistic discourse: Space and evaluation in news reports of political protests. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12(3), 238–260.
- Hodges, A., & Nilep, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Discourse, war and terrorism*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- El Hussein, R. (2010). Hezbollah and the axis of refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(5), 803–815. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502695>

- Izadi, F., Mehrbanifar, H., Chaboki, R., & Javid Mehr, M. (2013). Iran harasi dar Amrika: Baznemayi-ye sharq-senasan-e az barname-ye haste-ei Iran dar mostanad-e Iranium [Iranophobia in America: An Orientalist representation of Iran's nuclear programmes in the documentary "Iranium"]. *Faslname-ye Motale'at-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, 10(35), 92–69. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.20085834.1392.10.35.4.5>
- Jafarinejad, M. (2019). Diplomasy resanei Amrika alayhe Jomhouri Eslami Iran dar doran-e pasa-daesh [Public Diplomacy of US against the Islamic Republic of Iran in the post-ISIS era. *Tahqiqat-e Siyasi va Beinolmelali*, 11(38), 183–298. <https://www.sid.ir/paper/515705/fa>
- Jamalzadeh, N., & Aghaei, M. (2015). Ta'sir-e Iran harasi dar reqabat-e taslihati-ye a'zaye Shuraye Hamkari-ye Khaliye Fars [The study of the Iranophobia project in arms purchases of the Persian Gulf cooperation council members]. *Jostar-haye Siyasi-ye Mo'aser*, 6(15), 19–47. https://politicalstudy.ihrs.ac.ir/article_1656.html
- Kadkhodee, E., & Ghasemi, Tari, Z. (2018). Otherising Iran in American political discourse: Case study of a post-JCPOA senate hearing on Iran sanctions. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(1), 109–128. <https://10.1080/01436597.2018.1513786>
- Kellner, D. (2004). 9/11 spectacles of terror, and media manipulation: A critique of Jihadist and Bush media politics. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(1), 41–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900410001674515>
- Mahdizade, A., & Mirhosseini, F. (2012). Rish-e-haye Iran harasi az nega-e afkar-e omumi-ye jahan-e Arab [The roots of Iranophobia from the perspective of Arab public opinion]. *Faslname-ye Siyasat-e Khareji*, 31(2), 151–182. https://fp.ipisjournals.ir/article_28412.html
- Mahdizade, S. M., & Soleimani Sasani, M. (2016). Eslam harasi va Iran harasi dar sinama-ye Hollywood: Tahlil-e film-e "Gheyr-e Ghabel-e Dark" [Islamophobia and Iranophobia in Hollywood cinema: An analysis of the movie *Unthinkable*]. *Faslname-ye Motale'ate Ghodrat-e Narm*, 6(1), 196–222. https://www.spba.ir/article_40928.html
- Mottaghi, E. (2012). Islamic awakening and the extension of democratic soul in the Middle East. *Quarterly of Diplomacy and Just Peace*, 4. Retrieved April 26, 2015, from <http://peace-ipsc.org/fa>
- Nor Mohammad, M., & Kazemi, H. (2015). Jaygah-e farhang dar takvin-e Iran harasi farhangi dar keshvar-haye hashiye-ye Khaliy-e Fars [The role of culture in the genesis of Iranophobia in the Persian Gulf countries]. *Pazhohesh-haye Rahbordi-ye Siyasat*, 4(12), 87–113. https://qpss.atu.ac.ir/article_1224.html
- Ram, H. (2009). *Iranophobia. The logic of an Israeli obsession*. Stanford University Press.

- Ramazani, R. K. (1992). Iran's foreign policy: Both North and South. *Middle East Journal*, 46(3), 393–412. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328462>
- Shariatinia, M. (2010). Iran harasi: Dalayel va payamad-ha [Iranophobia: Rationales and consequences]. *Faslname-ye Ravabet-e Khareji*, 2(6), 191–208. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.20085419.1389.2.2.6.0>
- Sharifi, S. M., Ansari, N., & Asadollahzade, M. (2016). Iran harasi dar gotogo-haye khabari-ye CNN: Motale'yi bar mabnaye tahlil-e goftman-e entegadi-ye van Dijk [Iranophobia in CNN news talks: A study based on van Dijk's CDA approach]. *Faslname-ye Motale'at-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, 13(45), 189–207. <https://dor.isc.ac/dor/20.1001.1.20085834.1395.13.45.10.2>
- Shokati Mogharab, S., Mansouri, M., & Ayubian, H. (2019). Tahlil-e entegadi-ye peikare-bonyad kefiyat-e baznamayi-e tahrir-haye Amrika alayhe Iran dar resane-hae gharbi bar mabna-ye peikare-ye berouz-shavande-ye NOWA corpus-based critical analysis of the representation of U.S. sanctions against Iran in the Western media: The case of NOW Corpus]. *Faslname-ye Zaban-shenasi-ye Ejtemayi*, 3(1), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.30473/il.2019.45922.1259>
- Soleimani, R., & Harati, M. J. (2016). Nazariye-ye baznamayi va engare-haye ma'nayi goftman-e resane-yi Amrika az Eslam va Iran [Representation theory and semantic images of Iran and Islam in the US media discourse]. *Jostar-haye Siyasi Mo'aser*, 6(4), 99–122. https://politicalstudy.ihrs.ac.ir/article_2100.html
- Soleimanzade, S., Omid, A., & Yazdani, E. (2018). Tahlil-e saze engarane-ye Iran harasi dar siyasat-e khareji Amrika dar doran-e pasa barjam [A constructivist analysis of Iranophobia in the U.S. foreign policy in the post-JCPOA era]. *Pazhohesh-haye Rahbordi-ye Siyasat*, 7(24), 95–124. <https://doi.org/10.22054/qpps.2018.19033.1540>