Iran's Rhetoric Aggression:

Instrumentalizing Foreign Policy Power through the Media

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Executive Summary

Iran's domestic politics and regional ambition have, from the inception of the Islamic revolution, taken strength from the country's conduct of a defensive foreign strategy through a policy of 'rhetoric aggression' - a strident security discourse of radical pragmatism projected onto the public square to achieve specific foreign policy gains outside the use of force. The language of rhetoric aggression, constructed in the heat of popular upheaval, emerged as a mechanism first to tie the population together after the experience of authoritarian rule, secondly to protect the Iranian revolution from outside threat - particularly from the Great Satan, and thirdly to project Iran's Islamic world view as a united community, or *ummah*, of all Muslims against Western intervention and norms, a worldview it saw itself as leading. Prior to the nuclear deal, Iran's focus of rhetoric aggression was squarely on the US and was as much a defensive mechanism to protect its self-image from America's negative representations as an offensive one to project similarly toxic language toward Washington; today rhetoric aggression has found a new theater, the war of words with Saudi Arabia. For almost 40 years, Iran has adeptly utilized the media as an instrument of foreign policy in the absence of direct diplomatic relations with the US. In mediating public opinion, it has capitalized on journalism's use of drama, framing, and other aspects of information transfer – including online and through social media. This research explores how Iran has mediated its foreign policy instrument of rhetoric aggression to project its power, protect its self-constituted image abroad, deflect attacks on Shi'ism and promote the idea of a strong Islam – and how this mediated discursive economy has differed in the periods before and after the nuclear deal.

Introduction

For more than three decades, Iran and the US have had no formal diplomatic relations. Even so, they have maintained continuous foreign policy communication throughout, responding to each other with speed through their shared choice of exchange: the media. Most often, they are engaged in some kind of attempt to force the Other to accept their widely differing worldview, and to establish their own credibility at the expense of the Other. The reactive and declaratory nature of the exchange, conducted through the use of strong negative language, has infused the relationship with a sense of perpetual crisis, which nonetheless, has never spilled over into the use of force.

Following a period of close friendship between Iran and the US during the rule of the Shah, a barbed exchange redefined the conduct of foreign policy between them as a relationship by other than diplomatic means: the language was aggressive, and publicly conveyed. This hostile form of foreign policy exchange I call "rhetoric aggression" – a mode of "post-modern conflict" using language to instrumentalize recurrent ontological insecurity through threat perception and threat perception control, and which Iran is shaping into a similar rhetorical approach in the conduct of its relationship with Saudi Arabia.[1]

This paper sets out to elucidate how this communicative exchange can be understood and to parse out how it has worked. To do so, I turn to the explanatory power of political rhetoric theory and to the useful work on state practices of recognition, respect and misrecognition, focusing particularly on the mediated narratives adopted by Iran.

For three and a half decades, this public, emotionalized war of words has cast continuous aspersions on the identity, rationality, and legitimacy of the other state's government, and yet, this toxic exchange has served to contain the conflict within a theater of rhetoric, avoiding serious use of force. This suggests that the use of soft power, or what has more recently been termed by both states as "soft war," has served to avoid physical confrontation, not purely by luck, but because rhetorical exchange serves to contain escalation of hostilities and contributes to a status quo of stability (Sabet and Safshekan nd; Wastnidge 2015, 371; Price 2013, 2398). What it suggests is that public foreign policy projection, conducted through the media in an active exercise of cultural power, has played a critical, if not *the* critical, factor in the key relationship between Iran and the US and in the tricky game of physical war avoidance.

Iranian and American rhetoric aggression, however, does not conform to traditional definitions of soft power transference which operate on the premise that state legitimacy in the eyes of the other undergirds the projection of such power (Nye 2004). The original concept of soft power has been much adjusted in the literature since Nye's original 1990 *Foreign Affairs* article advanced the idea, with variations on the practice providing alternative approaches to the argument, such as Bially Mattern, for example, who has been able to claim that "a certain degree of coercion is inherent in the means utilised to deploy soft power" (2005). The difference in the Iran-American case is that in the rhetoric adopted by each side and lobbed through the media onto the platform of public opinion as publicized foreign policy, neither side recognizes the legitimacy of the Other in the course of the hostile name calling and moral denunciation; indeed, as will be examined below, the rhetoric was designed to delegitimize the identity of the Other, misrecognize their claims, and promote a world order in which each passionately reads the Other as dangerous and hence, rightly defamable. This leads to a quandary: Used in this way, soft war, a war of words designed to discredit the Other, would seem to be, as Wastnidge claims, much the same as hard war – prone to escalate rather than decrease the chances of physical conflict. Yet, for 35 years, a publicly instrumentalized power politics of identity focused on a struggle for recognition has achieved the opposite: a containment of physical force, and the preservation of stability.

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[1] A similar break down in diplomatic relations with the UK during the Salman Rushdie affair and again in 2011, entailed recourse to mediated foreign policy exchanges that were contentious, see for example Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh (2014) *Persian Service: The BBC and British Interests in Iran* (London: IB Tauris).

To address this conundrum, the concept of "rhetoric aggression" is offered here, and is defined as a strident security discourse of radical pragmatism to achieve specific foreign policy gains independent of the use of force. Rhetoric being a form of language use designed to present an argument, and aggression defined as "behavior intended to harm another person, including psychologically or as damage to his or her reputation," the concept of "rhetoric aggression" refers to the projection of argument in a theater of foreign policy exchange structured to represent the Self in a morally superior worldview while promoting a hostile detraction of the identity and worldview of the Other. As both a defensive and offensive mechanism, its sustainability rests on both parties being able to adapt their rhetorical action to new meanings over time, ensuring that misrecognition and disrespect of the Other remains constant (Duncombe 2016, 623). With each new exchange, the Other is forced into self-identity reconfirmation and recovery, which temporarily constrains the actions of the Other (Trettevik 2016, 264). The projection of language onto the public square through media is as critical for shoring up the visibility, legitimacy, and rationality of the aggressor as it is for recovering the legitimacy of the aggressed. Yet the relationship between media and representation, particularly in regards to ideological mobilization, power projection, and collective learning processes, is itself contingent (Maia 2014, 2).

This study asks the over-arching question: How is rhetoric aggression structured and how does its instrumentalization of power through the media contribute to the deterrence of physical conflict between two highly antagonistic players? To take the inquiry forward, it likewise seeks to address three aims: first, to identify how rhetoric aggression fits into the larger field of strategic communications as a discourse of radical pragmatism. Second, to determine what the hallmarks are of rhetoric aggression's effectiveness and how the use of the media as a foreign policy exchange tool contributes to that. At various times in the course of the decades reviewed here, for example, the containment of violence was breached – including Iran's seizure of the US Embassy early in the standoff, and the US shooting down of a commercial Iran Air flight in 1988 during the Iran-Iraq War, killing all on board (Erlich 2007, 67, 195 fn23). Yet, although the temperature of the rhetoric aggression rose during such times of provocation, increased physical confrontation was generally avoided by both players. This raises issues regarding goals of war avoidance, the actors' close knowledge of the other's norms and practices, their own balancing between defensive and offensive rhetorical posturing, and their manipulation of the media as a platform of foreign policy dissemination. Third, this study sets out to investigate the origins of the language and labels adopted and their signification in perceptions of identity and cultural relations of power. As US rhetoric in the confrontation with Iran has been an active field of inquiry (cf. McDermott 1998; Erlich 2007; Pollack 2004; Said 1981) and literature on US and Iranian actions and responses by both practitioners and scholars of discourse and foreign policy decision-making has seen steady output since the hostage crisis (see for example Beeman 2005; Bowden 2006; Duncombe 2016; Jordan 1982; Roselle et al. 2014; Slavin 2007; Wastnidge 2015), this paper focuses Iran's rhetorical choices, use of media, and symbolic and historical experiences associated with the strategic narrative adopted.

Locating the Argument in Strategic Communications

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979 after 25 years of exile, his triumph over Mohamed Reza Shah was in no small part due to his highly adept use of strategic communication. For years, his sermons, smuggled from his seat of exile in Najaf, Iraq into his native Iran via cassette tape, were played throughout the mosque network, his followers becoming familiar with not only his voice, but his theories of Islamic government, and the language he employed to denounce the Shah and construct an Islamic vision for the future. In the year leading to the final denouement of the Pahlavi regime, Khomeini regularly hosted the world's media in the small town of Neuphle Chateau outside Paris, where the Shah had had him transferred in the vain hope that this might reduce Khomeini's media exposure. The canny use of the media by the prospective leader of the Islamic Republic to project his message to both domestic audiences and the international community is an example of the power of strategic communication, and the media's key role in enabling political leaders to communicate narratives and influence change.

To be strategic means structuring action to achieve a goal. Strategically structured communication, therefore, uses tailored language and message projection to target audiences, domestic or international, for specific ends, defensive or offensive, such as by evoking symbols of unity and self-respect, or images that delegitimize the enemy through misrecognition and disrespect. A focus on narrative highlights the centrality of meaning and perception in driving foreign policy through communicative acts. This initially served to locate the field of strategic communications by mapping it largely onto Nye's ideas of soft power. The strategy was seen as one of attraction and status enhancement, used to convinced the Other to align its policies more perfectly with the wielder's own (Nye 2004, 2013; see also Roselle et al. 2014; Wolf 2011). Understandings of the complementarity of strategic communications vis-a-vis hard power resource use shifted, however, as further analysis highlighted coercive communicative practices as part of the soft power toolkit (Bially Mattern 2005; Sauer 2007). Rhiss describes even the most conflictual strategic interactions, such as models of compellence and deterrence, as being all about communication (2000, 8). Wastnidge argues there is no difference

between hard and soft power. It is in this ambiguous zone that rhetoric aggression can be seen to reside.

Sauer argues that diplomacy is the main instrument of peaceful state interaction, but if diplomatic exchange is only occasional, or indeed absent, the communication vacuum will be naturally filled by using broadcast media, the Internet and social media (2007, 613). Advances in the tools available to states and their societies to easily and cheaply commune across wider and divided landscapes have, at the same time, coincided with the need to up the political game of media maximization. Rhetoric aggression, in utilizing public mediation to transmit foreign policy narratives of power for specific gains, relies on the media for its very existence. Analysis of media utilization in the context of rhetoric aggression offers an opportunity, therefore, to asses not only its effectiveness in achieving message promotion and goals of war avoidance, but its influence over state adaptation of narrative, and significantly, its contribution to a sense of perpetual crisis between the two involved states. What is more, it enables expanded conceptualization of how media as an expression of collective cultural practice maps onto communication strategies of radical argument and (dis)respect for and by the Other. "The urge to understand how to explain and practice non-coercive engagement in international affairs has never been more acute," precisely because the information age has developed so rapidly, and understanding state behavior as the technological landscape of strategic communications widens requires new approaches (Roselle et al. 2014, 72; Maia 2014, 2).

In an attempt to clarify patterns of practice in the context of this larger landscape of postwar foreign policy analysis, research has populated the field of strategic communications with in-depth analyses of specific persuasive communicative strategies. Several of these, such as war rhetoric, practiced prior to the "soft power" turn as part of the arsenal of discourses exercised by leaders toward their own populations, have undergone change as a result of new international challenges (Price 2015; Winkler 2007). Others include (but are not limited to) coercive diplomacy, which utilizes explicit threats and time pressure to oblige compromise on the part of a "stubborn" state (Sauer

2007, 614); the security dilemma, in which defensive action is misrepresented as offensive, leading to an upward spiral of threat discourses and militarization (Holsti 1962; Wheeler 2009); and representational force, discursive coercion and compellance specific to members of a security community that serves to sustain the relationship of "we-ness" at times of trust-eroding crisis (Bially Mattern 2001, 2005). These lines of research tease out concepts that will be elaborated in the context of how rhetoric aggression plays on the importance of self-image and status claims in relations between states, and the impact of misrecognition and its detrimental effect on trust, cooperation, and perceptions of reliability and rationality on the part of the Other.

It is in the field of strategic communications practice, in a so far unoccupied spot, that the current study places its claim. It is a contentious location, because the toxic relationship it sets out to analyze is more monologic than dialogic: Rather than exercising strategic narratives to cajole and persuade the Other with the intent of eventual cooptation, the discursive exchange is boldly antagonistic and intimidating. By 2007, both Iran and the US were describing the intentions and actions of the Other as tantamount to "soft war" (Price 2013, 2015; Sreberny and Torfeh 2014).

Political Rhetoric, Goals, and Identity

When Barbara Slavin, diplomatic correspondent for USA Today published her book on Iranian-American confrontation in 2007, her title, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, highlighted the contested nature of the relationship between Tehran and Washington. By then, both sides had engaged in name-calling and other forms of inflammatory condemnation for 18 years, a practice begun as the Shah's regime crumbled and Khomeini's voice was broadcast across the international stage (Beeman 2005). Unwilling throughout that period to talk directly to each other, the pattern of mediated indirect communication turned into a unique foreign policy relationship that was grounded in cultural sensibilities, the two nations' conflicting experiences of shared past events, and a tailored vocabulary that reflected their contrasting narratives and worldviews (Addib-Moghaddam 2002, 9). Since each conducted this foreign policy strictly in discursive form through the instrument of media, and without the other myriad contacts that traditionally thicken the interstate relationship, control over their own representations of Self and Other remained culturally contingent, and isolated from the tempering influence of reflexive, face-to-face, intersubjective, and cross-fertilizing processes normally part of international engagement. If foreign policy can be defined as "socially and politically constructed through language," this was an example of its purest form (Duncombe 2016, 627).

In contrast to discourse analysis, which locates repertoires of speech and action in a wider cultural frame of practice, political rhetoric analysis apprehends rhetoric, or the practice of argumentation, as "'*situational*,' that is, as it relates to specific audiences, moments and issues" (Martin 2016, 145, emphasis in the original). Rhetoric is therefore a particular kind of speech act, a genre of pragmatic communication "designed to assert control over an unfolding situation," and which employs strategic practices such as "purposeful selection and repetition of key terms and phrases in order to heighten the impact of a preferred message" for the sake of power projection (ibid). Analysis frequently links it to strategic action, in that it is evocative language structured to shape the theater of participant perception and action through the justification of one's own position, and/or by seeking to attain specific goals related to the Other (Martin 2016;

Risse 2007; Winkler 2007). "Its aim is as much to capture mood and sentiment as it is to reason logically" (Martin 2016, 141). Martin, quoting Alcorn, observes that what matters in shaping judgments, therefore, "is not how discourse aligns with the facts, but *where* the discourse takes up residence in the organization of the subject" (2016, 148, emphasis in the original). As the media's approach to information dissemination follows similar structural patterns, which media scholars have given terms to such as deadline oriented (i.e. timeliness), the use of framing (i.e. locating the discourse in the organization of the subject), dramatic scripting (i.e. asserting control over an unfolding situation), and compelling vocabulary and imagery (i.e. purposeful selection and repetition of key terms to heighten impact), the mutual involvement of the two to control spin, stereotype use and public opinion, among other aspects, serves to project a political rhetorical construction of foreign policy that effectively maps onto media characteristics (Bennett 1994; Gowing 1994; Hafez 2000). As a shared project, the strident communicative strategy broadcasts a consistent and relatively accurate picture of government policy abroad. At the same time, the coincidence of interest and presentation achieves high levels of positive influence over the outlook and cultural sensibilities of domestic publics.

Political rhetoric therefore can be understood to be an argument delivered in a strategic mode to influence, even control, an adversary's perceptions with the ultimate purpose of shifting them to coincide with that of the rhetor's. Risse (2000), in his seminal "Let's Argue," calls such communication "rhetorical action" (25). Yet, this presupposes an addressee willing to receive and engage with the messages being conveyed (ibid, 27), and if that is not the case, the argument and/or the goals must be adjusted to maintain relevance in the face of a non-responsive recipient actor.

Rhetorical action can therefore be approached either as a benign or as an antagonistic set of arguments, the latter relying less on linguistic inducement, and more on the harsh use of language to threaten or denigrate (Bially Mattern 2005). In the case of Iran and the US, each has at different times attempted to change all the elements in the Other that Risse mentions, while

engaging simultaneously in claiming positions for themselves of moral inalienability (Beeman 2005). But their approach less frequently has utilized persuasive argument, and instead favored language and themes intended to shame the Other through narratives of disrespect. The goals can be understood as driven as much by the desire to fix self-images of status and thus force recognition by the Other as to compel the Other to behave a certain way. Actual engagement rarely has figured in each side's attempts at rhetorical one-upmanship. More important has been to shape the theater of the relationship not through diaologic exchange but through monologic control. This strategy, a specific form of rhetorical action, is rhetoric aggression, the use of calculated argument defined through competition over status-seeking, worldview leadership, and disrespect for the Other and its governance.

A public manifestation of the vitriol that emerged during the revolution was the labelling of the US as the Great Satan. Although Beeman, and others, have closely analyzed the use of "Satan" as originating in earlier opposition language toward the Shah, and evocative of religious sensibilities linking it to Yezid, the Sunni caliph characterized in Shia tradition as the evilest of leaders, its use was adapted to the specific situation presented by the revolution to evoke an image of the US as a corrupting influence linked to the illegitimate authority of the Shah. In a calculated move to link it to other symbolic language, such as "imperialist" and "criminal," the credibility of its rhetorical use was cemented to historically contingent national trauma associated with the "illegal" CIA coup that overthrew Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, and the 1963 White Revolution in which the US was a beneficiary and Khomeini a victim (Beeman 2005, 64-67).[2] The reaction of the US to this moniker, as expressed in its media, was immediate, retaliatory, and situational. President Carter, in speeches picked up by the *New York Times* in December 1978 described Khomeini as "encouraging bloodbaths and violence" and described his leadership as "bloodthirsty" in February 1979. For the first time, the word "terrorist" was linked to the demonstrations in a series of articles

penned by Michael Ledeen[3] in The Washington Quarterly (Ledeen and Lewis 1981, 105).

Rhetoric aggression, like rhetorical action, has both defensive and offensive modes. Carol Winkler identifies a similar pattern in war rhetoric, which, like rhetoric aggression is productive of status claims (reactive and declaratory). These might feature as calls to unity that legitimate defensive actions to protect the nation, and narratives that rhetorically depict the enemy as brutal, evil, and lacking credibility, in order to illustrate the need for offensive action (2007, 308-310).

The defensive mode of rhetoric aggression reflects the state's role as culturally legitimate, and a credible representative and unifier of its people able to secure the nation against both physical and rhetorical aggression. The Great Satan trope served this defensive purpose well. An evocation of the ineffability of evil, and "the speechlessness caused by human suffering" (Gunn 2004, 3), it was a characterization of the Shah's alliance with the US in which the Iranian public, i.e. those engaged in the revolution and particularly those whom Khomeini called the "barefooted," had had no voice. The Satan metaphor worked therefore as a unifying symbol for the entire nation to exorcise from the body politic an alien, polluting force, which had silenced the people, and which once expunged, would restore the nation and enable it to reclaim speech. As Gunn further observes, "Exorcism can be identified as a formal logic that (1) constructs a rhetorical body; (2) features a spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil; and (3) contains metaphors that speak to the purging of something invisible or silent" (ibid, 18). As a defensive rallying cry, it drew on all three aspects, and was a powerful response to the US claim that the 1978 uprisings were not a revolution but a civil war, and likewise, a heuristic easily drawn on by Iranian leaders to counter the US claim that the clerical leadership did not represent the Iranian people – the latter an accusation that became reified in the calculated delivery of disrespect formulated in Washington (evoked, for example, by US Presidential Nowruz addresses that were specifically directed to the "Iranian people," rather than "Iran").

The offensive mode promotes the state's perceived

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2   For a review of the US Status of Forces Agreement that came into effect as a result of the White Revolution and was most beneficial to US communities in Iran, and for details of Khomeini's speeches and expulsion during the demonstrations that occurred at that time, see, for example, Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian (1997) *Blood and Oil* (New York: Random House) and Nicki Keddie (1981) *Roots of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press), pages 158-160.

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3   Michael Ledeen, then editor of the *Washington Quarterly*, later headed up the Iran Desk in the Department of Defense during the GW Bush administration.

worldview and its own identity within it; importantly, it utilizes narratives toward the Other that rhetorically capture its failure to engage with the worldview ideal being promoted. Hence, the Other is constructed as lacking credibility on the world stage, and any counter-claims about representing the best for its own populace are condemned as illegitimate.

Undoubtedly, the worldviews promoted by the US and Iran when the Shah fell were radically at odds, as indeed are the worldviews promoted by the Islamic Republic and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In the case of the former dyad, the US narrative constructs its worldview around democracy. It claims to speak for the international community, to which its self-respect is deeply tied, not least due to its perceived identity as a force for good and a moral power with substantial influence over rules of international behavior and engagement. In reaction to US offensive rhetoric that Iran was "not playing by the rules," and had to change its practices (if not in fact, its regime) if it were to enjoy recognition by the world community, the clerical leadership projected an Islamic alternative that it argued should be adopted by the United States (Beeman 2005, 8). Summed up in the vision of "Neither East nor West," it rejected both US and Soviet paradigms, and offered instead an independent set of ethics and practices drawing its direction from the divine, and highlighting the needs of the oppressed as part of a universalist worldview in which Sunni and Shia differences were immaterial in the larger challenge of Islamic confrontation

with the West. This vision offered Iran the opportunity, similarly exercised in the opposite direction by the US, to condemn the Other's form of government as morally impoverished, distanced from its population, and, in a tit-for-tat, Iran mirrored and then appropriated the US representation of Self by subsuming into its own foreign policy a leadership role for the oppressed the world over. By doing so, its rhetoric was calculated to highlight failures in US foreign policy practice regarding such issues as democracy promotion and human rights, and thus, to shame Washington.

"What the nation wants," Khomeini declared in a March 3, 1979 speech quoted in *The Guardian* and clearly designed to rebuff US claims to democracy's superiority, "is an Islamic Republic; not just a republic, not a democratic republic...Do not use the term democratic. That is the Western style." In November that same year, Khomeini wrote a letter in answer to Pope John Paul's concerns that Christian clerics be protected in Iran and which was later published in the American press through Shiachat, where he claims to speak for all the world's oppressed: "In the opinion of all the deprived nations of the world, whether Muslim, Christian or belonging to any other religion, one issue is unclear...[they] who have been under the yoke of oppression and the pressure of colonialism, particularly on the part of the United States, expressed most recently by pressure applied by Carter, have all been waiting for a kind word…" (Imam Reza Network 1979).

Recognition, (Dis)respect, and Misrecognition

Both defensive and offensive rhetoric aggression can constitute "a struggle for recognition," for rhetoric aggression constructs representations of the Other that are discordant with the Other's picture of themselves and their narrations of identity. Using Trettevik's definition of identity as "a set of meanings attached to roles, groups and persons," it becomes clear that the narratives adopted by states articulate meanings they see as constituting their identity (2016, 264; Banarjee 2011, 2; Duncombe 2016, 625). In media terminology, these narratives are the state's framing instruments through which it engages both domestic and international audiences and by which it seeks to be recognized (Wolf 2011, 107).

Affirmation of a state's identity by other states is important to its self-respect and a confirmation of its worldview (Duncombe 2016, 623). "Such affirmation suggests that an actor's identity has worth and value, providing a sense of security in its interactions with others" (ibid). According to identity theory, the emotions generated by a match between the input of Others and the Self's own identity standard will be positive, and contribute to cooperation and trust (Trettevik 2016; Wolf 2011, 120). Disrespect, on the other hand, suggests an actor lacks the status it claims (Wolf 2011, 111). It indicates that the state does not control its own identity, and hence lacks accountability. It denies the state's sense of importance. This manifests as either ignoring the state's narrative claims, or negating them. Both are humiliating (ibid).

For Iran, the notion of respect is culturally and historically significant. In an op-ed penned by nuclear negotiator Seyed Hossein Mousavian in *The New York Times*, he explains, "For thousands of years, Persian culture has been distinguished by customs that revolve around honor and esteem. Preserving one's *aberu* [face] is tantamount to maintaining one's dignity. There are almost no instances in modern Iranian history when *maslahat* [self-interest] has trumped *aberu"* (Mousavian and Shabani 2016). Demands that the US respect the Iranian revolution, the Islamic Republic, and Iran's sovereignty appear early, and Iran responded with alacrity to perceived examples of any disrespect on Washington's part. One example was Khomeini's withering speech responding to US President Ronald

Reagan's vivid labeling of Iran as a "barbaric nation" in 1987, which Iranian bureaucrats picked up from the *New York Times.* Khomeini's repost, in turn reprinted by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service *Daily Report South Asia*, made it immediately available to Washington, as well as the rest of the world:

> I suppose you have heard recently that the US President has said that the people of Iran are barbarians. If by barbarians you mean that they rise against your interests and oppose your desires, then you call them barbarians if you like. And if by barbarian, you in fact mean something else, you are talking nonsense. Is a barbarian someone who does not allow others, the bullies, to violate his rights, or someone who intends to violate others' rights? One should not make uncalculated remarks...(quoted in Ramazani 1990, 59, fn 10).

In this as with many of Khomeini's speeches, he adopts the "you" toward the US president, asserting his equality as leader of a sovereign state. Using rhetorical action, he repeats Reagan's wording for emphasis, presents a structured argument, concluding with a condemnation of the US as the actual bully, and castigates Reagan for ill-considering the meaning inherent in his wording. The combined purpose was to reject US disrespect, and reestablish Iran's dignity as civilized rather than barbaric, turning the rhetorical tables on the US in the process.

Duncombe asserts that "how states represent and recognize each other has implications for how states behave, the consequences for which can be the instigation or continuation of foreign policy crises" (2016, 625). Misrecognition triggers counterclaims to shore up a state's identity, since being misrepresented threatens the validity of its narrative, and therefore, the essence of its Self-image (Ringmar 1996, 121).

Van Munster and Williams both argue that the friend-enemy antagonism is at the heart of the existential, and therefore, the most political and the most extreme of social constitutions (Farmanfarmaian 2008, 32; Van Munster 2005; Williams 2003). The progression from friend-to-enemy relationships tends to be

unstable and draws on a multitude of perceived and cumulative injuries to justify their antipathy. This pattern is duplicated in relations between states where soured friendships lead to foreign policies that narrate the Other antagonistically (Slavin 2007, 177). This "frenemy" behavior has been studied by Ferris and Felmlee, whose results identify the odds of victimization "as six times more likely between original friends than between those who never were friends" (2014, 13). First, ex-friends share knowledge about the Other's practices, norms, preferences, and interests, and hence, are better prepared to carry out hurtful misrecognition than aggressors with no such insider knowledge; second, ongoing emotional linkages, at least initially, serve to intensify the hurt because both players remain vulnerable to the negative inter-subjectivity of the exchange (ibid; see also Ricoeur 2005; Ringmar 2012; Wolf 2011).

Yet, although rhetoric aggression may take its most vengeful and discomfiting form between previously close friends, the exchange itself serves to funnel violence away from the use of force. First, both states have a track record of avoiding war with the Oth-er. This is not only because the process of insults and irritations requires each to continuously reaffirm their self-respect in rhetorical terms, but if they were to buckle in the face of the Other's prodding, and suc-cumb to the use of force, each would be shown to lack resiliency and hence fail to warrant the respect they continuously claim (thus living up to the moniker of the "bully," or acting "irrational"). Second, once a pattern of rhetoric aggression develops, the demonization of the Other, and counterarguments by the Self, become

routinized within public discourse, inuring the players to the Other's' humiliation and misrecognition. Indeed, the utilization of rhetoric aggression over time serves to balance even the most asymmetrical of players into a more equal relationship based on language-exchange rather than force-exchange; what is more, each con-tinues the process because self-respect and power projection hinges on recognition, and hence, each actor ultimately hankers for the respect of the Other (Ringmar 2001,122). Third, once routinized, there is little room for surprise, an important feature in the use of force; the aggressive rhetoric that keeps the relationship in a perpetual crisis likewise keeps both players constantly vigilant and prepared for slippage into war. This makes war more unlikely, even when the occasional unex-pected use of force by the Other interrupts the routine of abstinence. Fourth, the radical pragmatism inherent in processes of rhetoric aggression means the ability to adapt and appropriate a situation can lead at times to a reduction in the temperature of exchange; this al-lows retrenchment and leads to a period of less toxic relations, reducing the level of crisis. Finally, the goal of rhetoric aggression is to avoid use of force; to adopt it as a new strategy requires a shift in foreign policy approach. Even when the George W. Bush administra-tion demanded regime change and threatened to keep the use of force on the table, it was continuing a policy that was developed a decade earlier regarding rogue state security narratives (Homolar 2010). The tempera-ture of the rhetoric had risen; the nature of the policy remained substantively unchanged. That this process is conducted in the public sphere, primarily through the interface of the media, is critical to its perpetuation, a subject I turn to next.

The Media Interface

Media culture as an interface of political expression has evolved rapidly in the decades under review here. Beeman claims that the Iranian revolution may not have occurred at all without cassettes to not only tie the populace to the radical Islamic ideals of the revolution's leaders, but to serve as a confirmation mechanism – through voice recognition – that the message was authentic, rather than fabricated by the regime (2005, 176). Subsequent events, most spectacularly the hostage crisis, but likewise, the failed US rescue mission, the release of the hostages coincident with President Ronald Reagan's inauguration, the Salman Rushdie affair, Iran Contra, the Green Movement – were mediated through political engagement with broadcast, and later, internet and social media transmission.

The media's impact on public opinion creates a link between the populace and leadership that remains an important area of analysis, and is of key relevance to this discussion. The media's choices as to when and how stories are presented, its framing, its language use through heuristics and stereotyping, sound-bite phrasing and visual coding, and its intrusion into political processes such as, for example, the CNN Effect, all point to the power of the media over the way events are constructed and represented (cf: Benett 1994; Chadwick 2003; Gower 1994; Hallin and Gitlin 1994; Norris 1995; Sreberny and Torfeh 2014). On the other hand, Chomsky and Herman's 1988 study on media professionals' – particularly news journalists' – close integration with political and economic elite networks, and the ability of political agendas to influence media output, revealed the process they called "manufacturing consent," a symbiotic relationship reflected in story generation that often reproduced policy agendas (what Dorman and Farhang call a "journalism of deference") (1987, 30). The advent of complex media platforms that have broadened access to commentary and public input have not significantly altered that relationship or its output.[4]

Instrumentalization of the media for policy dissemination is an important plank of government strategic communication. This does not mean, however, that me-dia always need to be controlled and directed. Whether in the more open media atmosphere of the US and the UK, or in restrictive ones such as in Iran, governments can generally count on their own media to be permeated with national cultural values that inevitably color their point of view (Sreberny and Torfeh 2014, 170). In the process of rhetoric aggression, government and media draw on and contribute to popular narratives evoked from the cultural sensitivities and collective memories of the Other, enabling them to complement each other through common vernaculars and shared experiential responses without any overt need for government interference (Dorman and Farhang 1987). Thus, the media, naturally representing each actor's interpretive perspective and sense of Self, provides a consistent domestic narrative, and serves as a communicative bridge to project foreign policy statements between governments. In fact, the operational position of the media closely mirrors that of the states involved, in that they often lack representation rights in the Other by being denied visas and barred from reporting on site when diplomatic relations are lacking.

In the case of Iran and the US, there have often been intermediaries, such as BBC Persian TV, BBC World Service, and al-Jazeera, which, much like the intermediary diplomatic representatives that on occasion provide alternative linkages, have served a key role in transmitting information and live reportage that each actor and their medias have utilized – and which I draw on here. This has not meant that as intermediaries, they have escaped excoriation, as they too have at times been banned, or blamed for being the nefarious instruments of intelligence activity, or tarred with the same brush used in the conduct of rhetoric aggression by one government toward the Other (Sreberny and Torfeh 2014, 137). In 2011, for example, the Commander of the Iranian Police Forces, Ahmadi Moghaddam stated in remarks to the Iranian press that "any cooperation with channels like BBC Persian was seen as an intention to topple the regime and the person was to be considered a dissident." He claimed that the VOA and BBC were extensions of the American intelligence services such as the CIA, and that "cooperation with these channels is not a media activity but is cooperating with the enemy's intelligence services" (ibid, 158). This statement was usefully

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4   For a counterargument, see Monroe Price (2015) *Freedom of Expression, Globalisation and New Strategic Communication*.

picked up and broadcast by Radio Farda in October 2011, a channel publicly funded by the US Congress and part of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe located in Prague, and which has likewise served as a consistent information bridge between Iran and the US. BBC Persian withdrew from Iran soon after, producing most of its subsequent reportage from London. Press TV, the Iranian broadcasting channel reporting from the UK, likewise ran into difficulties with the British authorities, and like BBC Persian, was forced to withdraw back to its home base (ibid, 147-148).

The media's importance in transmitting key foreign policy material and its ability to reproduce not only the message but also the setting, the tone, and the accompanying imagery enables political decision-makers to draw conclusions and construct policy toward the Other based on a dense, if filtered picture.[5] One effect is that it has enabled the rhetoric to adapt to changing circumstances and leadership styles. At the time of 9/11, for example, President Mohammad Khatami, who had previously launched the 'Dialog of Civilizations' to temper the level of aggression in Iran's rhetoric, described the attack as perpetrated by a "cult of fanatics who…could only communicate with perceived opponents through carnage and devastation." The comment was picked up by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who in an interview on *PBS's Frontline*, signaled that Washington welcomed a period of toned-down rhetoric aggression. "Iran was not unhelpful," he acknowledged, referring to its response during the US invasion of Afghanistan, and noting that the two states "share a general view that stability in Afghanistan would very much benefit everybody."

This of course was shattered by the US adoption of the "Axis of Evil" rhetoric in 2002, which triggered a period in which both the Ahmadinejad and Bush administrations maximized the toxic language used in their exchanges. The rhetoric emanating from Tehran reflected in particular Ahmadinejad's personal, broad-sweep confrontational style, such as during his radio address on December 7, 2009, in which he stated that the "the global arrogance" (the US)…was the biggest impediment to the administration of justice in the world" (Zarif 2009). When Barak Obama was elected president, the tone shifted again, his milder rhetoric toward Iran suggesting a more forgiving period. Yet this lasted only for a few months, and by the second Nowruz address, broadcast on March 21, 2010 via television (and rebroadcast on YouTube), Obama's delivery had become combative:

> For three decades, the United States and Iran have been alienated from one another. Iran's leaders have sought their own legitimacy through hostility to America…The choice for a better future is in the hands of Iran's leaders. [W]e are prepared to move forward. We know what you're against; now tell us what you're for. For reasons known only to them, the leaders of Iran have been unable to answer that question… You have refused good faith proposals from the international community…Faced with an extended hand, Iran's leaders have shown only a clenched fist.

Obama's speech, though reflecting his personal disinclination to use defamatory labels and harsh condemnations, nonetheless perfectly maps onto the rhetoric aggression pattern so familiar to both the US and Iran: he questioned the credibility of Iran's leadership and hence their viability, noting they were unable to formulate or communicate positive goals, a careful misrecognition of Iran's narratives and self-image and a subtle move to shame Iran. Meanwhile, affirming US identity and status, Obama draws on the US ability to speak for the international community, and points to its "good faith" proposals as models, affirming US status.

Khamenei, in a Friday sermon broadcast by BBC Persian, retorted in similar vein to Obama by demanding to see his hand extended "in practice…We said that if they are extending a metal hand inside a velvet glove, we won't accept. Unfortunately, what we had guessed turned out to be right" (Bakhshandeh 2015, 50).

Although the language of invective has varied, the

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5   Lacking other face-to-face ways to read the Iranian landscape has led US government Departments, think tanks, research centers and other associated institutions to develop what Susan Maloney of the Brookings Institute calls 'Clerical Kremlinol-ogy' through resources to translate and disseminate Iranian media for analysis (www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz). Today, many of these are online and publicly accessible, and include The American Enterprise Institute's IranTracker, the US Institute of Peace's iranprimer.usip.org, and the CIA's iranintelligence.com, which regularly translates PressTV, Fars News, and the Tehran Times. Although the Iranian (and Saudi Arabian) govern-ments and think tanks do not make their resources publicly available, the rapidity of these governments' responses to media presented by the Other suggests that they have similar services in place.

driving forces underlying its structure have remained consistent over the course of decades. The "Great Satan" is less commonly heard today than Khamenei's preferred term "The Arrogance," while references to US "tyranny" have ebbed in favor of the word "bully" to describe Washington's threats of "regime change." The meanings behind each of these terms, however, have remained.

Indeed, the motivating forces that led originally to the development of rhetoric aggression have proven to reflect deeply engrained sociocultural features of each state, and not only continue little changed since the inception of the Islamic Republic, but transportable into other rhetorical relationships, as, in Iran's case, with Saudi Arabia. In Iran, the language of rhetoric aggression initially drew on cultural symbols to confront extreme domestic circumstances, and was only later transmuted to the foreign policy sphere (Price 2013, 2399). This development was in partial response to early US claims that Iran's clerics did not represent the people – a stinging aspersion. National unity, sovereign protection and the projection of a new vision of world order that was neither East nor West structured both the nature of the rhetorical argument and the goals it set out to achieve. Importantly, the goal of avoiding war with the world's greatest military power was paramount. Yet, despite Obama's optimistic beginning,

the relationship went down precipitously thereafter, reaching a new nadir with "debilitating sanctions" (Hillary Clinton's phrase). However, in the monologic exchange defined by rhetoric aggression the tone of the mediated exchange shifted again when ex-nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rouhani, was elected Iran's president in 2013. Writing in the *Washington Post* on November 9th, he laid out the rules of the game without the toxic language: "To us, mastering the atomic fuel cycle is about who Iranians are as nation, our demand for dignity and respect and our consequent place in the world. Without comprehending the role of identity, many issues we all face will remain unresolved" (Rouhani 2013). Obama, intent on avoiding another war in the Persian Gulf, responded by vaulting across the mediated rhetoric aggression dividing the US from Iran. "As president and commander-in-chief, I will do what is necessary to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," Obama stated in a talk picked up by *The Guardian*. "But I have a profound responsibility to try to resolve our differences peacefully, rather than rush toward conflict" (Obama 2013). The nuclear issue, however, presented the greatest test to the strategy of rhetoric aggression. The tensions negotiated in mediated policy through languages of identity and status are explored in the next two sections.

Mediating the Nuclear Deal

"Obama official says he pushed a 'narrative' to media to sell the Iran nuclear deal," Paul Farhi, *Washington Post***, May 6, 2015**

The history of the nuclear standoff has been amply reported on and analyzed, and its particulars will not be revisited here (the record is extensive, cf.: Barsamian et al 2007; Chubin 2006; Farhi 2010; Fitzpatrick 2011; Parsi 2008, 2012; Pollak 2013; Toucan and Cordesman 2009). Although negotiations over the nuclear issue were joined by the US under the Presidency of George W. Bush in 2005, progress was negligible through frequent rounds of meetings. In 2006, UN sanctions were imposed on Iran, and in 2010, the US raised the level of its sanctions to include restrictions on global financial exchanges. For both Iran and the US, the years of rhetoric aggression had emphasized the illegitimacy of the Other's respective governments and hence the distinction between their peoples and their leaders, the danger of the Other's worldview, and their own victimization by the Other in contrast to their own rational deflection of the Other's actions. To bring domestic public opinion on-side, while maintaining credibility, would therefore be a test for both.

The headline above tops a story that summarizes steps taken by the Obama administration in 2013 to address these challenges, and marks the year this study takes up analysis of the language and arguments used in the process. In this *Washington Post* story, a report on a longer treatment carried in the *New York Times Magazine*, the Obama administration indicates that a framework agreement had been "hammered out" with the hardline Islamic faction years before the election of the moderate Rouhani. "The distinction is important," notes the article, "because of the perception that Rouhani was more favorably disposed toward American interests and more trustworthy than the hard-line faction that holds ultimate power in Iran" (Farhi 2016). As such, it explains, a "narrative" was promoted that "relied on inexperienced reporters to create an "echo chamber" that helped sway public opinion to seal the deal" (ibid). The article points to the power of the media to shift public opinion through narrative and promote foreign policy to domestic audiences. Likewise, it underscores the care with which the US government plans and executes media-enabled policy to bring public opinion on board, and the kind of "narratives" that compose the media-political nexus. It also reveals the government's keen awareness of the impact of years of rhetoric aggression on American perceptions of Iran, and the necessity of remolding public opinion if a positive change in the relationship were to occur.

In Iran, a similar process took place, but using different trajectories. In the lead-up to the final agreement, arguments that focused on retaining a "unified," "heroic," and "resilient" stance against the malevolence of the US featured prominently. This reflected the adaptation of vocabulary to evoke traditional ideas in a new setting, such as "The Arrogance" to label the US, and "bullying" to describe its approach. A typical, if particularly encompassing speech for purposes of this analysis in that it contains most of the elements constituting Iran's more current rhetoric aggression, was one Khamenei delivered to 50,000 members of the Basij paramilitary corps in November 2013, just as negotiators sat down to a new round of talks in Geneva. US analysts, having picked it up from Fars News within hours of its delivery, described it as a "blistering address" and a "jeremiad" (Maloney 2013). Khamenei's is a calculated argument to show Iran is not being pressured into these talks, retains sovereign parity with the US, supports its negotiators but draws red lines around compromises to Iran's right to enrich, and though it knows the US to be untrustworthy, is itself sufficiently resilient and pragmatic to gain benefit from the talks, and thus, avoid war. His language throughout is unrelenting; he begins by casting doubt on the credibility of the US leadership, drawing a distinction between it and the people (i.e. the nation), before going on to discuss the tactics of the US and Iran's strength in standing up to it:

> We want to have friendly and kind relations with all nations, even with the nation of America, although the American Government is an arrogant and enemy government, a malevolent and spiteful government toward the nation of Iran and the Islamic Revolution system...One of the features of the arrogant regime is considering itself superior over others…giv[ing] itself the right to meddle in their affairs, impose on them, bully them, put pressure on them.

Khamenei then revisits old ground by pointing out the moral inconsistency of the US in its handling of the domestic IranAir plane shot down by US naval forces during the Iran-Iraq War, a source of culturally shared trauma that continues to evoke widespread anger and a sense of indignity, emotions Khamenei plays on to unify his audience:

> They claim that they support human rights. But they hit Iran's passenger plane in the air and killed over 300 passengers. They did not even apologize and granted medals to the person who committed that crime…

Khamenei next addresses the role of the negotiators as responsible and fearless, with defined objectives that represent the nation's interests:

> I insist on the support for officials who have taken responsibility for carrying out the work... On the other hand, I insist on the acceptance of the rights of the Iranian nation including nuclear rights. I believe that we should not yield the nuclear rights of our nation even one iota…There is a red line and a limit. I mentioned this point to the authorities and they are obliged to observe this limit, not to fear the enemies' and opponents' bluster and not to feel qualms.

Finally, he contextualizes the negotiations as part of a plan that Iran itself has designed, and which conforms to the nation's Islamic ideals, and because it enjoys God's help, will ultimately be victorious:

> Our approach is heroic flexibility. Some interpret it as quitting the ideals and targets of the Islamic system...These are misunderstandings. Heroic flexibility means the art of maneuver to achieve a goal…Any kind of move, whether forwards or backwards as on a battlefield, must be according to a plan to attain pre-set goals...This is a nation, which thanks to divine blessing and power is able to withstand the pressure and to turn your threats and pressure into opportunity. The Iranian nation will do this with the help of God.

Throughout the entire process of negotiations, these pillars of Iran's rhetoric aggression remained in place, little affected by the prospect that a breakthrough with the US might alter the relationship. Although Rouhani and his team presented a picture of optimism

and pragmatism as the negotiations proceeded, the language used for the negotiations themselves was carefully sequestered from the broader narrative of rhetoric aggression that described the overall relationship. As Rouhani tweeted in August 2014, "Our enthusiasm about the #JCPOA[6] should not be misconstrued as trusting major powers. We are confident about JCPOA but suspicious about the USA."

Commentator and academic Trita Parsi noted that one of the greatest obstacles to a settlement was not just about centrifuges and fuel rods, but "Concern in Washington and Tehran over who is seen as the 'winner'" (Parsi 2014). And indeed, the language both sides adopted and which was projected through the media was not win-win but win-lose, and thus, entirely about winning against the Other. US rhetoric aggression focused on the terms of the agreement and was delivered in language underscoring Western power, which it presented in a detached, at times lofty manner, implying it was not the one with skin in the game. It insisted it was entirely up to Iran to establish its innocence and comply with the terms set by the US and the West. For example, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a statement, "There are steps they need to take to meet their international obligations and find a peaceful solution to this issue, and the ball is in their court" (ibid), a phrase giving the US the role of judge (Parsi's term) rather than actor, and which nonetheless positions it as determining, as spokesperson for the international community, the rules and requirements Iran was expected to meet. Iran's rhetoric aggression on the other hand was about dignity and resistance. "We accept rational words; we accept fair and sensible agreements. But if there is bullying and excessive demands, no we won't accept," Khamenei stated in November, in a speech picked up by the Huffington Post (ibid).

When at last the agreement was signed in July 2015, neither Secretary of State John Kerry nor Foreign Minister Javad Zarif presented the agreement as a success for the Other; It was acknowledged as a victory, but for the Self. Ensuring it was recognized as such domestically was an important piece of the puzzle for the Obama administration, but equally in Iran. In a parallel, if considerably blunter step than that taken by the Obama administration, the Iranian Supreme

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6   Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the name of the deal, signed by both parties on July 14, 2015.

National Security Council encouraged local media to present the deal in positive terms just days after it was signed, by issuing a directive indicating they should praise the deal and the negotiating team. The two-page document stressed the need "to safeguard the achievements of the talks," avoid sowing "doubt and disappointment among the public," and avoid giving the impression of "a rift" at the highest levels of government (Naji 2015).

In fact, the high point gained with the success of the negotiations gave Iranian leaders an opportunity to underscore how the West and the US had misrecognized them for so many years, and to attempt to gain respect by correcting the record. Thus, on September 28, just two months after the deal was signed, Rouhani tweeted, "We proved in these negotiations that there is nothing on Iran's table other than logic, reason, and ethics, and where necessary, legitimate and decisive self-defense against any kind of aggression." Again, on December 16, 2015, he tweeted, "After 14 years,[7] it has become clear that Iran speaks to the world with honesty & integrity."

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7   The number of years that had elapsed since the first negotiations took place with the EU, and which Rouhani led.

Rhetoric Aggression and Saudi Arabia

Research on patterns of rhetorical argument, and the narratives they draw on to represent identity, remain under-investigated, and for this reason, a brief examination of how adaptable the features of the process of rhetoric aggression are in a different theatre of agonistic foreign policy exchange can be of value. Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia has been variably contentious since the advent of the Islamic Republic threatened Riyadh's Muslim worldview and its leadership status in it, particularly as Iran proposed instead a more politicized, hegemonic worldview (in the Gramscian sense) positioned squarely against Saudi Arabia's greatest ally, the US, and with Khomeini at its vanguard.

As the two largest powers in the Persian Gulf, with roles of gravitas in the oil world, and with significant minorities located strategically in their respective oil-producing areas, and therefore critically important to the Other within the sectarian Sunni-Shia landscape, the uneasy relationship between the two has roller-coastered over the past 35 years, foundering most spectacularly over the wars in the Gulf, clashes among pilgrims during the Hajj, and Saudi Arabia's approach to its Shia minority. The Arab spring, followed by Riyadh's war in Yemen and the signing of the nuclear deal by the US and Iran, however, plunged the relationship to a new low, with diplomatic relations severed when Riyadh executed Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr in 2016, and street demonstrators in Tehran ransacked the Saudi Embassy. Like the US-Iran exchange, the nature of the vocabulary utilized is harsh, with each calling the Other "terrorist" and "violators of human rights." In the Iran-Saudi Arabia exchange, however, sectarian language is equally used to condemn, defame, and isolate.

For Saudi Arabia, the prospect of a rapprochement between the US and Iran is deeply worrying. A rehabilitated Iran puts pressure on its own status vis-à-vis Washington, while promoting Iran to international acceptability and visibility, shifting the regional balance of power. Saudi Arabia's response to the nuclear deal was officially reserved, but the tightly controlled Saudi Arabian-owned daily newspaper *a-Sharq al-Awsat* headlined its reaction by editor Saman Aldosary, "Iran Nuclear Deal Opens the Gates of Evil in the Middle East," a reminder of Washington's "Axis of

Evil" heuristic, as well as a mirroring of Iran's own tendencies to utilize the word "evil" for its own rhetorical exploits. A testament to the deteriorating nature of the relationship, volleys by leading figures, including Saudi Sheikh Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah and the Grant Mufti of Mecca, claim that "Iranians are not Muslims" or that they are "Zoroastrians" (attacks picked up immediately by Iran's newspapers, including *Iran Daily*) fits a pattern of religious erasure and defamation.

Both powers produce media directed at the Other. Al-Alam, an Arabic-language satellite television and radio channel (accessible on social media, and in Iraq, through terrestrial lines) is produced by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting service (IRIB), and is particularly popular in the Gulf states (Therme 2016). In July 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a radio and television channel, Hajj 1436, directed at Persian language speakers, "in order to highlight the eternal message of Hajj and the great meanings of Islam," in the words of Saudi Minister of Culture and Information Adel al-Toraifi (The New Arab 2015). However, Persian language broadcasts from abroad are regularly jammed, and an official law bans its citizens from having any contact with Persian-language media based overseas (Middle East Eye 2016). Saudi Arabia's record of similar censorship is documented by Reporters without Borders.[8] Both states' populations, however, are highly social-media capable, and such restrictions do not deter either the leadership or the public from access to materials projected by the Other.

The pillars defining the rhetoric aggression directed at the US, which utilize narratives that reflect Iran's identity, remain germane to the pragmatic rhetorical arguments used toward Saudi Arabia and are similarly practiced. Differences in worldview, for example, though distinct from the areas of variation with the US, continue to exert an important backdrop to the narratives both Iran and Saudi Arabia draw on to project power. Iran's narrative has traditionally been deeply committed to an inclusive Islamic community (*ummah*) that can act as a unified force against the West. An important aspect of its rhetoric aggression

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8   https://rsf.org/en/saudi-arabia

toward Saudi Arabia, therefore is its strident rejection of religious division, and rejections of Riyadh's regular accusations that Iran is using the Shia against the Sunni states. This plays out as a competition for the hearts and minds of a larger Muslim audience, with both sides structuring their arguments to highlight the "atrocities" and "incompetencies" of the Other in a campaign for regional, and indeed, broader Islamic support. For example, Al-Alam online headlined a speech by Rouhani as "Muslim Nations Must Unite against Saudi Arabia Crimes" (Al-Alam 2016), while Rouhani himself tweeted in January 2016, "#Saudi Arabia doesn't want peace and stability in the region because chaos helps it cover up its domestic problems & failed regional policies." The rhetoric aggression produced here not only seeks to defame the Other while reaching out to a wider public, but at the same time, to project the Self's power to offer an alternative vision.

Perhaps the most visible of these exchanges occurred in 2015 and 2016 through very public expressions of foreign policy conflict using the US media as the platform. In a new triangulation of toxic rhetoric aggression, every few months, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir or Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have penned an editorial, or alternatively taken out full pages of *The New York Times* to project an argument that is designed to affect both the American readership and (once translated and reprinted) their own domestic public opinion. On the one hand, the practice reflects well-honed skills of defensive argument and offensive denigration through a combination of miscued identity politics, and rational expressions of self-representation. Each is unwaveringly monologic. Yet, the tit-for-tat responds, if only obliquely, to the gouges and scratches imparted by the Other, suggesting a dialogic that rests on self-reaffirmation in the glare of the US public sphere.

An example is a recent *New York Times* editorial editorial by Zarif published September 13, 2016, in which he lambasted Saudi Arabia under the headline: "Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism." Re-adopting a position long-ago occupied by the Shah of the trusted US Middle East advisor, Zarif assumes a position of superiority to diminish Saudi Arabia's status, and misrecognise its close historical alliance with the US:

> Saudi Arabia's effort to persuade its Western patrons to back its shortsighted tactics is based on the false premise that plunging the Arab world

into further chaos will somehow damage Iran. The fanciful notions that regional instability will help to "contain" Iran, and that supposed rivalries between Sunni and Shiite Muslims are fueling conflicts, are contradicted by the reality that the worst bloodshed in the region is caused by Wahhabists fighting fellow Arabs and murdering fellow Sunnis…While the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq set in motion the fighting we see today, the key driver of violence has been this extremist ideology promoted by Saudi Arabia — even if it was invisible to Western eyes until the tragedy of 9/11.

Zarif's use of "fanciful" and "short-sighted" rhetorically construct Saudi Arabia as not only lightweight and misguided, but are used as a warning that Riyadh is a dangerous ally in its drive to promote and fund extremist ideology. On the offensive, he employs tropes, recognizable from the portfolio of rhetoric aggression used toward the US, to project the Islamic Republic's long-held view that the Shia-Sunni divide only harms the Islamic world in the face of outside threat, while at the same time making the political argument that Islam as a whole is endangered by the "violence" of Saudi Arabia, and that even the US was long blinkered by its strategy. Not surprisingly, Al-Jubeir responded harshly within days, writing an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* (aired on Al-Arabiya and picked up by numerous media outlets, including the Kurdish news agency RUDAW, and posted on the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website). Quoting both Reagan and Adams, and drawing on the American anecdotal phrase, "Facts are stubborn things," his statement tersely highlights many of the concerns Saudi Arabia experienced in the months leading up to the nuclear deal, including its ability to speak as a credible ally of the West, capable of containing Iran's powerful rhetorical play to define categories such as Islamic terrorism and information dominance (Price 2015). Mirroring Zarif's charges by positioning his counter-rhetoric as an attack on Iran's own state-sponsored terrorism, Al-Jubeir's response, a situational argument rather than a dialogic engagement, takes place under the headline, "Iran can't Whitewash its Record on Terror:"

> The fact is that Iran is the leading state-sponsor of terrorism, with government officials directly responsible for numerous terrorist attacks since 1979…Nor can one get around the fact that Iran uses terrorism to advance its aggressive

policies. Iran cannot talk about fighting extremism while its leaders, Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard continue to fund, train, arm and facilitate acts of terrorism. It is this ideology of "Khomeinism"—driven by an appetite for expansion, fueled by anti-Western hatred and motivated by sectarianism—that has energized and empowered extremism (Al-Jubeir 2016).

Al-Jubeir, on the offensive, parries Iran's accusations that Saudi Arabia's identity as a Wahhabi state is misguided by making damning accusations of his own. In language designed to project cool rationality emanating from a solid ally who shares definitions of terrorism with Washington, he attempts to discredit Iran's government by pinning responsibility for terrorist support squarely onto its officials and special forces. His charge of direct involvement in terrorism constructs Iran as continuing its pariah practices despite the nuclear deal. The tag line to the article reads: "Saudi Arabia would welcome better ties with Iran – but it must first stop supporting terrorism," a reaffirmation of Saudi Arabia's identity as a good neighbor, but likewise, as a holder of a worldview that condemns the nefarious activities in which Iran engages, thus proving it, by definition, is innocent of promoting the Islamist extremist violence that Zarif's argument claimed.

The nature of the monarchical leadership in Saudi Arabia offers a constant opportunity for Iran to accuse the Al-Sauds of lacking legitimacy, and hence, being separated from not only their own people but the Muslim world in general – a tactic of misrepresentation similar to that used against the US, but designed to evoke disrespect for Saudi Arabia's narrow sectarian vision. Thus, in the deepening rift caused over the death of Iranian pilgrims to the Hajj in 2015, and which

locked Iran out of the Mecca pilgrimage in 2016, Khamenei, that July, condemned the monarchy for acting against Islamic principles, and as self-styled spokesperson of the world's barefooted and ill-used, he blasted other Muslim states for failing to confront Saudi Arabia over the loss of their nationals. Tehran's Al-Alam summarized the speech, noting "Ayatollah Khamenei said the Saudi failure to host Hajj pilgrims proved the kingdom does not merit the custodianship of Islam's Two Holy Mosques," adding this is a "reality that should be propagated and well understood in the Muslim world" (Al-Alam 2016).

As with the past friendship that marked Iran's past relationship with the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia have at times been close, with both states describing the other as "brother" when tempers are cool (Gaub 2016). This gives them both greater ammunition, however, to choose language and representations that misrecognise the Other in psychologically damaging ways when tempers flare. Funneling the ire and sense of disrespect by both parties into a foreign policy profile defined by a war of words rather than a hard war, however, appears, as in the US case, to be an important goal. "Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are wise enough not to take their war inside their own borders," a senior Iranian official is quoted as saying in an article on the ire inflamed in Iran by an address to the MEK, a group Iran considers terrorist, by Faisal al-Turki, a former Saudi Intelligence chief (Bozorghmehr and Kerr July 2016). Beginning with the lead-up to the nuclear deal, both actors' narratives have shifted in regards to each other and the US, with implications for their identities, and their self-image. For each, saving face is critical, not only for their domestic audiences, but for their respective claims to leadership among the wider Muslim public.

Conclusion

In this study, it has become clear that rhetoric aggression is a powerful tool of strategic communication. Instrumentalizing foreign policy narratives through the media mobilizes arguments of radical pragmatism to project power and achieve specific foreign policy gains. By engaging the public sphere in a war of words to evoke responses in the Other that require identity recovery, the strategy operates both defensively and offensively to create a landscape of perpetual crisis that nonetheless serves to deflect physical war. A form of strident soft power, it re-describes foreign policy projection as a monologic struggle for recognition that gains its impact through the rhetorical power of disequilibrium in the exchange that it maintains between the actors. In the case of the US-Iran relationship, the instrumentalization of language through rhetoric aggression played a key defensive role in constructing Iran's domestic unity around collective narratives of national identity, while simultaneously enabling Iran to confront and deny delegitimizing narratives directed against it by the US. Rhetoric aggression likewise served to project Iran's alternative worldview onto the public sphere and locate Iran's position as its leader. In the course of the 35 years in which the two states have conducted their war of words, however, the process of rhetoric aggression has avoided deterioration into actual war. Yet, the relationship with the US, having traversed the victory of the nuclear deal, remains one of perpetual crisis and rhetorical enmity even after the signing of the nuclear deal, suggesting that the patterns of exchange routinized in the process of rhetoric aggression are slow to change. In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, where differences in how each constructs their worldview undergirds the language and the identity of a relationship that affects the wider regional and Muslim public, the cyclicality of their ongoing relationship has likewise through decades, survived through declaratory animus, waxing and waning, but staying nonetheless back from overt or prolonged use of force.

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