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Political Prioritization: American-Iranian Discourse Leading Up to the Nuclear Deal

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Political Prioritization: American-Iranian Discourse
Leading Up to the Nuclear Deal

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2016

Honors Capstone Project in International Relations

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I. Abstract:

On July 14, 2015, Iran, the European Union, and the P5 +1, the five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council—Paris, the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and China—plus Germany, agreed on and signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The JCPA, a nuclear deal, agreed to lift economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for strict monitoring of Iran's nuclear program. This research conducts a qualitative discourse analysis by using UN General Assembly Debate speeches from 2001 to 2015, and illustrates which key elements within these speeches made way for this negotiation to take place. More specifically, the use of Iran's religious rhetoric—exemplified through Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—and the U.S.'s hostile language—exemplified through George Bush—both had implications on U.S.-Iran nuclear relations; similarly, language within these speeches revealed Barack Obama's approach to diplomacy and prioritization of the nuclear deal and Iran, along with Hassan Rouhani's willingness to emphasize the economic sanctions' negative impact on everyday Iranians. Therefore, through the use of these speeches, this research reveals the implications of language on Iranian-American relations and how these implications have varied in accordance with specific presidential worldviews.

II. Executive Summary:

In today's world, most major powers have capabilities to build nuclear weapons or are secured by an ally with these capabilities. However, as nuclear energy resources and information spread to different areas of the globe, members of the international community have become more cautious and fearful that nuclear energy development could lead to a path of gaining nuclear weapon capabilities. This, in large, has been one of the major issues when it comes to relations between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to the nuclear issue, the U.S. and Iran have had a multitude of mishaps with each other for more than 60 years, ranging from the U.S.'s siding of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the Iraq-Iran war, to the American embassy hostage crisis shortly after the start of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Despite this history, however, the U.S. and Iran were able to secure and agree on a nuclear deal, an agreement between Iran, the P5 +1 (five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council, plus Germany), and the European Union.

Therefore, since this agreement recently took place and continues to be a major ongoing dispute in the international community and especially, in the U.S., this research analyzes the language used in speeches made by U.S. and Iranian presidential officials and administrations. Through this, the research reveals how discourse between these two countries has changed in order to make way for the successful agreement of the nuclear deal. This research also illustrates the strong implications language can have, particularly when it ties into political speech.

Throughout this paper, a qualitative discourse analysis is conducted by using speeches from the United Nations General Assembly Debate, an annual debate where

countries' leaders and representatives gather together to discuss the progresses and plagues of today's world. Through the use of these speeches, one can analyze how the U.S. and Iran talk about each and how they talk to each other in a public forum—specifically in regards to what language they use to describe each other and what themes repeat throughout each president's speeches.

Since the nuclear deal is a recent development in long-lasting tense relations, there is definitely a gap in the level of research that discusses the relations of these two countries prior to and during the nuclear deal. Although there has been previous research on the use of persuasive rhetoric and language on U.S.-Iran discourse, there has not been research on this in regards to the nuclear deal agreement. With this said, the specifics of language and use of certain rhetorical devices has its implications on political decision-making and political events transpiring in the international community.

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IV. Introduction:

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 not only marked a shift in domestic Iranian politics, it also marked a change in relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Since the revolution, and essentially, since the hostage crisis, the U.S. and Iran officially cut diplomatic ties in 1980. Although these countries have had their political, cultural, and religious differences, they historically labeled one another as the enemy. These enemies showed signs of rapprochement on July 14, 2015 after Iran, the European Union, and the P5+1—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany—signed a nuclear agreement entitled the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna, Austria. The agreement lifts economic sanctions in exchange for strict monitoring of Iran’s nuclear program (Borger, 2015). With this said, what key elements made way for this negotiation and deal to finally take place?

Many scholars have conducted research on American-Iranian relations throughout history as well as the way in which the U.S. and Iran talk about each other; this project analyzes the discourse leading up to and during the nuclear deal negotiation, revealing the important role language plays in everyday politics. Specifically, I argue that the American and Iranian leaders’ worldviews, each uniquely different, has shifted from different leaders to make way for the Iranian nuclear deal. In the first section of this paper, I analyze the shift from George W. Bush’s confrontational language to Barack Obama’s diplomatic approach. Expanding on research that has been made on the causes of negative relations between these two countries of focus, recalling major political events, cultural, and religious differences, this project analyzes Iranian and American United Nations General Assembly speeches and the changes in discourse before and during the nuclear deal, beginning in 2001 to 2015.

Therefore, the first portion of this paper analyzes presidents Bush and Obama, while the second focuses on speeches by Iranian presidents, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani.

Therefore, this analysis argues that the most notable and essential changes include going from Bush's confrontational language to Obama's increased discussion of a nuclear Iran and his diplomacy efforts—as demonstrated through specific keywords—, which may have helped foster an Iranian nuclear deal, as well as the increase in Iranian leaders' prioritization of the economic implications of sanctions, a willingness to negotiate, and a decrease in religious speech within the UN GA speeches.

Throughout this paper, I approach my research through a constructivist's worldview by analyzing the social and historical construction behind what leaders are saying. A constructivist worldview allows for the assumption of specific cultural, historical, and social constructions of the way international relations and the world works (Slaughter, 2011). Moreover, although I mainly focus on discourse within the speeches related to Iran and its nuclear activities, I also reference certain general terms in the entire speech (i.e. use of the word terrorism), since this provides context to the tone and subject issues. Analyzing the words and themes these political leaders choose to use allows for the understanding of messages they choose to portray, and most importantly, the implications of these messages.

V. Literature Review:

In *Culture, Identity and Hegemony: Continuity and (the lack of) change in US counterterrorism policy from Bush to Obama*, Richard Jackson (2011) addresses two main issues through a qualitative analysis and constructivist worldview. Jackson compares the Bush administration's language for the "war on terror" and how the administration's counterterrorism policies have been "normalized" into the American public's identity with the Obama administration and how Obama attempted to change the counterterrorism narrative. Through this, Jackson asks whether this "counterterrorism policy can be rewritten, given the degree to which it accords with the deep cultural grammar of American identity" (Jackson, 2011). Jackson's qualitative analysis addresses open-ended questions by connecting culture and identity to the social construction of the 'war on terror,' while also focusing how these various narratives have been engraved in American society. This research fails to focus in on specific countries however, which is why the research in this paper is a unique addition to Jackson's research.

As for in *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*, Sam Keen (1991) addresses how the mind of what he describes as *homo hostilis* (hostile human) creates the image of an enemy, and how "surplus evil" (Keen, 1991) is created as a result of this. Keen addresses this issue through a psychological approach, analyzing how the idea of an enemy is formed, what components play a role, and how to deconstruct this image. His research provides various thematic characteristics of what plays into constructing an enemy. However, Keen's approach mainly focuses on imagery as opposed to the construction of language, although he does use descriptive language that accompanies specific characteristics of persuasive images.

Farzad Sharifan (2009) analyzes the use of figurative language in his paper, *Figurative Language in International Political Discourse: The Case of Iran*. Sharifan explains that figurative language is “largely socio-culturally constructed” (Sharifan, 2009) which can lead to misrepresentation and misinterpretation by those who may not share the same social and cultural background, as well as manipulation “when it collides with the realm of international politics” (Sharifan, 2009). Through a constructivist’s worldview, Sharifan concludes that because of this social construction of language, translations, especially in the case of figurative language within international politics can result in “considerable risks or produce substantial rewards, depending on the translation” (Sharifan, 2009). Although this literature does not identify any motivations or political stances behind these actors, it does point out an important issue that can be applied to Iran’s translated UN GA speeches, which in turn may impact perceptions and language used in response to these speeches—specifically by the U.S.

William O. Beeman (2008) discusses the cultural roots of the negative relations between the U.S. and Iran in *The ‘Great Satan’ vs. the ‘Mad Mullahs.’* He conducts a qualitative analysis of communication between American and Iranian leaders, concluding that this “mutual demonization” (Beeman, 2008) continues throughout various leaders and has become part of these countries’ “cultural dynamics” (Beeman, 2008). This however, was published in 2005, ten years ago, before Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani were elected into office, and before the nuclear deal. The advantages of Beeman’s research include his connection between American and Iranian myths about each other and the misconceptions they have of one another, as well as his connection to the Iranian media.

This project updates Beeman's analysis, which mostly references political and current events from the 1990s and earlier.

Gawdat Bahgat (2006) in "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran," argues that Iran's nuclear ambitions are because Iran perceives specific threats from multiple countries (the U.S., Israel, Iraq). Therefore, Bahgat approaches his research through a constructivist's worldview, claiming that these threats need to be alleviated. The author uses a qualitative approach since he uses the history of Iran's nuclear advancement, and the country's relationships with the international community as well as its relations with China and Russia. In addition to this, Bahgat also uses nationalism as he backs his claims. This research is important to note because it reveals the negative implications of perceived threats between these two countries, which a lot of the time, is impacted by the things these countries' leaders say and the way in which they say them.

VI. The History of U.S.-Iran Relations:

Although the U.S. and Iran have been on negative terms for more than 35 years, this actually dates back to when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In 1953, in a joint effort, the United Kingdom and the U.S. intelligence organized a coup d'état to overthrow Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, who attempted to nationalize the country's oil in 1951, threatening the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company—currently known as BP (Tharoor, 2010). Although this coup had been acknowledged by American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and President Barack Obama, the Central Intelligence Agency officially admitted its role in 2013, marking 60 years since the coup (CIA documents acknowledge its role in Iran's 1953 coup, 2013). This coup is the first major event that contributed to the tensions and distrust between the U.S. and Iran, especially since many Iranians view this as “a sign of the West's meddling in Iranian affairs, motivated first and foremost by greed” (Tharoor), The key moments in the long history of U.S.-Iran tensions, 2015). In 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT), which it ratified in 1970, allowing the country to enrich uranium (Nikou).

The Iranian Revolution began in 1979 after many Iranians—secular and religious—called for the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, to step down. The shah, a friend of America and “strategic ally in the Middle East” (Shoamanesh), fled Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an exile who spearheaded the revolution from abroad, returned to Iran in February 1979. Ten days later, the monarchy fell and the Islamic Republic of Iran was put into place. However, in October of that year, the U.S.—and specifically, President Jimmy Carter's administration—decided to allow the shah, who was sick with lymphoma,

into the country (Sick). After the revolution, the U.S. stopped providing Iran with enriched uranium for the Tehran Research Reactor (Nikou).

In turn, this led to a violent backlash within Iran. In November 1979, Iranian students took over the U.S. embassy, holding the people at the embassy hostage. The students demanded the shah's return, along with his financial assets, to Iran. Backed by Khomeini, this movement led to what is currently known as the hostage crisis, since American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days (Sick). The women hostages and those who were African-American were released within a month, while an ill individual was also released a few months after the embassy takeover, leaving 52 hostages to remain captive for 444 days, after a rescue mission in 1980 failed. As a result of the hostage crisis, Carter's administration halted all imports of Iranian oil. The crisis ended when President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated and replaced the Carter administration in 1981 (Reactions to the Hostage Crisis).

However, an important aspect of this is that Khomeini was dealing with issues in maintaining the support he had had during the revolution. At the start of the revolution, many Iranians from all walks of life had joined in calling for the shah's fall; however, they had not anticipated that after the monarchy's fall, Iran would be replaced with a theocracy. Although opposition against Khomeini was growing, the hostage crisis and resentment against America had grown, which maintained the Ayatollah's influence. Through this, Khomeini was able to pass a new constitution that would officially and permanently change Iran from a monarchy to an Islamic republic (Sick).

In 1983, a Lebanese bomber killed approximately 241 members of the American military. That bomber had ties to the Lebanese paramilitary Shi'ite group, Hezbollah, also

officially recognized as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and European Union members. Since Hezbollah had ties to Iran, and continues to today, the U.S. government condemned Iran as a state supporter of terrorism—a concept that continues until today and is repeatedly brought up in American leaders' speeches (Shoamanesh).

Tensions and distrust were heightened throughout the 1980s when the secret Iran-Contra scandal was exposed. While Iran was under a U.S. arms embargo, the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran, in an attempt to achieve two goals; the release of U.S. hostages being held by Hezbollah, and in order to fund the Contras, a rebel group fighting against the Nicaraguan government. In addition to this, during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 until 1988, the Reagan administration provided Iraq with weapons, technology, and intelligence. Another important factor in U.S.-Iranian mistrust is the Iranian passenger flight with 290 people on board, which was shot down by U.S. military planes in 1988. The U.S. claimed this was an accident, but many Iranian “hard-liners” (Tharoor, 2015) viewed this as an act against the Islamic country (Tharoor 2015).

Shortly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, George Bush listed Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil” in his State of the Union Address to Congress in January of 2002 (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). In this speech, Bush said, “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger” (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). In “What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran,” Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham (2007) describe the implications of this metaphor, stating it had reconstructed “the American understanding of the ‘War on Terror,’ in which the focus shifted from Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa’ida, with their allies and bases in

Afghanistan, to a series of other states, whose involvement in that operation ranged from minimal to non-existent” (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). Heradstveit and Bonham account Bush’s inclusion of Iran in this Axis to Iran’s hostility towards the U.S. and its thoughts on terrorism, specifically Iran’s support of Palestinians’ resistance against Israel and for Hezbollah (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007).

VII. Primary Research:

The United States of America:

There are stark differences between the foreign policy approaches of Republican George Bush and Democrat Barack Obama. More specifically, the evolution of discourse within these speeches from Bush to Obama has revealed the increase of diplomacy and compromise as well as the increased focus on Iran within this discourse, and a decrease in demonizing language.

One of the major factors that influenced America and Iran's capability to agree on a nuclear deal is the willingness to do so. This willingness is revealed by analyzing where Iran and its nuclear development are mentioned within a speech and how this reflects the level of importance to the speaker. The first main difference between speeches made from 2001 until 2008 and speeches made from 2009 until 2015 is that the latter speeches place Iran and its nuclear capabilities at a higher importance. For example, during George Bush's first term as president, he rarely mentioned Iran and its nuclear capabilities, with the exception of his speech in 2002. Even so, in the 2002 speech, Bush references Iran five times, and all of the times he mentions Iran, he is condemning Iraqi acts towards countries and towards Iran—specifically in the context of the Iran-Iraq war. In 2005, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice references four of the world's "greatest threats" (Rice, 2005) which include "transnational threats like terrorism and weapons proliferation, pandemic disease and trafficking in human beings" (Rice, 2005). Although she mentions the proliferation of nuclear weapons near the start of her speech in the phrase quoted above, Iran is mentioned towards the end. This continues in Bush's 2006 speech, where he

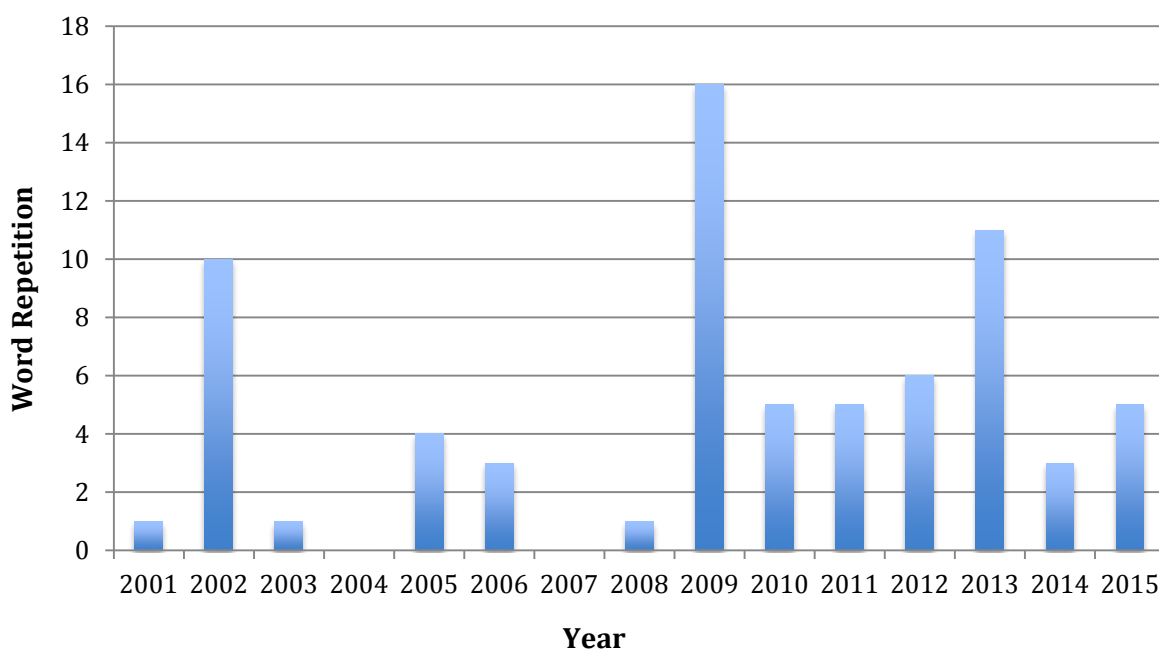
addresses Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, before bringing up Iran, and continues by mentioning Syria and Darfur. The former president's speeches in 2007 and 2008 momentarily bring up Iran near the beginning of the speeches, but only mention Iran's denial of the rights of its people—merging Iran with North Korea and Syria—and refers to ending nuclear weapons proliferation with no specificity to Iran near his concluding statements in 2007, and assigns a phrase to Iran's nuclear capabilities in 2008.

The Bush administration's allocation of Iran and the nuclear issue is entirely different than that of the Obama administration. In Obama's first speech to the GA, he put forth four major "pillars that are fundamental to the future" (Obama, 2009). The first pillar is nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament. This continues throughout his speeches, where Obama regularly brings up the issue of nuclear proliferation near the start of his speech and continues to detail this in relation to Iran either at the beginning or in the middle of his speech. Unlike speeches from 2001 until 2008, the speeches from 2009 and on all reveal the importance of Iran's nuclear capabilities and the urgency to resolve this issue through explicit statements, through the extensive details provided, and through the actual location of where this issue is mentioned in the actual speeches. For example, in 2013, Obama said the main focus of America's diplomatic efforts in the short-term were "Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the Arab-Israeli conflict" (Obama 2013).

Table 1. The Use of Nuclear Terms In the Bush and Obama Administrations' Speeches from 2001 to 2015								
Year	Nuclear Terms							
	IAEA	NPT	Nuclear	Proliferation	Nonproliferation	Arms Race	Iran/Iranians	Weapons of Mass Destruction
2001	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
2002	0	0	10	0	0	0	5	5
2003	0	0	1	7	1	0	0	4
2004	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
2005	1	0	4	2	1	0	3	1
2006	0	0	3	0	0	0	5	0
2007	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
2008	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0
2009	1	2	16	1	2	2	2	0
2010	0	1	5	0	1	0	6	0
2011	0	0	5	0	0	0	2	1
2012	0	1	6	0	0	1	7	0
2013	0	1	11	0	1	1	26	2
2014	0	1	3	0	0	0	3	0
2015	0	0	5	0	1	0	15	0

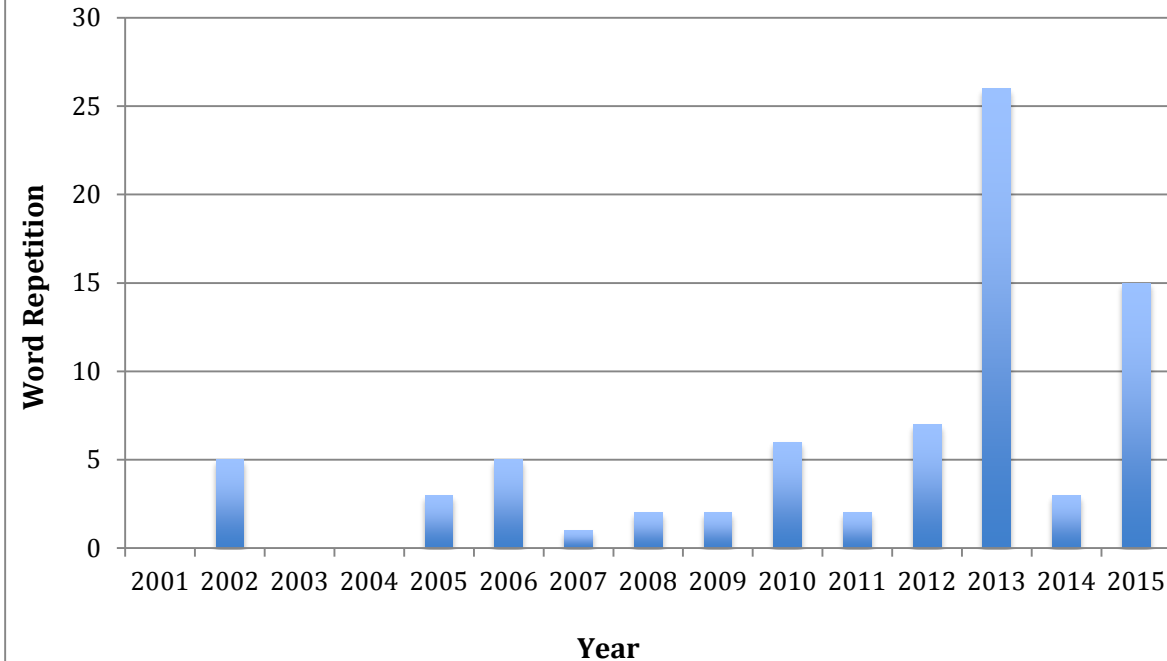
Table 1 reveals how frequently both presidents focused on nuclear issues, including the general term ‘nuclear,’ the mention of an arms race, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), proliferation and non-proliferation, as well as the number of times each leader specifically mentioned Iran. Table 1 shows more focus was given to the subject of the nuclear issue starting in 2009. This is especially the case with the actual word, ‘nuclear,’ which was mentioned 16 times in Obama’s first speech addressing the UN GA, and 11 times in 2013, the starting point of negotiations between the U.S. and Iran. Furthermore, Figure 1 illustrates how the use of the word ‘nuclear’ increases over time.

Figure 1. Total Number of Times 'Nuclear' is Mentioned in 2001-2015 Speeches



Another important factor to consider is the increase in referencing Iran and Iranians from 2009 to 2015, as opposed to its relatively low number—and at times, nonexistent—in the eight years prior to 2009, which is illustrated in Figure 2. Obama brought up Iran 26 times in his 2013 speech, the highest amount, as opposed to Bush, who’s highest mention of Iran was only a total of 5 times in 2006.

Figure 2. Total Number of Times 'Iran' is Mentioned in 2001-2015 Speech Discourse



The terms ‘proliferation’ and ‘nonproliferation’¹ are separated in Table 1 because each has a different connotation to its meaning. The Bush administration’s speeches did not use the term ‘nonproliferation’ – with the exception of Bush’s 2003 speech and Condoleezza Rice’s speech in 2005. Instead, the term ‘proliferation’ was used, which has a negative connotation and threat, since it essentially means the quick spread of nuclear weapons. Contrastingly, the term was not used at all in the speeches from 2009 and on; instead, the term ‘nonproliferation’ was used, which has a less negative connotation since it essentially means the lack of spread of nuclear weapons.

¹ These words both carry different connotations. Proliferation of nuclear weapons means the spread of nuclear weapons, essentially pointing out a threat, whereas nuclear nonproliferation is the end of the spread of nuclear weapons, essentially portraying an action or potential solution to the possible threat of nuclear proliferation.

A major theme in Bush and his administration speeches is the concept of the 'other' through the use of personal pronouns and the specific use of vocabulary that isolates a subject. Throughout Bush's speeches, there is constantly a differentiation between good and evil, us and them, as well as the civilized and the terrorist world, bringing up Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of identification.

This relates to the Bush doctrine, where one of the major pillars is,

“That we live in a time not only of opportunity, but also of great threat posed primarily by terrorists and rogue states. Optimism and pessimism are linked in the belief that if the United States does not make the world better, it will grow more dangerous” (Jervis, 2003).

This is not only exemplified through Bush's use of vocabulary, but through his overall message that the U.S. and international community must act against terror and terrorists in order to avoid a catastrophic future.

For example, the Bush administration stressed the threat Iran poses on the UN and the nuclear nonproliferation regime. This is shown throughout the speeches made by the Bush administration, including a speech made by Condoleezza Rice in 2005. That year marked the UN's 60th anniversary, which reflects the U.S. speech and specifically, its calls for UN reform. Rice's speech took place shortly after Iran had rejected a nuclear deal with the EU-3, which consisted of Britain, France, and Germany. Rice urged Iran to go back to these negotiations, and stressed the repercussions Iran could face on the international level if it does not do so. She states, “Challenges like that of Iran are fundamental tests for the United Nations” (Rice, 2005). Rice also explicitly referred to the threat Iran poses to UN legitimacy directly after urging the country to go back to its nuclear negotiations with the EU-3. The way in which she phrased this entails that Iran must do this or it will be

responsible for putting the UN system at jeopardy. She also illustrates the threat Iran not only poses on the UN, but the “effectiveness of the global nonproliferation regime” (Rice, 2005).

Another aspect of the Bush doctrine that relates to this narrative of a growing threat is that “even defense may not be possible against terrorists or rogues” (Jervis, 2003) and because of this, “the United States must be ready to wage preventive wars and to act ‘against... emerging threats before they are fully formed,’ as Bush puts it” (Jervis, 2003).

In 2006, Bush addressed a dichotomous divide in the world between “extremists who use terror as a weapon to create fear, and moderate people who work for peace” (CNN, 2006). This brings up the question of where Iran actually falls. This question is quickly answered when Bush later states, in appealing to the Iranian public, “your rulers have chosen to deny you liberty and to use your nation’s resources to fund terrorism, and fuel extremism, and pursue nuclear weapons” (CNN, 2006), placing Iran in the category of terrorism and extremism. One of the metaphors Bush uses is the infamous “war on terror,” which is a very effective form of political communication (Bonham, Heradstveit, Sergeev 2011). Metaphors are also very effective in representing a specific cultural understanding and a shared system of belief between individuals; additionally, a metaphor “provokes affective responses because it draws on value systems... embedded in a culture where certain types of entity are associated with positive or negative experiences” (Bonham, Heradstveit, & Sergeev, 2011). Therefore, Bush’s use of these specific terms impacts the overall tone of the speech, given the focus he places on terrorism, which is always the first and major issue addressed in speeches made by Bush and his administration from 2001 until his last speech in 2008. For example, in his 2007 UN GA speech, Bush urges “every civilized nation”

(Bush, 2007), to “stand up for the people suffering under dictatorship” (Bush, 2007), listing Iran along with Syria, Belarus, and North Korea.

When referring to Iran and North Korea in his 2008 speech, Bush distinguishes between “the terrorists” and “civilized nations” (Bush, President Bush Addresses United Nations General Assembly, 2008). He began by building up the threat terrorists pose to the civilized world: “Some may be tempted to assume that the threat has receded. This would be comforting; it would be wrong” (Bush, President Bush Addresses United Nations General Assembly, 2008). Bush then continues by stating,

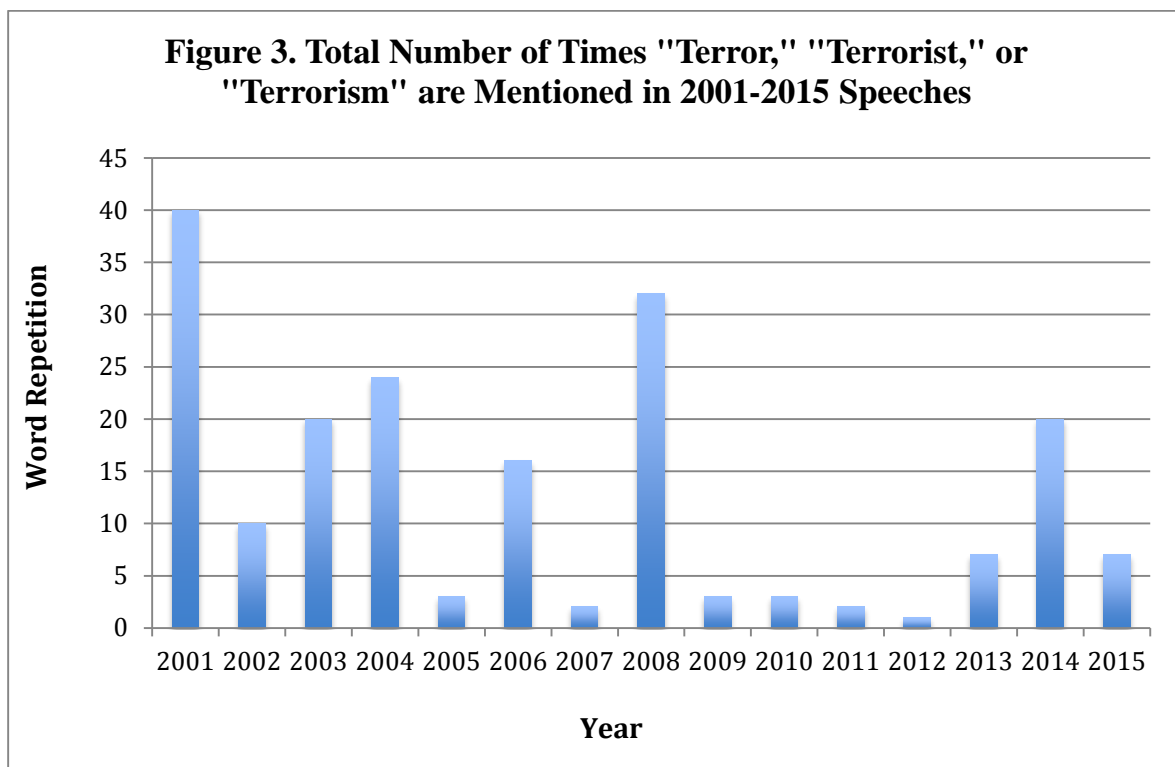
“We must continue working to deny the terrorists refuge by fully implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1540, and enforcing sanctions against North Korea and Iran. We must not relent until our people are safe from this threat to civilization” (Bush, President Bush Addresses United Nations General Assembly, 2008).

Through this, Bush revealed two important issues through the language he uses. The first issue was the use of inclusivity in his language, creating a division between ‘we’ and ‘the terrorists,’ where ‘we’ represents the civilized countries that are part of this civilization, and ‘the terrorists’ represents the uncivilized countries, mainly Iran and North Korea. This construction of language relates to Sam Keen’s description of how an enemy is portrayed as a barbarian, “rude, crude, and uncivilized” (Keen 1991). Therefore, through this, it is implied that Iran is uncivilized, which helped sustain the image of an enemy, advancing the chances of a deal between the U.S. and Iran.

Bush also stressed the importance of the UN and the existential threat it faces. Throughout his speeches, Bush does not always specify which extremists or terrorists he refers to, and seems to group together the idea of extremists and terrorists, failing to differentiate whether he means extremists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, or any other nation in

the world. In his 2008 speech, Bush labeled Iran and Syria as countries that “sponsor terror,” and although he refers to terrorists in general, the ambiguity in his words allows for the application of ‘terror,’ ‘terrorism,’ and ‘extremism’ to Iran in addition to other countries he mentions in the Middle East.

Figure 3 reveals a decrease in the use of words associated with terrorism, while the highest use of these words took place in Bush’s first and last UN GA speech in 2001 and 2008, mentioning terror, terrorist, and terrorism 40 times and 31 times, respectfully. On the other hand, Obama’s highest reference to ‘terror,’ ‘terrorist,’ or ‘terrorism’ is 20 in 2014.



Contrastingly, in addition to placing Iran at a higher importance to discuss with the UN GA, Obama also stresses the importance of peace and negotiations. Another major component of Obama’s doctrine is his approach to diplomacy and negotiations. Certain sources state Obama’s doctrine is one of targeted-killing through advanced technology, especially given his attempt to remove all American troops off the ground and use drone

strikes instead (Rohde, 2010). This is especially exemplified through the discourse in Obama's speeches to the UN GA. Most notably, in 2010, while calling for Iran to prove its nuclear ambitions are peaceful, Obama said,

“I offered the Republic of Iran an extended hand last year, and underscored that it has both rights and responsibilities as a member of the international community... Now let me be clear: the United States and the international community seek a resolution to our differences with Iran, and the door remains open to diplomacy should Iran choose to walk through it” (Obama, 2010).

Obama's use of this 'handshake' metaphor –“extended hand last year”—is used in more than just his UN GA 2010 speech. In fact, shortly after his inauguration in an interview on Al-Arabiya, Obama used this handshake metaphor when he said, “If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us” (Bonham, Heradstveit, Sergeev 2011).

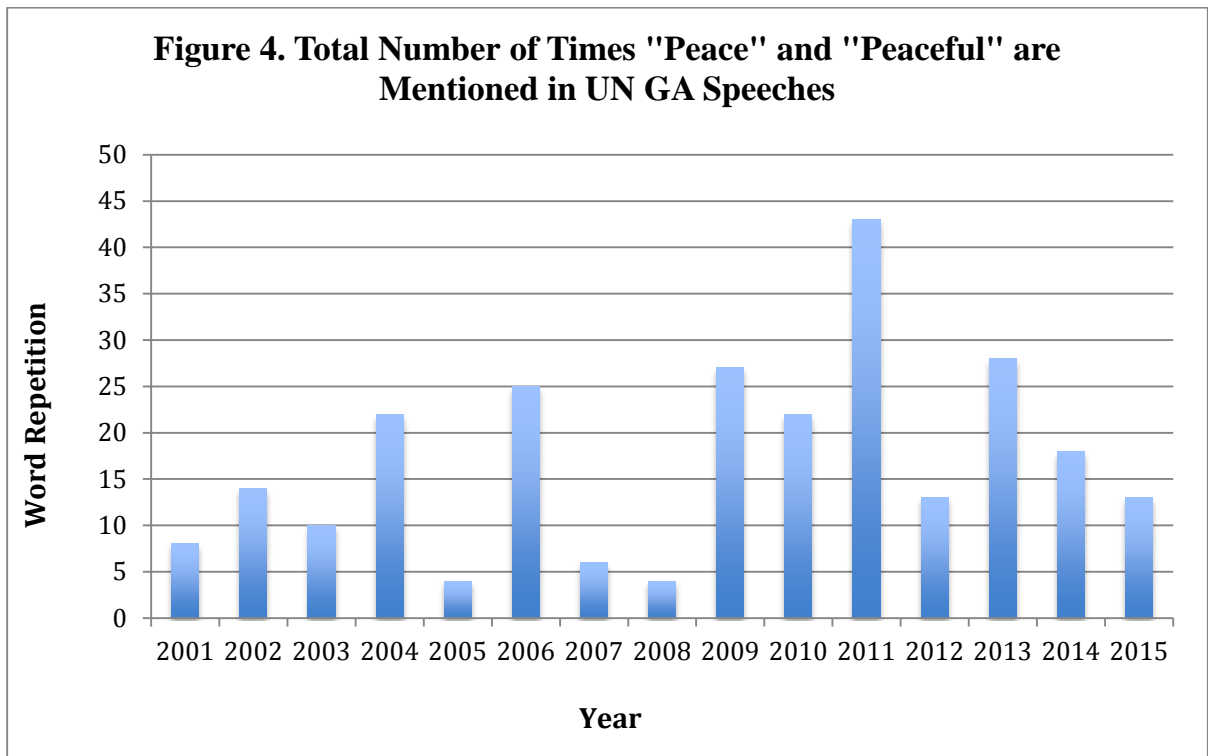
After his 2010 speech, the next year, Obama took a stronger stance on Iran as he continued to stress the importance of an agreement with Iran when he said,

“There's a future of greater opportunity for the people of these nations if their governments meet their international obligations. But if they continue down a path that is outside international law, they must be met with greater pressure and isolation” (Obama, 2011).

This concept of negotiations and diplomacy in terms of the Iranian issue was again reiterated in Obama's 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 speeches. In 2013, the two main issues the U.S. focused on were Iran's nuclear issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most notably, however, was Obama's recent 2015 speech where he said,

“For two years, the United States and our partners -- including Russia, including China -- stuck together in complex negotiations. The result is a lasting, comprehensive deal that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, while allowing it to access peaceful energy” (Obama, 2015).

Another notable difference in the switch in discourse from Bush to Obama is the drastic increase in the promotion of peace and the consistency of using the word ‘peace,’ as opposed to taking a more aggressive stance and calling for action through conflict. Figure 4 displays the number of times the word ‘peace’ was said in a speech, with a low of 4 repetitions of either ‘peace’ or ‘peaceful’ in 2005 and 2008, and the highest at 43 times in 2011—in part as a response to the Arab Spring and uprisings in the Middle East and North African region. The number of times ‘peace’ is mentioned from 2001 until 2008 is much lower than the following period.



By revealing how semantics and themes differ from one presidential administration to the other, one can begin to unravel the role semantics plays in how two countries

communicate, signal and interact with each other after a tense and distrusting history, and to what extent this changes prior to and during a historic nuclear deal. Rhetorical theorists illustrate how language can act as a persuasive tool, especially when ethos (credibility of the speaker), pathos (emotions), and logos (logic) are used. In order to have compelling speech, an individual would have to have these three components (ethos, pathos, and logos) reflected within their speech. In terms of the presidential candidates, ethos is already automatically established because a president of the United States is considered to be a credible source or speaker. Through Bush's high number of keywords such as 'terrorism,' he appeals to the pathos, by pinpointing a specific threat (i.e. terrorists), which would elicit an emotional response (i.e. fear).

Many Americans do not support the nuclear deal. Whether this is because of the long history between these two countries, the categorization of Iran as a state inflicting and sponsoring terror, or statements by American and Iranian leaders, it relates back to Burke's theory of identification. In September, there was a sharp contrast between Democrats who support the deal—approximately 42 percent—and Republicans who support the deal—about 6 percent as of September 2015 (Support for Iran Nuclear Deal Falls, 2015), which could largely relate to Burke's theory, since Democrats are more likely to identify with a Democratic leader and vice versa when it comes to Republicans. Interestingly enough, in February 2016, the number of Democrats who support the deal climbed up to 51 percent, and rose to 9 percent among Republicans (Dugan 2016). A relevant point to discuss when referencing public opinion on the Iran nuclear deal is that a significant amount of people are undecided on the issue. More Republicans are undecided on whether they support the deal—about 16 percent—than actual Republicans who support the deal. Approximately 29 percent

of Democrats are unsure as to whether they support the deal or not, which is the same percentage as Democrats who do not support the Iran deal (Support for Iran Nuclear Deal Falls, 2015). This uncertainty could relate to the stark contrast between Bush's narrative and Obama's. Because of this, in *Culture, Identity and Hegemony: Continuity and (the lack of) change in US counterterrorism policy*, Richard Jackson points out how Bush's counterterrorism policy had been engraved in the culture and identity of American society. However, this may not apply in this case with the emergence of the Iran nuclear deal.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

When it comes to Iranian discourse addressed to representatives of the international community in annual UN GA Debate speeches, although sometimes similar,

there are major changes from speeches made by Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani. The Iranian presidents' speeches, most notably, the way in which they talk about and interact with the U.S. and other 'superpowers' of the U.N. have varied from all three presidents, most drastically so, in the case of comparing Ahmadinejad's speeches with those of Iran's current president, Rouhani.

The most notable difference between these three figureheads is the contrast from Ahmadinejad's terms (2005-2013) to that of Rouhani's (2013- present). On one side, a political figure continuously brings in religious speech, and on the other, a moderate president who prioritizes the country's economy—and the implications sanctions have on it. Therefore, this change from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani is similar to that of Bush to Obama, simply because of the fact that the two latter presidents are more open to dialogue and therefore, diplomacy, and—unlike their counterparts—lack aggressive speech toward one another. Now, make no mistake, aggression and indirect messages between these two countries still persists today; however, to a much lesser degree with the instatement of a U.S. and Iranian president, who represent a significant change in their country's policy.

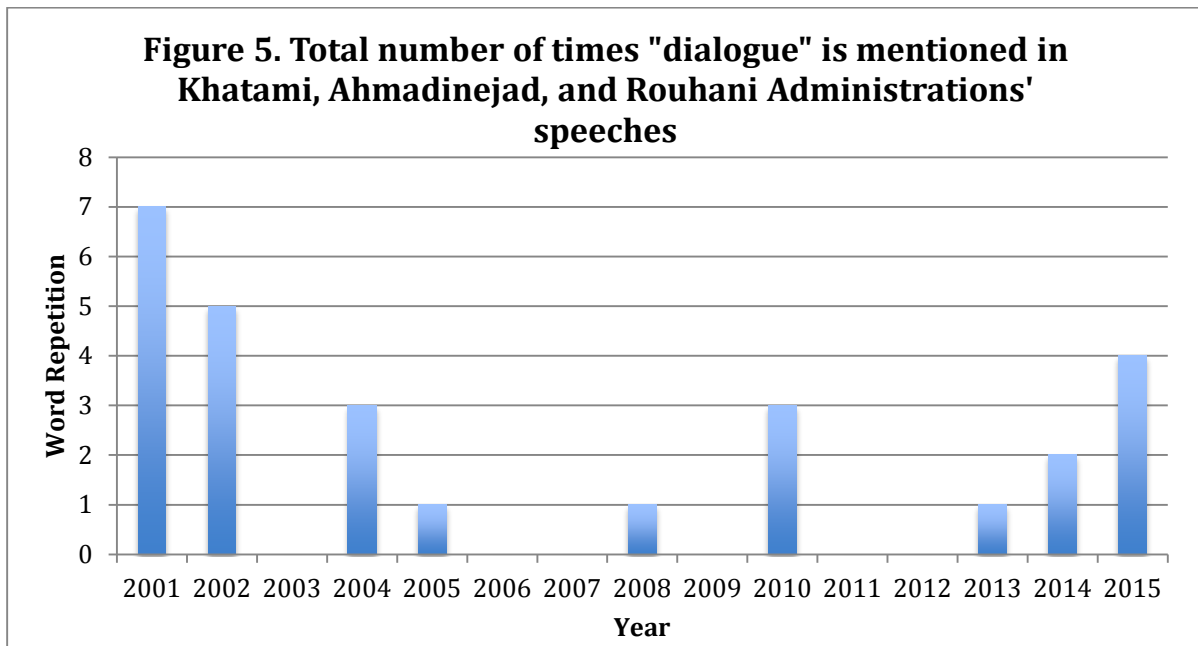
Before going into stark differences between these various speeches, it is important to note the one constant similarity they all illustrate every year at the UN GA. Consistently throughout the speeches, Iranian leaders at one point or another mention the following countries: Palestine, Iraq, and in most cases, Afghanistan. Iran focuses on these countries bringing up U.S. military intervention (or invasion) in these countries and U.S. support for Israeli intervention (or occupation) in Palestinian territories. Interestingly enough, the most striking data in Table 2 is the almost non-existent referral to the state of Israel—with the exception of Khatami's speeches. This relates to Iran's refusal to declare Israel's right

to exist, which is a major hindrance in Iran’s relations with the U.S. The U.S.’s continued role in Iraq and Afghanistan, although less prominent today, is also one of the major hindrances to the U.S. and Iran’s relations.

Table 2. The Use of Specific Terms in the Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani Administration Speeches from 2001 Until 2015					
Year	Terms				
	Iraq	Afghanistan	Palestine	Israel	Zionism/Zionist
2001	0	4	6	0	0
2002	7	13	6	0	0
2003	20	6	5	5	0
2004	11	3	10	5	0
2005	4	3	6	0	2
2006	11	0	7	0	1
2007	6	0	8	0	5
2008	4	2	6	0	6
2009	3	3	6	0	2
2010	4	4	11	0	6
2011	1	2	1	0	3
2012	1	1	1	0	2
2013	3	2	5	0	0
2014	2	2	1	0	1
2015	3	2	1	0	2

Khatami’s presidential election in 1997 was a momentous occasion that marked “Iran’s first reformist president” (Mousavian, 2014). This was evident through Khatami’s attempts to promote dialogue between Iran and the U.S., which he repeatedly announced

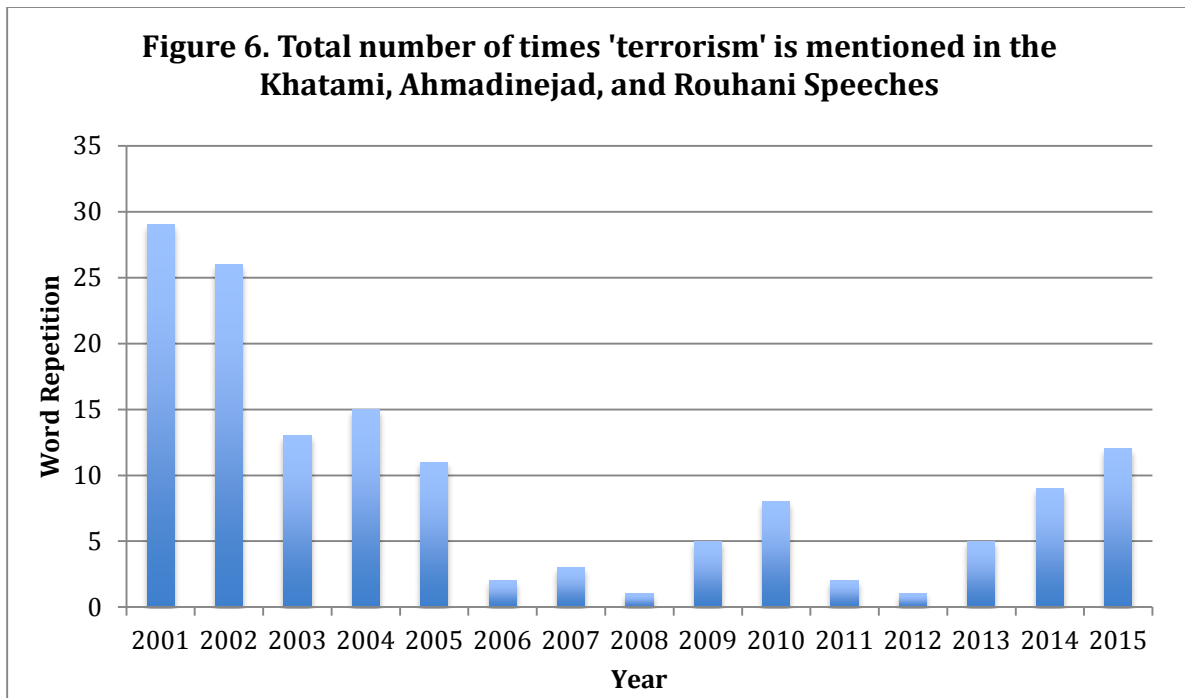
in his UN GA speeches. More importantly, Khatami’s willingness to promote dialogue with the U.S.—and international community—was exemplified through his introduction of the “Dialogue for Civilizations” in response to Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” (Mousavian, 2014). In Figure 5, one can see just how many times Khatami brings up the idea of an open dialogue, shown most prominently in Bush’s first year of speaking to the UN GA, in 2001 (Khatami, 2001).



Yet, even though Khatami was telling the U.S. that Iran was open to dialogue, other factors and topics he brought up during his speeches were alarming because of the fact that one specific subject can mean two very different things to the U.S. and Iran. Out of all three of the Iranian presidents, Khatami was significantly the most prominent person to discuss and reference the specific word ‘terrorism.’ However, the issue with this is within the word itself, since ‘terrorism’ carries subjectivity and fluidity at the tongue of its speaker. This is best described in *The “Collective Mind” of the Obama Administration: Central Concepts and Figures of Speech of Obama’s Approach to the Islamic World*, by

G. Matthew Bonham, Daniel Heradstveit, Victor M. Sergeev, where they cite the continental semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who said a sign consists of both a *signifier* and a *signified*. Therefore, in the case of the word ‘terrorist,’ “A *signifier*, the word ‘terrorist’ and a *signified* concept—a person who attacks innocent civilian targets. A sign must have a signifier and signified” (Bonham et. al, 2011). Through this, the word terrorism changes depending on who is saying it and what message they are trying to explicitly or implicitly state.

This issue of terrorism has actually been a major factor in U.S.-Iran relations since the Revolution in 1979. In 1984, the U.S. labeled Iran as a “state sponsor of terrorism” mainly for its support to militant groups such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Palestine’s Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. This however, is contested by Iran, stating that these are freedom fighters, “whose struggles are viewed as a legitimate means to liberate their lands” (Mousavian, 2014) in the case of Hamas, and to “preserve Lebanon’s integrity against Israeli threats and invasions” (Mousavian, 2014) in the case of Hezbollah. Labeling Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism “in return prompted Tehran to not only object to these accusations but also seek to uncover evidence of US aggression that would justify applying the same designation to the United States” (Mousavian, 2014). Therefore, because of this structural disproportionality between Khatami’s version of terrorism and Bush’s ‘Islamic jihadist’ version of terrorism, these two leaders cannot see eye to eye, especially in Bush’s post-September 11 world of a ‘war on terror.’



In the case of Ahmadinejad, one can make the argument that the main themes within his speeches relate to religion. This religious specificity within Ahmadinejad’s speeches does not specify a religion (i.e. Islam) but instead, uses the idea of monotheism and monotheistic religions, which according to Ahmadinejad, is the “common thread that binds us all together” (Ahmadinejad, 2005). Although he intends to use religion as a universal commonality among the international community, it actually creates a further rift between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the international community. Not only is this because of the obvious problem with mixing religion and politics and essentially, failing to separate ‘church and state,’ but his consistent religious rambles seem forced onto the rest of the UN delegates, along with the vague use of specific words, like ‘justice,’ can be completely misconstrued. Ahmadinejad’s religious rhetoric also brings up the rational choice theory and whether Ahmadinejad would be considered a rational or irrational actor.

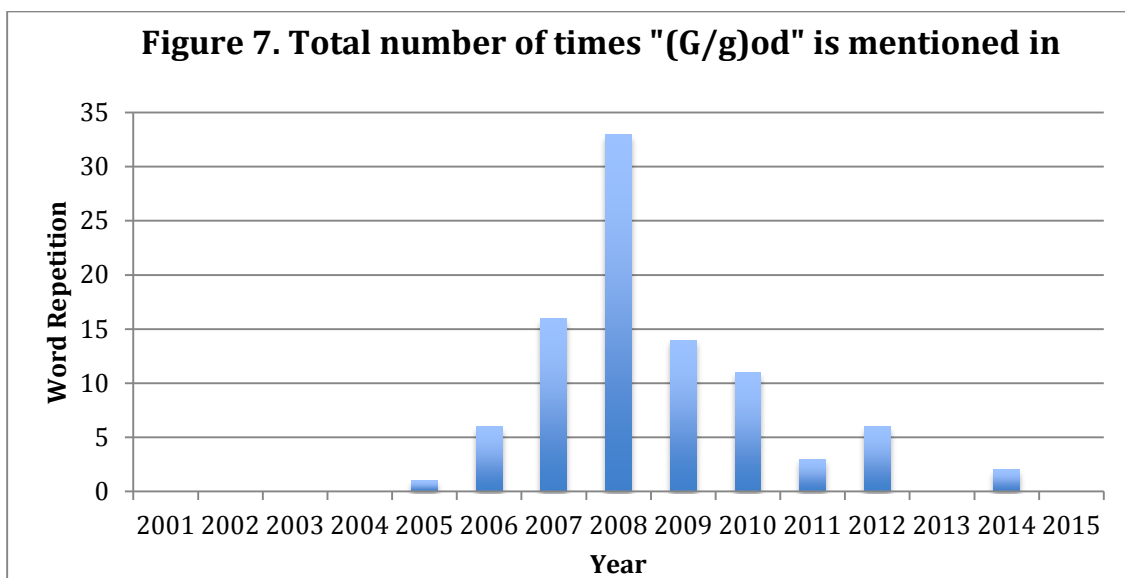
For example, in his first speech to the UN GA, Ahmadinejad begins by discussing religion and spirituality in the hope to achieve “peace and tranquility” (Ahmadinejad, 2005). However, in order for this peace and tranquility to happen, Ahmadinejad said, “The Almighty placed humans on earth to develop it, to institutionalize justice, to overcome their egoistic tendencies and to praise no lord but the Almighty.” The wording of “no lord but Almighty” seems extremely forced and very intolerant of any other belief system that defies this. That being said, Ahmadinejad’s hyper-religious rhetoric definitely does not align with Bush’s worldview, especially since, according to Bush in 2005, “All of this from a leading state sponsor of terrorism, which threatens to destroy the fragile opportunity for peace that now exists in the Middle East” (Bush, 2005). Therefore, this use of religious rhetoric—something that seems entirely out of context in the United Nations—is a major hindrance in the relations between Iran and the U.S., especially when dealing with president Bush, who referenced the word “terrorist” 40 times in his first speech of his presidency alone and a total of 97 times in all the speeches he made at the UN GA.

Year	Terms						
	Religion	God	Monotheism	Almighty	Prophets	Lord	Creator
2001	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
2002	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
2003	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
2004	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2005	3	1	2	6	3	3	1
2006	0	6	2	7	6	1	1
2007	1	16	6	3	4	1	0
2008	1	33	2	7	6	0	2
2009	1	14	1	3	6	0	0
2010	3	11	2	1	9	0	0
2011	1	3	1	1	5	0	1
2012	1	6	0	3	1	0	0
2013	7	0	0	0	0	0	1
2014	1	2	0	1	2	0	0
2015	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3 is an accurate representation of the change between Ahmadinejad’s overly religious rhetoric and that of Khatami and Rouhani. This is especially exemplified through the words, “god,” “monotheism,” “almighty,” and “prophets.”

In this case, however, one must also take into account the linguistic difference between Farsi and English, bringing in Farzad Sharifan’s research, *Figurative Language in International Political Discourse: The Case of Iran*. Sharifan explains the socio-cultural specificity of the Persian language and of the way it is actually constructed socially and culturally. Therefore, if an audience has not been exposed to and does not adequately comprehend the cultural and social links to the specific language, then how can they fully and accurately understand what a person is saying? Sharifan answers this question, stating that the social construction of language, translations, especially in the case of international

politics, can result in “considerable risks or produce substantial rewards, depending on the translation” (Sharifan, 2009). This is especially the case with Farsi, which similarly to Arabic, incorporates a literal meaning of god, but does not have the same implications and weight it would have if a phrase about god were translated in English. Since Ahmadinejad is not the sole speaker of Farsi, and since he can be compared to two other speakers, it is extremely plausible that he does use these words to a certain extreme, especially since Rouhani only says ‘god’ twice during his three years speaking at the UN GA, as opposed to Ahmadinejad’s maximum use of the word 33 times in 2008, and a total of 90 times from 2005 to 2012.



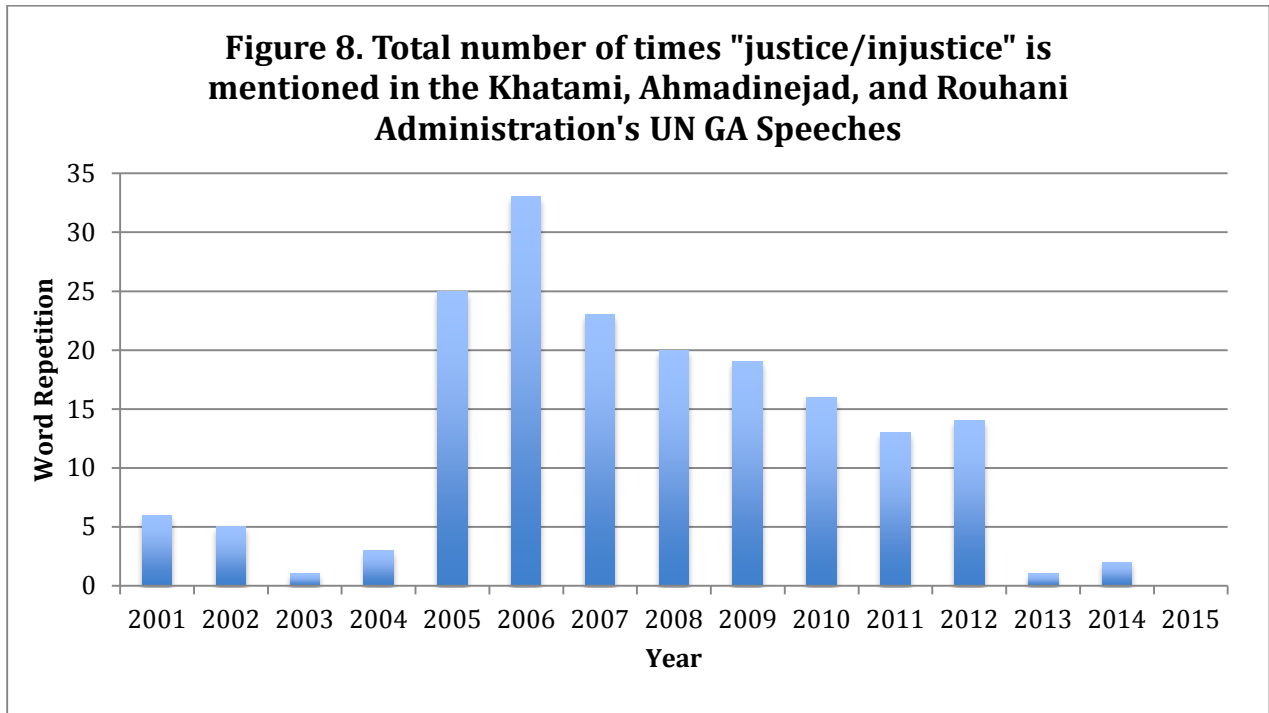
Additionally, a crucial note on the subject of religion is the importance placed on it during Ahmadinejad’s remarks. Although most of the documents that have translated the Iranian speeches begin with a prayer, this prayer is not technically included within the speech in the sense that it acts as a talking point to expand on. However, in the case of Ahmadinejad, religion is a talking point to expand on. Not only does he discuss religion, but in almost all of his speeches, his opening and closing statements mentioned religion or

god in some way. Religion and religiosity does in no way equate to something negative, and can actually be a positive thing in terms of the nuclear crisis because of the fact that many Iranian officials, and Iranian presidents within UN GA speeches, have said that the development of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons is against the fundamental values of Islam.

Ideally, this claim could be plausible and could even deter the U.S. from thinking Iran is secretly building nuclear weapons. By analyzing Ahmadinejad's speeches from 2005 to 2012, however, it is clear that this would not be the case because of the indirect aggressive comments towards mainly the U.S. and Israel—although the word Israel is never mentioned because that would in turn, be a public statement that Iran acknowledges the countries existence—which until today, it has not done.² Not only are religious beliefs assumed by Ahmadinejad when he gives his speeches, but he also makes very vague statements that can be interpreted as threats. This could not be more true through his use of the word 'justice,' as seen Figure 8. For example, Ahmadinejad calls the U.S. out when he said, “at least one permanent member of the Security Council has always been a party to a conflict. When both the judge and the prosecutor are on the same side of a conflict, how can one expect justice” (Ahmadinejad, 2010). This seems pretty fair to state, especially with the U.S. track record of military involvement in the Middle East. What is concerning, though, is when Iran also accuses the U.S. of an “unforgivable crime” because of the “occupation of other countries under the pretext of freedom and democracy.” In

² Exactly 18 out of 22 members of the Arab League do not recognize the state of Israel or its right to exist. Since achieving a nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been consistently stating that “any final agreement with Iran will include a clear and unambiguous Iranian recognition of Israel's right to exist” (Tharoor, 2015).

this case, what kind of justice prevails when it is an ‘unforgivable’ crime?



These threats reveal the main reasons for the U.S.’s lack of trust towards Iran. For example, in Seyed Hossein Mousavian’s book, *Iran and the United States: An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (2014), Mousavian recounts a conversation he had with “a former American politician” who noted two major hindrances in U.S. relations with Ahmadinejad specifically. The first issue, is that he is “presenting himself as an ‘unstable and unpredictable’ man” (Mousavian, 2014), which essentially puts his rationality in question. Mousavian’s source also said one of the main reasons for Ahmadinejad’s perceived instability and unpredictability was the contradiction between some of his actions and his statements at the UN. For example, Ahmadinejad sent Obama a congratulatory letter on his election, to which Obama ignored and wrote a letter to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. However, that year, at the UN GA, Iran condemned the

U.S. (in the form of addressing the U.S. and other major ‘Powers’) as “domineering” and “corrupt” powers that “oppose the progress of other nations.” Ahmadinejad also criticized the U.S.’s influence in country’s politics when he said, “by starting civil wars in large counties, including the Sudan, the disintegration of those countries is planned in order to serve the interests of some corrupt powers. When there is national resistance, the leaders of the resistance are put under pressure by legal mechanisms created by the very same Powers” (Ahmadinejad, 2008). This however, does not come close to being as aggressive as when Ahmadinejad referred to the fall of the “American empire” (Ahmadinejad, 2008). Although Ahmadinejad openly stated that he was ready to enter dialogue with the U.S., his ominously threatening statement seems to contradict this willingness to cooperate in talks.

“Those hegemonic Powers... have misrepresented Iran’s healthy and fully safeguarded technological endeavors in the nuclear field as a pursuit of nuclear weapons... [Iran] is presenting in good faith its proposal for constructive interaction and a just dialogue. However, if some try to impose their will on the Iranian people by resorting to a language of force and threats against Iran, we will reconsider our entire approach to the nuclear issue” (Ahmadinejad, 2005).

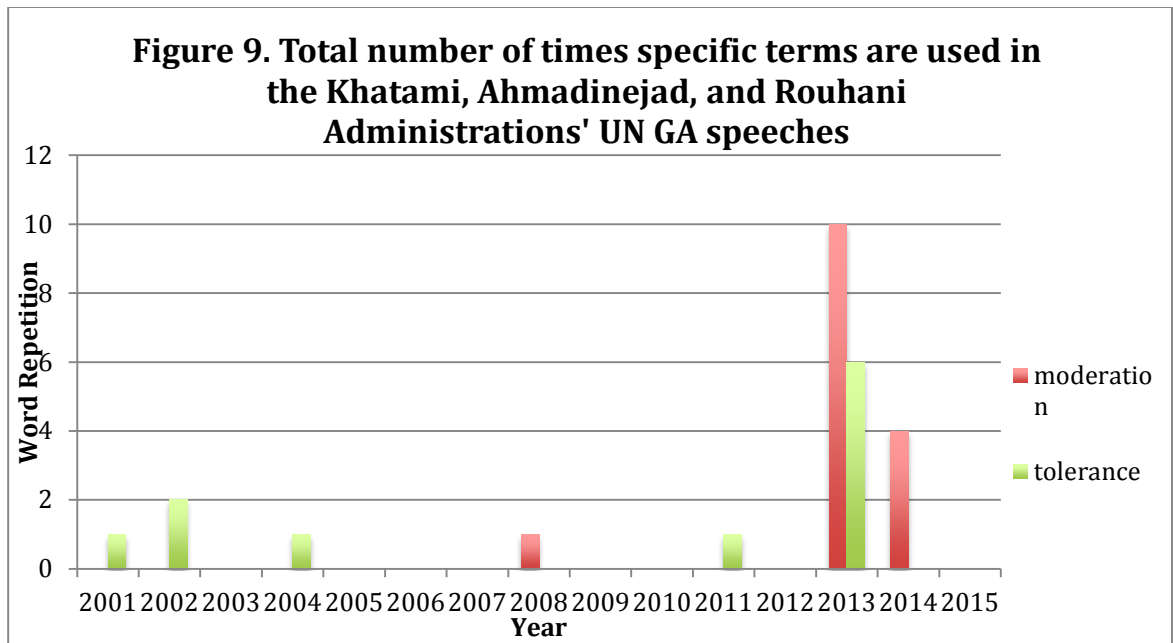
This is not a rare statement from Ahmadinejad, who made a similar statement in 2009 after explaining how Marxism is “history now” and “the unhindered growth of capitalism will certainly meet the same fate because, based on the divine tradition of a principle in the Holy Koran, the deceitful one, like a bubble on the surface of water, will disappear. Only that which eternally serves the interests of human societies survives” (Ahmadinejad, 2009).

Hassan Rouhani’s election to the presidential seat in June of 2013 symbolized a

possible change in Iran's political, economic, and cultural structures that in turn, brought hope of normalized relations with the rest of the international community—most particularly, the West (Hunter, 2014). Rouhani is a moderate politician and respected cleric in Iran; this modernity was definitely evident in Rouhani's three speeches to the UN GA, which were an extreme contrast to the hostile rhetoric within Ahmadinejad's speeches. Another change between these two presidents is their perceived rationality. Ahmadinejad's rationality in regards to the U.S. and Western powers was questioned through both of his presidential terms. With Rouhani's case, however, this was the exact opposite, while his rationality was exemplified through the speeches he made. Starting with his first one.

“The recent election in Iran represents a clear, living example of the wise choice for hope, rationality and moderation by the great people of Iran. The realization of democracy consistent with religion and the peaceful transfer of executive power showed that Iran is an anchor of stability in an ocean of regional instabilities” (Rouhani, 2013).

When measuring the actual way in which Rouhani illustrates his moderate politics, the change from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani is shown in Figure 9 by revealing how many times each leader used the terms, “moderate” and “tolerant.” By Rouhani providing a message to the international community that he is a moderate Iranian leader that is tolerant of others while simultaneously not including significantly hostile comments within his speeches.



Rouhani’s speeches not only reveal his moderate worldview, but also give off a genuine aim to cooperate with the international community and cease the isolation Iran has endured for the last several decades—without continuous contradictions as shown in Ahmadinejad’s speeches. Rouhani continuously attempts to reassure the international community of Iran’s peaceful purposes in the general sense and in terms of nuclear advancement. His attempt to promote a message of peace is shown when he said,

“Violence and extremism leave no space for understanding and moderation as the necessary foundations of the collective life of human beings and modern society. Intolerance is the predicament of our time. We need to promote and reinforce tolerance in the light of the religious teachings and appropriate cultural and political approaches” (Rouhani, 2013).

Unlike Ahmadinejad, Rouhani’s statement is not followed by an indirect threat to the U.S. or other Western powers—a very significant factor when determining whether or

not to allow a country to develop nuclear capabilities. Additionally, it incorporates inclusivity through the referral of “we” as the international community.

Equally important is Rouhani’s emphasis on the implications sanctions have had on Iran’s economy and the “common people” (Rouhani, 2013) of Iran, who have been punished for the actions and politics of their leaders.

“Unjust sanctions...are intrinsically inhumane and against peace...Those sanctions are violent, pure and simple, whether called smart or otherwise, unilateral or multilateral. They violate inalienable human rights, inter alia, the right to peace, the right to development, the right to access to health and education, and, above all, the right to life. Sanctions, beyond any and all rhetoric, cause belligerence, warmongering and human suffering” (Rouhani, 2013).

VIII. Conclusion:

The United Nations General Assembly is a symbolic attempt of bringing in all representatives from the corners of the globe. During this annual event, countries engage in conversations, attempting to address issues they have faced and continue to face within their own countries and as members of the international community. The changes within these modes of communication are extremely important to analyze because they provide cues and signs of the messages exchanged between UN member states.

Dating back through history, the U.S. and Iran have had numerous negative encounters with each other, further hindering their already unstable relations. More recently, the nuclear issue and Iran's nuclear capability has been a hot topic of debate and one of the main hindering factors in their relations. However, as of July 2015, the P5+1 and Iran have come to a nuclear agreement. By investigating 2001 to 2015 UN GA speeches from Iranian and American presidential administrations, this research concludes that specific themes and particular word choice reveal important changes within these countries' discourse. Moreover, the lead up to the nuclear deal changed from Bush's confrontational language and unilateral approach to Obama's attempt at diplomacy and promotion of peace, which may have helped foster a nuclear deal, in addition to a change from Khatami's promotion of dialogue to Ahmadinejad's religious rhetoric to Rouhani's rational modernity. More specifically Bush's hostile division of 'good versus evil' to Obama's approach to diplomacy and the prioritization of Iran and the Iranian nuclear issue, as well as Ahmadinejad's threats and religious themes to Rouhani's moderate focus on the negative impact sanctions have on the general Iranian public are major thematic changes in U.S.- Iran relations.

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