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Iran and the American Media

Press Coverage of the 'Iran
Deal' in Context

Mehdi Semati
William P. Cassidy
Mehrnaz Khanjani

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“*Iran and the American Media* offers a nuanced look at patterns of media coverage before and after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal. The analysis reveals the complex interplay of news sources in a landmark multilateral foreign policy situation.”

—Lance Bennett, Professor, *Political Science and Communication*, and Senior
Research Fellow, *Center for Journalism, Media & Democracy*,
University of Washington, USA

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ISBN 978-3-030-74899-9 ISBN 978-3-030-74900-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74900-2>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

We dedicate this book to those who advance the cause of diplomacy.

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The Iran Deal in Context: American Press Coverage of Iran from Coup to the Islamic Republic

Abstract This chapter presents the timeline of the development of both the nuclear program in Iran and the agreement known as the “Iran deal.” It provides a brief history of the press coverage of Iran beginning with the 1953 Anglo-American *coup d'état* that removed Mosaddeq, a democratically elected prime minister, leading to the coverage of the Iran Deal. The political transformation of Iran from a staunch “ally” of the United States to an “enemy” allows for a study of how the changing US-Iran relations affect Iran’s coverage. It argues that while Mosaddeq was labeled a dictator, the Shah was portrayed as a “modernizer.” Additionally, the opposition to the Shah was explained exclusively in religious terms conveniently neglecting the social and political roots of the Iranian Revolution.

Keywords Iran • Mohammad Mosaddeq • Iranian Revolution • The Shah • Islam • Iran deal • JCPOA • Iranian nuclear program • News

Nearly six years after the Islamic Republic of Iran and a group of powerful countries signed a nuclear agreement with great fanfare, the Iran nuclear deal is back in the headlines in June 2021. The administration of President Joe Biden is trying to revive an agreement that was essentially sabotaged by the previous administration of Donald Trump, an agreement that had been conceived by yet another previous American administration, that of President Barack Obama. A group of Republican senators have just

introduced a Bill that would demand President Biden to seek congressional authorization to secure any new diplomatic agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear program. The news about this bill comes a day after it was announced the United States lifts some sanctions on the Islamic Iran as a conciliatory gesture that would encourage Iranians to participate in yet another round of meetings to address Iran's nuclear program. Only a few days before this move, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister who appears to be on the verge of losing his job, warned that he is prepared to "risk friction" with the United States if the Iran nuclear deal is reinstated. It appears that Mr. Netanyahu is promising to do to President Biden what he did to President Obama with the help of congressional Republicans in their opposition to diplomacy with Iran. Meanwhile the administration of President Hassan Rouhani of Iran has been relentlessly criticized and undermined for his championing of the nuclear deal and for trusting Americans with their promise of sanction relief and with honoring their commitments. America's abandoning of the nuclear deal has meant a crushing blow to the political standing of the reformers in Iran.

While it is reasonable to read these developments as symptoms of dysfunctional politics, politicians, and institutions, we offer them more as examples of how successive American administrations have come to recognize Iran as a significant player and an unavoidable foreign policy challenge. It is also tempting to interpret these developments as a sign of intractable and enduring geopolitical conflicts that resist resolution or rational calculations. However, as a critical scrutiny of any attempts at characterization of these developments or the Islamic Republic of Iran makes clear, discourses about Iran are grounded in certain persistent and predictable, even if contradictory, views and perceptions. On the one hand, for example, Iran is characterized as a fundamentalist nation ruled by backward religious fanatics. On the other, these rulers have nevertheless been able to lead Iran to develop advanced ballistic missile capabilities and even more advanced nuclear technologies. Iran is said to be brutally ruled and its people subjected to harsh "Islamic" and repressive measures. At the same time, we witness in Iran a certain undeniable cultural flourishing in film, literature, music, theater, art, and education. An objective understanding of Iran entails interrogating the prevailing perceptions and discourses that constitute it as an object of geopolitical and journalistic deliberations. This book is an effort to contribute to such an interrogation. The media coverage of the nuclear negotiations with Iran provides us

an opportunity to study how perceptions and views about Iran come into being.

The research on which this book is based has both empirical and interpretive components. The immediate subject of our study in this book is an empirical investigation of the American media coverage of the historic nuclear accord between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany. By media coverage we mean the journalistic work of “prestige print media” in the news coverage and in the op-ed sections of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and in the broadcast news coverage of the nuclear agreement, commonly referred to as the “Iran Deal.” The empirical component of the research is placed within two broader contexts. First, it is placed with the broader historical context of the journalistic coverage that precedes the nuclear agreement. This is the task of the first chapter. In order to provide a broader perspective for understanding today’s media coverage of Iran, the chapter provides an account of Iran’s treatment as a subject of political and journalistic deliberations beginning in the 1950s leading up to the coverage of the Iran Deal. Second, the journalistic coverage is placed within a broader interpretive framework through which Iran, its political system of the Islamic Republic, and Iranians are constructed as intelligible subjects of journalistic and geopolitical discourses. In other words, we delineate the broader interpretive framework through which audiences make sense of Iran and the geopolitical world. This is the objective of the last chapter where we argue the interpretive resources which contribute to the construction of such a framework come from a much wider range of discursive materials that includes, among others, works of fiction and entertainment. Therefore, Chaps. 1 and 5 frame the empirical component of our research, presented in Chaps. 3 and 4, a framing which we hope broadens the horizon within which our empirical findings could be appreciated. Through this framing, while the first chapter historicizes the journalistic coverage of the Iran Deal, the last chapter examines the broader interpretive cultural framework that makes sense of Iran and Iranians.

For the empirical component of the book, we conducted analyses of the coverage of the Iran Deal in the news reporting and in the op-ed coverage of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Chap. 3), and in the broadcast news coverage of the nuclear agreement (Chap. 4). The analysis is guided by a specific set of methodological and theoretical tools. Using quantitative content analysis, we employ indexing hypothesis and cascading activation model as our theoretical resources that guide the research.

The choice of indexing is motivated by two specific considerations. First, indexing hypothesis is often used in the analysis of media and foreign policy. Second, this choice allows us to study the media-state relationship, which has been one of the founding questions in international communication, including international news media analysis. The literature from which we draw this set of theoretical tools is based in political communication and sociology of media and journalism studies. This literature is introduced in Chap. 2.

In this chapter, first, we present a timeline of the development of the nuclear program in Iran as a way to underscore the significance of the Iran Deal and to historicize its emergence. In the second section we present a brief discussion of Iran and the American press by examining the press coverage of Iran by focusing on the two major flashpoints in the contemporary history of Iran as they relate to Iran-US relations: the 1953 Anglo-American *coup d'état* that removed Mohammad Mosaddeq, a democratically elected popular Iranian Prime Minister; and the post-Mosaddeq era, leading to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and its immediate aftermath. With the coup Iran was transformed into a client state and an ally of the United States, as Iran became an important strategic ally. A quarter of a century later, with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran entered into an adversarial relationship with the United States. In the third section, we discuss the press coverage of Iran in the post-revolution period leading to the coverage of the Iran Deal.

The Iran Deal represents (as it still does at the time of this writing) the potential of a breakthrough in taking steps toward overcoming that adversarial relationship. In the final chapter we return to a discussion of the larger interpretive framework beyond the press coverage of the Iran Deal. Delineating such an interpretive framework entails a detailed explanation of the representation of Iran in American popular culture in the post-revolution period. One of the book's objectives is to reveal the place Iran occupies in the American political and cultural imagination.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND THE "IRAN DEAL"

What is commonly referred to as the "Iran Deal" is formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It is a nuclear agreement between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and

Germany, along with the European Union. The group is often referred to as P5 + 1, meaning the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China, plus Germany. JCPOA was considered a historic achievement and a diplomatic breakthrough in that it broke a stalemate in negotiations and in bringing Iran to the negotiating table and in dialogue with the world powers (Parsi, 2017). In order to underscore the significance of the agreement and appreciate the complexity of the subject of Iranian nuclear program, here we offer a brief narrative of its historical trajectory and development.¹

The origins of Iran's nuclear consciousness might be found in President Eisenhower's "Atom for Peace" program, which was announced on December 8, 1953, in a speech at the UN General Assembly (Homayounvash, 2016). Iran's nuclear program, under Eisenhower's initiative, was launched in 1957 with the help of the United States as an "agreement for cooperation in research in the peaceful uses of atomic energy" (Mousavian, 2014, pp. 177–178). The civil nuclear agreement entailed the United States providing Iran with technical assistance and some enriched uranium for research on the peaceful application of nuclear energy. Such a cooperation at the time meant that both the United States and Iran met specific strategic objectives. In the context of the Cold War, alliance with the Shah of Iran meant Iran remained within the sphere of influence of the United States and not that of the Soviet Union. For the Shah, who "was struggling to create modern foundations to assert domestic authority and redefine its regional and international identity following a cascade of strategically bruising experiences" (Homayounvash, 2016, p. 1), the cooperation was an important strategic investment toward becoming a regional powerhouse. The alliance of Iran and the United States and the support of successive American administrations for the Shah of Iran would continue until he fled Iran in the days leading to the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

With the assistance from the United States, Iran built its first nuclear reactor in 1967. The following year Iran signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), leading the Iranian parliament to ratify the NPT in 1970. The government of Iran established the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) in 1974. In the mid-1970s the cooperation between Iran and the United States continued, including a meeting of the US-Iran Joint Commission in Washington DC in March 1975. With the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in the immediate aftermath of the

Iranian Revolution, all diplomatic ties and cooperation, including Iranian nuclear energy projects, were terminated.

In the middle of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the first wave of extensive sanctions against Iran was launched in 1984 as the US Department of State added Iran to its list of “state sponsors of terrorism.” In violation of previously imposed arms embargoes, the Reagan administration was caught selling weapons to Iran in 1985, which led to the Iran-Contra Affairs scandal. Iran and Pakistan signed an agreement to send engineers from Iran to Pakistan for training in nuclear technology in 1987. During the same year Iran received technical information to build a certain type of centrifuge from the network of Abdul Qadeer Khan, a Pakistani nuclear physicist who is believed to be responsible for Pakistan’s clandestine nuclear weapons program.

In August 2002, the political branch of a terrorist organization known as Mujahenin-e Khalgh (MEK) claimed the Islamic Republic of Iran was building nuclear facilities in two locations (Natanz and Arak). In 2003 Mohamed ElBaradei, International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) chief, and his team of inspectors visited both sites. IAEA issued a report indicating Iran was not in compliance with respect to its obligation under the terms of the NPT. IAEA later reported that its inspectors had found weapons-grade enriched uranium at a different site. In 2004, IAEA notified Iran that it must suspend its uranium enrichment activities. Later in the year Iran agreed to suspend all nuclear fuel processing activities. However, in 2005 Iran insisted that the country will not abandon nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment, for research and civilian purposes, and resumed uranium enrichment. Following the collapse of negotiations with Europe, Iran resumed uranium enrichment in Natanz and opened a heavy-water reactor in 2006. In December 2006 the UN Security Council imposed its first round of sanctions targeting Iran’s nuclear activities.

In 2008 the UN Security Council passed a resolution (1803) introducing sanctions that were broader in scope, preventing member states from selling technologies that might have the potential to be used in nuclear or missile programs. In June 2008, Iran was presented with a proposal from P5 + 1 as an updated incentive package that had been proposed two years earlier. After Barack Obama assumed the presidency, his administration announced in 2009 that the United States was willing to join P5 + 1 in direct talks with Iran. A few months later, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of a disputed presidential election with a bloody

aftermath. While Iran continued its nuclear activities, additional sanctions targeted Iran, including a 2012 decision by the European Union to forbid its member states from importing oil from Iran. Between 2012 and 2013 Iran and P5 + 1 met a few times. Hassan Rouhani was elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran on June 14, 2013. Within days of his inauguration, President Rouhani called for return to stalled negotiations between Iran and P5 + 1 to discuss Iran's nuclear program.

In September 2013, John Kerry, the secretary of state of the United States, and Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, met in person to discuss future negotiations. More importantly, President Obama placed a phone call to President Rouhani, making it the first contact between the leaders of the two nations since the revolution of 1979. These steps launched a new hopeful era of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. In November 2013, the foreign ministers from P5 + 1, their negotiating team, and the Iranian negotiators reached an interim agreement, known as the "Joint Plan of Action." Iran agreed to some limits on its nuclear activities in exchange for some sanction relief.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and P5 + 1 reached a historic accord after 20 months of negotiations on July 14, 2015. The agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), colloquially referred to as the "Iran Deal," ended a decade-long confrontation between Iran and the world powers regarding its nuclear program. The agreement had the potential to reintegrate Iran into the global economy and the international system. Both President Rouhani and President Obama had to contend with oppositional voices who wished to scuttle the agreement. The UN Security Council adopted a resolution unanimously to endorse the nuclear agreement a week later. In October 2015, the Iran Deal was formally adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran and P5 + 1. The European Union stated it had taken steps to legalize the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions on Iran beginning the implementation date. Similarly, the United States announced it would issue waivers on nuclear-related sanctions to take effect on the implementation day. Iran and the P5 + 1 formally adopted the nuclear deal. Iran began taking steps to restrict its nuclear program. The United States issued waivers on nuclear-related sanctions to come into effect on the implementation day. The EU announced it passed legislation to lift nuclear-related sanctions on the implementation day.

On January 11, 2016, Iran started to roll back some of its sensitive nuclear activities (e.g., disabling the Arak reactor core). Five days later, on