A Discourse Analysis of the Conflicting Implications of Terrorism: the Iranian and U.S. Perspectives

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Received: 20 July 2021 / Accepted: 13 December 2021 / Published online: 24 January 2022
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Abstract

There are many approaches in analyzing the prolonged Iran–US impasse. We can taxonomize them into objective and subjective perspectives. We can explain Iran–US tension for realistic and geopolitical reasons. But discourse analysis is a subjective approach that maintains social facts are constructed in a discursive way by social players. This article aims to provide a discursive overview of how the definition of terrorism has been influenced by divergent discourses, as well as conflicting political interests by Iran and the US. In the discursive approach, as what anti-foundationalism maintains, social phenomena and social concepts like terrorism, miss a fixed essence or meaning. The present article applies the term discourse analysis mostly in Foucauldian philosophy and other like-minded political scientists in the deconstruction of the relationship between power and knowledge. This research concludes that definition and determining the instances of terrorism is a discursive action by Iran and the United States, so it explains the subjective reasons why there has been a dichotomy between Iran and the US in characterizing terrorism or ‘resistance movements’ in the Middle East. Therefore, subjective reasons as much as objective ones play a major role in the Tehran–Washington discord.

Keywords Terrorism · Discourse analysis · Identity · Iran · The United States

1 Introduction

Applying discourse analysis is one of the ways through which the explanation of social phenomena is made possible. Discourses represent hegemonic articulations that lead to the production of a semantic or meaning system for phenomena. Discourse is defined as “any practice (found in a wide range of forms) by which

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individuals imbue reality with meaning (Ruiz 2009).” In other words, discourse is a structured totality configured through the articulation process. Articulation represents an action that communicates between apparently scattered elements, in such a way that the identity and meaning of these elements are constructed as a result (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Discourse represents a system of related signifiers which shapes the social phenomena through its framework, and constructs the interaction between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ so that realities derive meaning through it. Different discourses create different paradigms and diverse paradigms produce different semantic systems which result in phenomena taking on different meanings. Therefore, the process of giving meaning to terrorism and its significance (cases or instances) will change in various discourses.

Even though all countries acknowledge the importance of taking counter-terrorism measures, there has been no consensual definition of it. States with diverse interests often have different opinions as to what counts as a terrorist or non-terrorist act and this is an indication of the influence of different discourses underpinning rationale in world politics. Walter Liqueur believes there is no comprehensive definition of terrorism, and there will be none shortly. Jeffery Simon, after the collection of different definitions, stated that there are at least 212 diverse definitions of terrorism being used worldwide. Of these definitions, 90 have been used by states and organizations (Spencer 2006: 5). As an example, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman define it by noting, “Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassination—the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are typically chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators” (Schmid and Jongman 1988: 28). They put the spotlight on the common and main elements in different definitions of terrorism such as, “The use or threat of use of violence and force, pursuit of political objectives, creation of mass panic and fear, targeting violence and organized violence against civilians” (Corlett 2003: 118).

Legally, terrorism is defined in Title 22, Chapter 38 of the US Code § 2656f as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” In Iran, a law entitled “Bill against Funding Terrorism” was approved in 2018 by the Iranian Parliament and stipulates: “Committing or threatening to commit any violent acts, such as murder, assassination, violent action which result in severe physical harm... illegal seizure and the hostage-taking of individuals or deliberate acts of violence against people, or endangering life or liberty which are intended to influence the policies, decisions, and actions of the State of the Islamic Republic of Iran, other countries or international organizations.” On the surface, it appears that the two states have commonalities in defining terrorism. But the problem arises when there is a need to signify a violent action as a terrorist one.

Since 1979, there has been no statement by US officials about Iran in which there would be no reference to Tehran as a sponsor of terrorism. Sponsoring terrorism was one of the main justifications for President Trump’s decision to withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear deal nicknamed ‘the Joint Comprehensive Plan

of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 which brought the countries to a rhetorical brinkmanship: “This disastrous deal gave this regime—and it’s a regime of great terror—many billions of dollars, ... a great embarrassment to me as a citizen and to all citizens of the United States” (The Washington Post 2018). Supporting this viewpoint was the murder of Major General Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian top brass in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This has been explained differently by the United States and Iran. Tehran calls Soleimani a national hero, while the US names him a great terrorist (Aljazeera 2020). Therefore, terrorism is one of the most widely used terms in the daily clashes involving Iran and the United States as well as the US–Muslim world conflicts.¹

This study is based on the hypothesis that due to the dominance of different discourses, Iran and the US look at the political issues from different angles and receive different interpretations of most affairs, one of which is terrorism and its implications in the Middle East. The inconsistent viewpoints on terrorism by these two States are based on the perceived identities of each of the two actors in constructing the ‘other’ such as the ‘sponsor of terrorism’ on one hand, and ‘champion of freedom’ on the other hand. These paradoxical opinions are crucial issues that the present article investigates.

2 Literature Review

Terrorism studies, like other fields of social sciences, have undergone methodological and theoretical changes. In a general taxonomy, terrorism studies can be divided into conventional and critical approaches. The conventional approach refers to the orthodox methods of the social sciences, more commonly known as the positivist approaches (Martin 2020).² But the critical approach implies the use of critical theories in the study of terrorism. In the critical approach, the phenomenon of terrorism is considered as a social construct in which social actors, depending on their interests and ideology, label an act as terrorism. The difference between these two approaches can be distinguished through three criteria: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. From an ontological point of view, the conventional approach considers terroristic phenomena as a concrete fact that exists in the outside world independent of subjects.³ But the critical approach does not give independent existence to terrorism apart from subjects and maintains that subject and object form each other in a dialectical and uninterrupted process; so that a phenomenon such as terrorism should be studied in the context of time, place, and text. In other words, political actions and reactions to terrorism shape and direct it. Hence, the critical school believes in minimalist essentialism, and it defines terrorism as “a social fact rather

¹ In 2003, out of 447 entities identified as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT), 354 people or 80 percent have Islamic affiliations (Jackson 2005, p. 19).

² For example, Gus Martin’s book titled ‘Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues’ is a salient sample of conventional approach to terrorism. Out of 596 pages, only once, albeit in general meaning, the word discourse was used.

³ In philosophy, a subject is an observer and an object is a thing observed.

than a brute fact, and like ‘security’, it is constructed through speech by socially authorized speakers. That is, ‘terrorism’ is constituted by and through an identifiable set of discursive practices (Jackson et al. 2009: 75).⁴ Epistemologically it maintains that knowledge is not impartial and there is an interaction between power, interests, knowledge, and researcher. Therefore, supporters of critical discourse analysis believe that it is a suitable approach to deconstruct those interactions.

This approach refers to the fact that social phenomena have meaning and the process of meaning-making is a social construct. It refers to the process of how people construe, understand, or make sense of life events, relationships, and the self. To understand the meaning of a phenomenon, one must understand the time, place, and text of discourse. Accordingly, the method of discourse analysis in terrorism studies began and proceeded since the 1970s. But the meaning of discourse analysis has also undergone a conceptual change. The term implies two things; the first one deals with what linguists indicate as the study language uses ‘beyond the sentence boundary’ to try to find hidden meanings of texts in the much larger context. If we look at the published works on critical terrorism studies, most are of this fabric.⁵ But the second narrative falls under Michel Foucault’s critical discourse analysis, which has more philosophical connotation than a linguistic one. Furthermore, E. Laclau and S. Mouffe in articulating the ideas of different critical theorists—both Marxism and structuralism, have provided a theoretical–analytical framework for the social sciences that is now called Essex’s discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 25).⁶ The present article primarily applies the term ‘discourse’ based on the Essex School definition, and it examines the discursive confrontation of terrorism between Iran and the United States conceptually rather than linguistically.

This work has a conceptual overlap with some of the published works in the field of terrorism. But its main difference is that it deals exclusively with the discursive confrontation between Iran and the United States regarding the definition and causes of terrorism in the Middle East, which the authors did not find within any of the English publications. Most works, especially by American think tanks have assumed the narrative of the US authorities that Iran is a sponsor of terrorism, which has been used in conventional terrorism studies.⁷ However, a couple of works have been

⁴ Richard Jackson, et al. book titled ‘Critical Terrorism Studies’ is a noteworthy book on this approach.

⁵ For example refer to recent publications:

- Almaged (2021).
- El-Nashar and Nayef (2019).

⁶ Look at: Jørgensen and Phillips (2002).

⁷ For example look at:

- Byman (2008).
- Levy (2021).

published both in English and Persian⁸ critically⁹ and this article has applied them by developing their ideas conceptually via Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe's studies.

3 Discourse Analysis and Terrorism

Discourse approaches have been inspired by the school of social constructivism. According to this school, humans do not possess any prior identities, and knowledge is furthermore a product of social circumstances; there is no fundamental and immutable truth. In other words, an interpretation of everything depends on time and luck. Therefore, some relativism and fluidity are embedded in constructivist theories. Discourse theory claims there are no fundamental truth or false criteria outside discourses. Therefore, the validity of claims cannot be evaluated except in the context of a particular discourse. The authenticity or falsehood of concepts and propositions depend on their stability within a discourse; therefore, the fundamental questions of classic philosophy about truth and essence become a volatile issue (Bashir 2005). In keeping with those conceptual ideas, the present paper builds a conceptual framework based on Foucault's view of the relationship between knowledge and power; Norman Fairclough's idea on the relationship between discourse and historical context; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory on the contractual relationship between signifier and signified; as well as the decisive role of 'otherness' in the life of a discourse.

The first characteristic is the contingent nature of social phenomena. The contingency of configurations and social relations is equivalent to the denial of the necessity, fixation, and determinacy of structures. It means that someone cannot refer to the application of meaning to a word as absolute, definite, and meta-historical. The concept of signified and signifier in Laclau and Mouffe's theory explains this point rather well. Signs represent entities or symbols that refer to specific meanings in specific discourse frameworks. The meaning and the indication implied by one sign is called a signifier. The signifier is a sign with which a particular signified will be associated when we perceive it. In this theory, signs and concepts are floating signifiers and various discourses try to confer them a meaning. Each discourse, based on the structure of its semantic system, highlights the meaningful signified of this semantic system and marginalizes the other signified. In Laclau and Mouffe's theory, like the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, the connection between any sign with its meaning is not inherent but arbitrary and contractual. The principle of the arbitrariness of relation between signified and signifier is one of the essential ontological principles of this theory. Essentially, stabilization and closure are not permanent in the meaning of signs. The stabilization of the meaning of signifiers

⁸ Look at:

- Asgarian et al. (2015).
- Haji-Yousefi and Joneidi (2018).
- Moshizadeh and Rajaie (2019).
- Soleimani (2007).

⁹ Look at: Baker-Beall (2016).

in all discourses is temporary. For this reason, Laclau and Mouffe apply the term ‘moment’ to indicate the temporariness of the meaning of the signs. Therefore, it is always possible that the meaning of a ‘moment’ becomes transient. This destabilization is called ‘restlessness.’ This applies equally to terrorism as a sign and its instances. The relation between the sign of terrorism and its signified forms is not inherent but rather dependent on the conditions and power relations; so it is constructed conventionally (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 24–59).

In political conflicts, a discourse will occupy a better position, or a signifier will be attributed to existing signified as a result of power relations. That is precisely what Foucault calls the genealogy of discourses. Norman Fairclough uses the concept of the power behind discourses to explain this idea. The ability of discourses to consolidate the meaning and their hegemony depends on the strength which is behind them. The power behind a discourse signifies signs in a particular way by highlighting them. By generating consensus, it makes them hegemonic in the public sphere. Therefore, a specific meaning of the signs or floating signs of that discourse is temporarily consolidated in the minds of the subjects. On the other hand, assisted by the process of marginalization, a dominant discourse tries to sideline the meanings provided by rival discourses and deconstruct their central signifier. In other words, for the meaning of a sign (here the concept of terrorism) to be consolidated, all other possible meanings must be rejected. In any event, any consolidation or objectivity takes place in conjunction with power relations. Identity and objectivity are developed by constructing a violent hierarchy between two opposing forces, such as black and white, man and woman, east and west, an opponent of terrorism and supporter of terrorism, and so on (Marsh and Stoker 2010: 209). This equally applies to the definition of terrorism. The United States, owing to its material, political, and even ideological power, imposes a certain definition of terrorism and its opponent is discredited with the tag of the sponsor of terrorism (Devetk 1996: 181–182).

Borrowing Foucault’s ideas on genealogy, it can be assumed that in defining what we recognize as terrorism/counterterrorism and terrorist/anti-terrorist, is characterized in a framework associated with power and political relationships. A norm-maker power produces both the discourse of terrorism and counter-terrorism strategies. In other words, a dominant power exerts discourse violence to impose itself on the other existing discourses through two strategies of absorption and exclusion. This extends their umbrella more and more and accordingly attracts still more discourses to it; while other discourses face rejection and isolation. The decision on what falls within the definition of terrorism/terrorists and what is to be recognized outside of it is something that is strongly determined by the interests of the dominant power. Terrorism sometimes forms a label for violence by specific individuals, groups, and governments who do not move behind the interests of a dominant power (Cox 1981: 49–66).

Within themselves, discourses require a concept called ‘otherness’ as a political activity. This means a discourse is not defined merely in line with its affirmative components, but it needs an opposite or negative dimension to determine its scope which is called ‘non-self’. In Connolly’s terms, the concept of the Self requires the existence of the different other, and the process of producing such self-other is titled othering. Discourses make identities, and in turn, “it requires a difference to be, and

convert difference into otherness to secure its self-certainty (Connolly 1991: 64).” The mechanism of this dialectic is formed through the principle of ‘I’m not who you are. This ‘self vs. other’ confrontation is more intense in political affairs, and rival discourses are easily labeled as being against international norms (terrorism here), especially if they oppose hegemonic power.

The last, not least, characteristic indicates the existential conditions of discourses. The structure and existence of social phenomena are historical and constructed collectively through dominant semantic systems in society. Historical understanding of an entity means referring to the settings in which it has possibly emerged. Instead of searching for the objective meaning in the society, one must think of deconstructing all meanings and returning them to their basis and the historical circumstances of their existence. Discourses retain a social nature, identity, and structure, and as Fairclough indicates, they are a form of social practice which both constitute the social world and is constituted by other social practices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 61). They are the outcome of contexts and settings of social backgrounds. Thus, they are identifiable through recognizing external elements and their historical context. This is precisely what Foucault calls archeology of knowledge. Furthermore, Fairclough believes discourse cannot be investigated independently and merely through the analysis of the structures of a text. By contrast, discourse in the system of discursive interactions can be understood and analyzed in terms of social and political contexts (Fairclough 1995:10). Terrorism also emerges in a favorable chronicled context. The creators of that historical context cannot be considered to be faultless while the perpetrators (here terrorists) of those conditions are simply denounced. Take for example, somebody infected with Coronavirus. Who provided the context to contract the virus, should not be blamed solely while those who brought about that situation go unblamed.

4 Iran–The US and the Duality of Terrorism

The theoretical core of US foreign policy has centered on the concept of ideological superiority and belief in the benevolent nature of its hegemony over the world. These ingredients in turn have shaped the identity of the United States and directed its foreign policy. Accordingly, in the framework of American ideal discourse, the signs of exceptionalism, benevolent hegemony, political and economic superiority, as well as the American narrative of liberty, democracy, liberalism, and Christianity play an essential role in the survival and continuation of American identity in which the limits of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are delineated (Myrdal 1962). The US perceives its identity through a constant other-making mechanism (Mitzen 2006: 21–26). Moreover, given the discursive approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to the life and death of domineering discourses, American hegemony frequently discovers meaning in the shadow of the existence of an enemy or otherness. From this perspective, the existence of an enemy and others seems vital and inevitable in determining political boundaries of discourse (Hawthorn 1992: 165).

In this regard, it is understandable why the dominant US discourse on foreign policy in the contemporary era has always been focused on an ‘other foreigner’,

especially since the middle of the Second World War. After the Monroe Doctrine was abandoned as a principle of the US foreign policy in the early 1940s, the identity of this ‘other foreigner’ or mostly ‘enemy’ was defined as and narrowed down to Fascism and Nazism in the middle of the Second World War (after Hitler invades Russia). After the occupation of Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan by the Allies, the identity of this other foreigner underwent a metamorphosis, so it moved from Western Europe to Eastern Europe. And at this point, communism and the Soviet Union become the main ‘other’ of American discourse. As such, in the Cold War period, the United States referred to the Soviet Union as ‘Satan’s Empire’. Accordingly, the United States’ conceptualization of Islamic terrorism and terrorists is the last, not least, in the long list of other-making process products, especially when the neo-conservatives are in power in the US. At the dawn of this millennium and under the influence of the 9/11 attacks, American foreign policy discourse was defined against emerging threats in the form of a counter-Islamism strategy. From this perspective, the knowledge that Western-American discourse has produced on terrorism is thoroughly and structurally integrated with the considerations of power and interests. As such, Ronald Reagan’s reference to the founders of Al-Qaida in the Cold War era as ‘freedom fighters’ can be better understood. With a discursive approach, it seems that the conventional American definition of terrorism arises from the overwhelming political concerns of its ruling elite which direct it in conceptualizing terrorism. As Jackson put it, the “war on terrorism is currently one of a great many kinds of political discourses, and it is attempting—with considerable success—to become hegemonic over alternative discourses” (Jackson 2005: 19).

Therefore, the ‘other’ in the US foreign policy discourse is sometimes identified as communism/communists and at other times as political Islam, as has been the case for nearly two decades, when Islam has been referred to as terrorism and its followers as terrorists (White 2005: 73), and recently as directed against China. This is why there is not a particular occasion when the US authorities have not spoken negatively about Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Subsequently, Tehran represents a symbol of political Islam in the Middle East and it has been constructed as the other or enemy in the American identity. Shortly after the assassination of Q. Soleimani, Senator Chris Murphy expressed that Soleimani was “an enemy of the United States. That’s not a question” (National Review 2020). Or Rep. Eliot Engel, the Democratic chair of House Foreign Affairs Committee (2020), called Soleimani “the mastermind of immense violence, suffering, and instability” (The Atlantic 2020). The worst description about Soleimani was uttered by President Trump: “He’s a terrorist. He was designated a terrorist by President Obama, and then Obama did nothing about it except giving them \$150 billion...” (CNN 2020). In the process of other-making, Trump dehumanized him: “He was a monster. And he’s no longer a monster” (BBC 2020).

Terrorism also applies as a threat label which can be dubbed as Iranophobia. Through widespread propaganda, the Western media instill the idea that Iran is a serious threat to the GCC countries and the Middle East. When the wealthy states of the GCC came to believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a terrorist state that threatened their security, they consequently bought sophisticated and expensive arms to guarantee their security. During this rush to buy arms, the main profits go

to American and European arms companies, which in times of economic stagnation is a blessing. One of the reasons for Iranophobia, that is by labeling it as a sponsor of terrorism, is to divert the attention of the GCC states from Israel to Iran. Tehran is thus propagated as being far more dangerous than Israel, and in this way, serves the long-term interests of the United States in protecting Israel's security as well as having a lucrative and permanent arms market. Therefore we see that when the GCC countries normalized relations with Israel, was right about the same time that their ties with Iran became exacerbated (Jamalzadeh and Aghaei 2015: 42–45). According to the data of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the five largest arms exporters in 2016–20 were the United States, Russia, France, Germany, and China. But the GCC and MENA countries are categorized as the 40 largest importers of the major arms deal in the world in 2016–20, while Saudi Arabia ranked number one (SIPRI 2021: 6). Therefore we can also determine a close relationship between interests and production of knowledge on terrorism.

The aforementioned narrative applies to Iranian officials as well. They view terrorism through discursive procedures by constructing 'other' and 'self'. Anti-Americanism has become part of the identity of Iranian leaders in the post-revolution era since 1979. Even separate attempts by some Iranian presidents to modify tension with the United States have so far been unsuccessful due to opposition from the Supreme Leader (Khamenei Official English and Persian Websites 2021) and his elite and institutional supporters. Following the 1979 Revolution, Iranian authorities redefined their political identity based on elements such as confronting the so-called global arrogance (the US), denouncing the so-called puppet states of the region (i.e., Saudi Arabia), and delegitimizing Zionism. And in the meantime, the United States was seen as an apparent 'arch other' or the 'enemy' according to the words of Ayatollah Khamenei: "Our main enemy, the regime of the United States of America, is one of the most corrupt and oppressive governments in the world. They support terrorists. They supported Daesh as much as they could. In the present time, despite all the fuss that they kick up, they are still helping tyrannical governments ... oppressive dynasties in the region" (English.Khamenei.ir, Sep 26, 2018).

Let us assume 'Islamism' is Iran's foreign policy discourse, its "otherness" is the US and Israel, and "Enmity with the United States is the main pillar of the ideology of I.R. Iran. If one day its relations with the US become normal, Islamic Iran will face an identity crisis," Sadegh Zibakalam, a professor of political science at the University of Tehran tweeted (@sadeghZibakalam, 25 July 2018). There are no public speeches or statements in which Ayatollah Khamenei does not call the United States 'world arrogance' or 'enemy,' which has been seeking to dominate Iran, the Middle East, and even the world. In a content analysis of Khamenei's 51 speeches and messages from March 2019 to March 2020, it is found that out of 131 thousand words, he applied the word "enemy" 451 times hinting at the US and 424 times at the word "US" and its derivatives. Moreover, he applied adjectives such as "malice", "evil" and "satan" for the US performance against Iran (Radio Farda 2020). He believes, "it is like global imperialism to show enmity towards an entity such as the Islamic Republic." (English.Khamenei.ir/ June 3, 2016).

This Anti-Americanism discourse influenced the Iranian definition of terrorism and terrorists as well. Terrorism in the Middle East is seen by Iranian leaders as a

proxy war to secure the interests of the West and to fill the pockets of arms companies. This colonial policy has been led by American political adventures in the Muslim-populated countries. Khamenei sees terrorism as America's revenge against what he coined as 'the Islamic Awakening Movement.'¹⁰ He maintains: "In all parts of the region that man looks at, we see this evil fingertip which produces terrorism (Farsi.Khamenei.ir, May 16, 2015)." Iranian Supreme Leader described Israel as a 'terrorist garrison': "Israel is not a country, but a terrorist garrison against the Palestinian people and other Muslim nations." He maintains "fighting this brutal regime is fighting oppression and fighting terrorism, and it is a public duty (Farsi.Khamenei.ir, May 7, 2021)." He believes that terrorism has been a theater that the US invented along with its interests: "ISIL was created by them. Until recently, when ISIL was vanishing in Syria, they supported and defended ISIL; so they are pro-terrorists, they are terrorists themselves (Farsi.khamenei.ir, Jan.5, 2020)." He sees all Iranian armed opposition such as Mujahedeen Khalgh, Baluch, Arab and Kurdish rebel groups as the US and Israel proxies that were just invented to undermine the Iranian Islamic establishment (Farsi.Khamenei.ir, May 12, 2003). He believes that the US transferred the ISIS terrorists to Afghanistan "to justify its continued presence in the region and to provide security for the Zionist regime (Farsi.Khamenei.ir, Jan.30, 2018)." He even generalizes this pessimistic view on the import of coronavirus vaccines. "Imports of US and British vaccines into the country are forbidden ... They're completely untrustworthy." He goes further: "It's not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations (The Guardian 2021)." Ayatollah Khamenei addressed the US authorities: "to the leaders of the order of domination (the US and Western states), terrorism is whatever that threatens their illegitimate interests. They label as terrorists the resistance fighters who are defending their legitimate right of countering occupiers and interferers, but they do not recognize as terrorists their evil and mercenary centers (entities) which are threatening the life and security of innocent people" (English.Khamenei.ir, 2011).

Therefore, in the eyes of Iranian leaders, especially Ayatollah Khamenei, the counter-measures of Muslims in the region against US policies are described as 'resistance,' while the United States labels them as terrorism. Khamenei believes, "The oppressed people of Palestine have experienced the worst kind of terrorism for the last sixty years... {by} the Zionist regime's death and destruction machinery" (English.Khamenei.ir, Nov 29, 2015). In the wake of Soleimani's assassination, Khamenei articulated this event in the us and them framework. He described Soleimani by saying, "This is the man who confronts the enemy with no fear... If he had not succeeded in that great Jihad within himself, he would not have been able to confront (the enemy) in this way." (English.Khamenei.ir, 2020). He also labeled the US action as a thoroughly terrorist act: "The US showed its 'terrorist nature' by killing Soleimani" (The Washington Post The Washington Post 2020). Here is a classic example where the two parties similarly accuse each other of involvement in terrorism.

¹⁰ Iranian authorities applies the Islamic Awakening Movement instead of Arab Spring.

The second feature of terrorism in the US discourse is that it considers friends and allies as members of an anti-terrorism partnership, but labels the rival discourse challenging American hegemony as terrorists or supporters of terrorism. The hegemonic power employs the concept of terrorism/terrorists as a political sticker to invalidate its opponents and those who pose a challenge to the US dominance and hegemony. In this regard, Jenkins states, “some governments are prone to label others as terrorism all violent acts committed by their political opponents” (Jenkins 2003: 166). This is while Kapitan explicitly asserts that the aim is to discredit those who are targeted by this conceptualization (Chagankerian 2013). They point out that the United States, after the 9/11 attacks, used its political-military power to define its so-called enemies as a terrorist. As George W. Bush said after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. Thus, Iran, which declared formal neutrality in the 2003 US war against Iraq, was labeled as part of an ‘axis of evil’. Or Donald Trump, despite worldwide condemnation of the Saudi crown prince’s complicity in the heinous murder of Jamal Khashoggi, in his statements of November 20, 2018, instead of condemning Saudi Arabia, hilariously accused Iran of terrorism: “The country of Iran, as an example, is responsible for a bloody proxy war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen,..., supporting the terror group Hezbollah in Lebanon, propping up dictator Bashar Assad in Syria and much more”. Trump went on to vow to stay a “steadfast partner” of the Saudi regime against Iran (Reuters 2018). Elsewhere, a US court required Iran to pay more than \$6 billion in ransom to the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks that killed almost 3,000 people (Aljazeera 2018), while it was crystal clear that Iran had no involvement in that event whatsoever. By and large, the signifier, i.e., terrorism, with all its signified instances, serves the hegemonic discourse as well as the ‘other-making’ approach of the US foreign policy. Hence, even the so-called resistance movements (in Iran’s perspective) are attributed to the weak dissidents who oppose the status quo of the US hegemony.

Tehran maintains there is no doubt that Hamas has risen from the ruins of occupation, humiliation, displacement, siege, and the like. But, every action of theirs is conveniently labeled as terrorism by Washington. The Lebanese Hezbollah was born as a result of the occupation and humiliation of Lebanon by Israel, and it was only after this movement’s military pressure that forced Israel out of Lebanese territory. This group was the mighty force that did not allow ISIS to encroach on Lebanon. But they are easily labeled as terrorists, since the goals of this movement run counter to the goals of the United States in Middle Eastern ideologically. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo named Iraqi militia leaders such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, along with Qais Khazali, Hadi al-Amiri, and Fali al-Fayyadh, as Iranian puppets. Al-Muhandis was already on the United States list of specially designated nationals, as well (The US Treasury 2009). All of these groups are the by-products of the US interventionist policies in Iraq after 2003. The United States launched air attacks on sites in Iraq and Syria belonging to Kataib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militia group (Aljazeera 2020). The US eventually decided to designate them as terrorist groups, even though they were created to rein in Iraqi security (Global News 2020). Khomeini believes terrorist groups such as ISIS are created and supported by the United States. Therefore, when the US forces launched strikes on Kata’ib Hezbollah bases

in Iraq's western Anbar province, killing and injuring around 76 people, Khamenei said the attacks on al-Hashd al-Shaabi represented a retaliation against the forces for crushing the Daesh (ISIS) terrorist group (Tehran Times 2020a, b). In other words, the Iranian authorities maintain that by attacking Hashd al-Shaabi, the United States is empowering the terrorists such as ISIS. In Tehran's view, Q. Solemani's main charge was being an arch-enemy of IS.

In the discourse of Iranian leaders, all immigrant Israelis (not Palestinian Jews) living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, whether military people or civilians are 'occupiers', and the actions of the Palestinians in response, as they are taken in self-defense and resistance against the occupation, are not considered as terrorism. This idea that all immigrant Israelis are 'occupiers' is indirectly inferred from Khamenei's proposal on the referendum: "We propose a referendum among the Palestinian people... All the original people of Palestine—including Muslims, Christians, Jews, and indigenous inhabitants—should take part in a general and orderly referendum to determine the future of Palestine's government, whether they live inside Palestine, or in refugee camps, or any other place. The government that is established after the referendum will determine the destiny of non-Palestinian immigrants who migrated to Palestine in the past" (English.Khamenei.ir, August 19, 1991). In accordance with this perspective, the launching of a rocket attack by Hamas against the Israeli civilians is not considered to be a terrorist act, because they represent all the 'occupiers'. In this view, the resistance of the Palestinians against the 'occupiers' cannot be discredited with the label of terrorism. In this context, Ayatollah Khamenei says, "In the minds of US officials, the concept of terrorism remains a flawed concept. They define terrorism wrongly. They define it in a way that the mass murder of the Palestinians and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila people is not considered terrorism. The usurper Zionist regime officially admitted its assassination of Palestinians (they indeed mentioned the word assassination) and they assassinated them for sure... But instead, the Palestinian people who rise to defend their land and reclaim their rights, who scream, and who have rocks in their hands and don't even have weapons, they are the terrorists in the American narrative." (farsi.khamenei.ir, Sep.26, 2001).

The third characteristic of the concept of terrorism in American discourse is its treatment of terrorism with double standards and in a selective manner. In other words, the US authorities practically suggest that there is good and bad terrorism. Although in public, while rejecting such terminology, their past deed confirms it. In the White House's view, good terrorism is in line with US interests, but if terrorism is against the US interests, it is detrimental and worthy of a harsh reaction. For example, Ronald Reagan met with Afghan Mujahedeen and al-Qaeda members in 1985 who at the time were fighting the occupying forces of the Soviet Union and called them 'freedom fighters' is quite like the United States' founding fathers. The result of that erroneous policy was the creation of al-Qaeda and the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Chengu 2014). But the American statesmen, after the attacks on September 11, 2001, officially put the same group on the list of foreign terrorist organizations. This story is true even for the Afghanistan Taliban. Or as mentioned earlier, there were cases of the killing of Saudi political dissidents, especially the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which was tragic and strongly condemned

worldwide; yet the Trump administration insisted that the incident did not affect the deep ties and alliance between Riyadh and Washington. In addition, the United States supported extremist groups in Libya, and eventually, the same forces attacked the US embassy. Or at the beginning of the Syrian crisis (2011), the United States appeared to support all insurgents against Bashar al-Assad, relying on the principle that ‘the enemy of our enemy represents our friend,’ but ISIS as a demon has since emerged from these insurgencies (Chossudovsky 2013). Donald J. Trump directed his ire at former President Obama on many occasions, accusing him of creating the Islamic State and saying the terrorist group ‘honors’ him. “In many respects, you know, they honor President Obama,” Trump told a raucous crowd in Florida in 2016. “He’s the founder of ISIS. He’s the founder of ISIS. He’s the founder. He founded ISIS.” He added, “I would say the co-founder would be crooked Hillary Clinton.” He has repeatedly reaffirmed this position. (The New York Times 2016).

Accordingly, the United States used Abdul Malik Rigs, the executed former head of the terrorist group Jundallah, as a lever of pressure against Iran. His sole mission was killing and taking civilians hostage. In November 2014, using substantiated documents from former FBI officials, the New York Times revealed that the CIA had been connected with him in the course of Jundallah Group’s terrorist activities. Moreover, it was reported that the CIA was informed of the terrorist activities before they happened but there was no reaction in that regard. This confidential communication between Jundallah and the CIA continued well after being identified as a terrorist group by the United States in 2010. (The New York Times 2014). Mohammad Pakpour, the high Iranian IRGC commander believes the use of sophisticated arms and operations by armed opposition groups such as Jundallah, PJAK (the Kurdistan Free Life Party), and others shows major powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia are behind them (Mojnews 2020). This is true for Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK). In 1997, the Clinton Administration designated this group as a foreign terrorist organization. But when the post-Clinton administrations found it to be a good vehicle for pressuring Tehran, it was delisted in September 2012. Under Trump, many US officials took part in the MEK rallies and vehemently supported this group’s activities against Iran (Iran-Interlink 2018). And this is while there is no doubt this same group committed the most heinous terrorist crimes in Iran in the 1980s.

As explained earlier, the Iranian regime adheres partly to an ideological view of terrorism. It defines terrorists as those who oppose the Islamic establishment in Iran such as MEK as well as the forces (including states) who are opposed to what Iran coined as the “Axis of Resistance.”¹¹ Iran usually calls these non-state entities who fight the Axis of Resistance as the US proxies or mercenaries. Iran claims that more than 17,000 people of its citizens and top political officials were the victims of terrorism; more than 12,000 of whom were killed by MEK operatives and the rest by other terrorist gangs such as the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Democratic

¹¹ The term Axis of Resistance refers to a political alliance between Iran, the Syrian Assad government, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, Pro-Syrian government militias, Iraqi Shia militias and the Yemeni Houthi movement.

Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), PJAK, Jundallah or People's Resistance Movement of Iran, Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz and Kingdom Assembly of Iran (Tondar). According to Iranian official estimates, more than 5000 Iranian people were injured in the assassination attempts (Asgarian et al. 2015: 175). In fact Iran claims to hold a world record of being the terroristic victim. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war (2011), Iran considered ISIS as a terrorist group and fought it, because Tehran is of the opinion that ISIS was fabricated by the US, and its ideology contradicts with the Iranian mullahs' narrative of Islam. However, Iran has been charged by the US with channeling arms to the Afghanistan Taliban or Iraqi armed group to kill the US forces or commit terroristic operations (Foreign Policy 2021). Tehran was also charged for killing hundreds of its dissidents abroad (Alarabiya 2021). Tehran always rejected these charges. If these charges come true, it means that Teheran also treated terrorism in a discursive way.

The fourth characteristic of American discourse is the disclaimer of creating the conditions conducive to terrorism. In the Syrian civil war, the United States supported terrorist groups operating in the country financially and also militarily, to reinforce the opposition to the Assad regime under the pretext of strengthening the Free Syrian Army (Durden 2015). The US officials knew well that there was no independent and coherent entity by the name of the Free Syrian Army, and the axis of the opposition forces to the Assad regime consisted of terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra Front. Therefore, it is conspicuous that the arms shipped to Syria may ultimately end up in the hands of terrorist groups through intermediaries (Bad-dour 2015). In addition, the United States closed its eyes on the financial support of its allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar for terrorist groups, and indirectly empowered these groups.

The United States has never deeply contemplated why a group of suicidal attackers created the 9/11 tragedy. One of the major goals of the 9/11 perpetrators was taking revenge for years of cruel and humiliating US policy in the Middle East (Haass 2000) and its support for Israel's crimes and occupation of Palestinian territories. Put differently, the United States is negligent of its historical role in triggering the 9/11 attacks indirectly. After the 9/11 terror attacks, the United States rallied a global campaign against terrorism to tackle extremism and terrorism in the Middle East, while refusing to admit the role of its past flawed policies in the Middle East crises. In other words, the United States has contaminated the Middle East politically to a degree that microbes that are called terrorists grow out of. As of yet, the United States neglects its role in fostering such a polluted environment.

Chérif Kouachi, one of the two terrorists who attacked the offices of Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris, France, revealed the reasons for his tendency for extremist and terrorist groups in interrogation sessions. The US military policy in the region and the presence of its troops in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan was mentioned as being one of the most significant reasons for his passion for terrorist groups and his willingness to engage with them (Zakaria 2015). Kouachi's words confirm that the US Middle East policy and its stubborn support for Israel have backfired on many occasions. Its extensive military presence in the region has triggered terrorist movements in the region and provided new justifications for the continuation and expansion of terrorist activities. The US

Middle East policy has neither reduced nor halted the growth of terrorism but has massively reproduced terrorist groups and proliferated their activities. Furthermore, the United States has a historical record of interfering in the internal affairs of regional countries and ousting regimes that it deemed unfriendly. Iraq and Afghanistan are strong proof in confirming this assertion. In Afghanistan, after the partial withdrawal of NATO and US troops in 2014, the Taliban and terrorist groups took advantage of the power void and tried to undermine the war-ravaged country. The United States, by overthrowing Saddam Hussein, created a power vacuum in the region that contributed to the emergence of terrorist groups in Iraq, as well. ISIS as a terrorist group and its struggles to institute its desirable order while reviving the caliphate is the outcome of the Americans' attempt to overthrow the regime in Syria (Porter 2016). Richard Haass, the former Director of Policy Planning Staff in the Department of State maintains, "There is no hidden agenda here. America's rationale in promoting democratization in the Muslim world is both altruistic and self-interested Countries plagued by economic stagnation and lack of opportunity, closed political systems, and burgeoning populations fuel the alienation of their citizens. As we have learned the hard way, such societies can be breeding grounds for extremists and terrorists who target the United States for supporting the regimes under which they live." (US Dept. of State 2002).

This story is somewhat true to Iran as well. Violent political actions usually are influenced by structural factors such as the type of political system, being plural or authoritarian, social-economic justice, center-periphery dilemma, and so on. Political actors need tangible structures—such as parties, media, NGOs, and other formal and informal institutions—through which they could convey their political demands to a political system. According to political theorists, political violence is natural if the voices of political and ethnic groups with a sense of relative deprivation are not heard. "A highly developed political system has procedures to minimize, if not to eliminate, the role of violence in the system and to restrict to explicitly defined channels the influence of wealth in the system," S. Huntington maintains (Huntington 1963: 20). The main cause of the tendency to political violence is embedded in the imbalance between demands for political involvement and the capability of a political system to meet it. Political groups seek ways and means of participation to achieve their goals, and if these means are denied to them, they feel frustrated and try to make their demands upon the political system, with violence, coercion, and the use of other illegitimate means (Huntington 1963: 47). The tendency to violence sometimes manifests itself in secret terroristic actions by marginalized groups and ethnicities. One reason for the tendency to armed actions by some Iranian ethnic groups is reasoned in the inefficacy of the Iranian political system to meet the political, economic, and cultural demands of marginalized groups. In a survey study, Asghari Niari and Mahmuodoqli (2017) found that economic, political, and cultural relative deprivation pushed a minority of Iranian Baluch ethnicity to terroristic violence (Asghari Niari and Mahmuodoqli 2017: 92–93).

5 Conclusion

Given the findings of the present paper, the US and Iran follow a discursive approach towards defining and the exemplification of terrorism in the Middle East. The key feature of the US discourse on terrorism is the politicization and ‘otherness-making’ process. In this perspective, the signifier, which is terrorism, with its some signified instances, partly serves the US foreign policy; while the Iranian authorities frequently interpret the acts of some of those ‘others’ as legitimate resistance in the face of humiliation and occupation. Iran interprets terrorism mostly ideologically and affiliates the insider and regional terrorist organizations such as IS as puppets that have been orchestrated by the US and Israel. While in reality, the Iranian view does not apparently match the facts: the US led coalition contributed effectively to IS vanishing. The authorities of the US treat terrorism somehow in a double standard way and ignore their historical role in the outgrowth of terrorism in the Middle East; it is also partly true to Iranian authorities to insider terrorist gangs and the dissidents who fled to other countries. But given the power imbalance of the two countries and thanks to the US media empire, the latter has been more successful in consolidating its definition of terrorism, or relative stability between signifier and signified to the world. Therefore, the US endeavor in the conceptualization of terrorism and exemplification of terrorists should not be considered as a meta-discourse which must be accepted by all the world. But in fact, it is just a discourse, among others, which produces biased knowledge influenced by power interests. On the other hand, this account holds partly true about the Iranian discourse on terrorism. Iran’s support for the so-called ‘resistance axis’ against Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia is a discourse, *inter alia*, which is also partly intertwined with its ideological and geopolitical interests. Therefore, when political interests come into play, it is hard to distinguish between the sponsor of terrorism and the heroin countering terrorism.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Statement This material is the authors’ own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere. The paper is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. The paper reflects the authors’ own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner. The paper properly credits the meaningful contributions of co-authors and co-researchers. The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research. All sources used are properly disclosed (correct citation). Literally copying of text must be indicated as such using quotation marks and giving proper reference. All the authors have been personally and actively involved in substantial work leading to the paper, and will take public responsibility for its content.

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