

Media coverage of Iran's nuclear program

An analysis of U.S. and U.K. coverage, 2009-2012



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Forward

As retrospect has revealed, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was based on an egregious misconception of that country's ability to wield "weapons of mass destruction." Media coverage at the time generally failed to distinguish the widely differing types of weapons included in that category. And it did not adequately report or credit the assessments of Iraq's nuclear capability provided by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that subsequently proved to be accurate. In the aftermath of the invasion, media scholar Susan Moeller prepared an evaluation of media coverage in an effort to encourage constructive reflection on the role it had played in the episode.

The current situation in Iran is significantly but not categorically different. Iran has acquired much greater capability to enrich uranium than Iraq ever possessed, and that is the primary determinant of the ability to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran's uranium enrichment activities are being monitored by the IAEA, and their reports document the accumulation of relevant material. Those reports reveal that Iran has not yet produced uranium enriched to the level necessary to generate a nuclear explosion but that the capacity to do so has been established. Unless the inspection process is terminated, as it was in Iraq, or unless some unknown and uninspected enrichment capacity exists, an effort by Iran to produce weapons grade material would be detected several months before enough had been accumulated to enable the fabrication of a nuclear weapon. During that time Iran's enrichment activities would be exposed to attack. Plausible attacks could disrupt and delay Iran's production of weapons grade material but could not decisively and indefinitely eliminate it.

Under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has the right to enrich uranium but also a legal obligation not to acquire nuclear weapons. In recent years Iran has repeatedly asserted the right to enrich, and has also repeatedly denied any intention to acquire nuclear weapons. The legal obligation not to do so could be removed by formal withdrawal from the NPT, but the political and moral declarations of intent that Iran has issued are not as easily renounced. As a practical matter, unprovoked reversal of the legal obligation and of the declared intention not to build nuclear weapons would establish plausible justification for disruptive attack. Conversely, an attack undertaken despite the declared intention and without decisive evidence that Iran is producing weapons grade material would establish plausible justification for Iran to leave the NPT and acquire nuclear weapons as a measure of deterrent protection. In this situation, legal obligation and legitimate security interest are both quite well defined.

But, of course, judgments about justification and intention are entangled in presumptions of underlying motive and are affected by attitudes nurtured over three decades of predominant hostility not mitigated by normal diplomatic interaction. It is fair to say that the principal protagonists in the dispute over Iran's enrichment activities do not readily understand each other.

With that circumstance and the memory of recent misjudgment in mind, this study examines relevant media reporting during four time periods when the issues in question were attracting public notice. The purpose is to summarize the content of reporting and to encourage informed assessment as to how adequate it has been.

John Steinbruner
Director
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Executive summary

The manner in which news media frame their coverage of Iran’s nuclear program is critically important to public understanding and to policy decisions that will determine whether the dispute can be resolved without war. News coverage of the lead-up to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and of the justifications of that invasion was found to have had a profound, distorting effect on public understanding and the decision to go to war. Is news media coverage having a similar effect on U.S. and international discussions about Iran’s nuclear program? If so, how exactly is the framing of the dispute and the broader approach of news media to covering this issue affecting the choices available to policy makers? And how is coverage likely to affect the dispute’s outcome?

To answer these and other questions, the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) analyzed a sample of the newspaper coverage from six influential, English-language newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Independent*—published during the past four years. By focusing on time periods in which significant events in the timeline of Iran’s nuclear program and the international response to it took place, this study identified several patterns in newspaper coverage. The study found that:

- Newspaper coverage focused on the “he said/she said” aspects of the policy debate, without adequately explaining the fundamental issues that should have been informing assessments—such as Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions, the influence of U.S., European, Iranian, and Israeli security strategies, and the impact of the nuclear nonproliferation regime.
- When newspaper coverage did address Iranian nuclear intentions and capabilities, it did so in a manner that lacked precision, was inconsistent over time, and failed to provide adequate sourcing and context for claims. This led to an inaccurate picture of the choices facing policy makers.
- Government officials, particularly U.S. government officials, were the most frequently quoted or relied-on sources in coverage of Iran’s nuclear program. This tendency focused attention on a narrow set of policy options and deemphasized other potential approaches to the dispute.
- Newspaper coverage generally adopted the tendency of U.S., European, and Israeli officials to place on Iran the burden to resolve the dispute over its nuclear program, failing to acknowledge the roles of these other countries in the dispute.

- A plurality of newspaper articles took the approach of examining the domestic political and international diplomatic angles of the larger story, contributing to the heavy reliance on official sources and a focus on official policy proscriptions. Commentary and opinion articles relating to Iran’s nuclear program made up a larger than typical share of the coverage, demonstrating the intense interest focused on the topic and opening the public debate to a range of viewpoints.
- Newspaper coverage paid insufficient attention to the broader context—particularly, the security concerns of the United States, Iran, Israel, and European states, and the effect of domestic politics within these same countries—that influences what specific actors say or do about Iran’s nuclear program at different times. This obscured the substantial confusion about national motivations and made it difficult to conceive of and debate consensual solutions to the dispute.
- Coverage of Iran’s nuclear program reflected and reinforced the negative sentiments about Iran that are broadly shared by U.S., European, and Israeli publics. This contributed to misunderstandings about the interests involved and narrowed the range of acceptable outcomes.

In general, these characteristics led newspapers to frame their coverage of Iran’s nuclear program in a manner that emphasized official narratives of the dispute and a relatively narrow range of policy choices available to officials. By not consistently describing the complex web of international relationships, security concerns, and intervening political factors in sufficient detail, newspaper coverage further privileged official narratives and policy preferences. This makes it likely that the policies enacted and under consideration by policy makers—coercive diplomacy and war—remain the most likely outcome of the dispute. In this way, news coverage of Iran’s nuclear program is reminiscent of news coverage of the run-up to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. News coverage has the potential to play a significant, constructive role in finding a lasting resolution to the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program, but journalists and editors first need to address the tendencies present in their current coverage of the topic.

Introduction

Iran's development of a nuclear program and the international response to it occupy a place of particular prominence in the eyes of U.S. and foreign governments, and the public as a whole. And for good reason: The dispute over the program poses fundamental questions about the nature of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and its outcome could have large repercussions on both regional and international security. Add to this the longstanding grievances between the Iranian and U.S. governments and the potential for miscalculation, and it is easy to understand why this issue is seen as so important.

Public understanding of this issue, as well as most foreign affairs issues, is dependent on the reporting of news media.¹ News outlets (newspapers, television news stations, internet publications, etc.) deliver to citizens information about happenings from which they are far removed (physically and culturally), and they also play an essential role in framing public understanding; that is, news outlets play a role in "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution."² This framing function is particularly important regarding public understanding of Iran's nuclear program, because a majority of the public and of policy makers already holds negative views of Iran that can bias policy choices if they are not critically examined.³ Moreover, the topic requires technical and highly specialized knowledge, a fact that places an additional translational burden on news coverage.

Criticism of news coverage about government claims of weapons of mass destruction prior to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has led newspapers to be more vigilant about coverage of Iran's nuclear program. Post-war studies of news coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War found an over-reliance on White House sources, the use of imprecise language to describe the threat from various types of weapons of mass destruction, a focus on the agenda and policy prescriptions of senior U.S. officials, and news coverage's relatively narrow framing of events.⁴ Some observers maintain that coverage of Iran's nuclear program is significantly better than pre-Iraq invasion news coverage, while others argue that it is still flawed in ways that could have serious unintended consequences.⁵

¹ See Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2008, vol. 11, pp. 39-65. Though Baum and Potter acknowledge the competing theories about how news media affect public perception on foreign policy issues, they conclude, "As the primary link between leaders and the public, the media are a central actor in the foreign policy marketplace."

² This definition of media framing is advanced by media scholar Robert Entman in Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 5.

³ Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center, "A Global 'No' to Nuclear Armed Iran," May 2012. According to this report large majorities of Americans and Europeans have an unfavorable opinion of Iran.

⁴ Susan D. Moeller, "Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction," CISSM Report, March 9, 2004.

⁵ Arthur S. Brisbane, "Lessons of Another War," *New York Times*, March 10, 2012; Stephen Walt, "Top Ten Media Failures in the Iran War Debate," *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 11, 2012.

This study finds many of the same tendencies in recent newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program, although not to such an extreme extent. The question then becomes, how precisely is news coverage framing this issue? And what effect could media coverage have on policy outcomes? If, for instance, the public were to perceive Iranian nuclear capabilities as presenting an imminent or existential threat, then preemptively attacking Iran could be construed by government officials as militarily necessary and morally acceptable. Likewise, if Iran is perceived as implacably hostile and uninterested in resolving the dispute peacefully, then it becomes easier for the public and policy makers to dismiss attempts to engage in sustained diplomatic negotiations as simply allowing Iran to stall for time while it improves its nuclear capabilities.

This study examines how coverage by leading newspapers in the United States and Britain is framing and influencing public understanding of the issues at stake and affecting the policies and positions taken by the parties involved. While it does note some significant differences among newspapers, it does not evaluate individual outlets' coverage or call out those who succeed or fail in certain respects. Before delving into its findings, the study outlines key details about the policy context surrounding the dispute about Iran's nuclear program so that news coverage can be thoroughly analyzed. A methodology section briefly outlines the study's approach to analyzing newspaper coverage; additional information about the methodology, the sample of articles that were selected, and how the articles were analyzed is available in Appendices A and B.

The main sections of this study present the findings about how newspapers covered the dispute about Iran's nuclear program. These findings select examples of the larger patterns that are apparent from examining all of the study's sample time periods. A complete, chronological analysis of the time periods is available in Appendix C.

Policy context

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis, U.S.-Iranian relations have been mired in animosity and distrust, with particular attention paid to the proliferation risks associated with Iran's nuclear program. But that was not always the case. As part of its longstanding support of the Shah of Iran, the United States supplied Tehran with a nuclear research reactor in 1967 and negotiated a nuclear cooperation agreement in the late 1970s that would have provided significant U.S. nuclear assistance.

The nuclear cooperation agreement took several years to negotiate, in part, because the Shah insisted that Iran had the “right” to the full complement of nuclear fuel cycle facilities—including uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing capabilities.⁶ Indeed, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Iran ratified in 1970, and Iran's comprehensive safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was concluded in 1974, Iran's “inalienable right . . . to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination” was explicitly protected in international law.⁷ As a party to the NPT, Iran forswore developing nuclear weapons, and the “NPT nuclear weapon states” (the United States, Britain, France, China, and Russia) pledged to work toward “effective measures relating to . . . nuclear disarmament,” and to facilitate the peaceful uses of nuclear energy in Iran and other “non-nuclear weapon states.”

Though the nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and Iran was completed in the late 1970s, the 1979 Iranian Revolution intervened, and the agreement was never signed. Iranian-U.S. relations deteriorated after the revolution. The lingering effects of the hostage crisis and presumed Iranian support for the 1983 bombing of U.S. and French barracks in Lebanon contributed to tensions, for example, as did U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and the 1988 U.S. shoot-down of an Iranian passenger jet.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw significant shifts in the nuclear nonproliferation regime: The role of nuclear weapons was diminished with the end of the Cold War, and flaws in IAEA Safeguards were laid bare by Iraq's covert nuclear weapons program. By the time Iran was revealed to be building an as-yet-undeclared uranium enrichment plant and developing a heavy-water nuclear reactor in the early 2000s (under its Safeguards Agreement, Iran was not yet obligated to disclose these under-construction facilities), the IAEA had already approved a voluntary model Additional Protocol, which expanded its ability to confirm that a state didn't have undeclared nuclear facilities and programs. Iran signed, but didn't ratify, an Additional

⁶ William Burr, “A Brief History of U.S.-Iranian Nuclear Negotiations,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 2009, p. 21.

⁷ See the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which is available, among other places on the U.S. State Department website: <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/trty/16281.htm>.

Protocol in 2003 in response to concerns about the nature of its nuclear program. Even though it has never ratified the protocol, between 2003 and 2006, Iran adhered to its provisions.

Concerned about Iranian compliance with some of its reporting obligations as an NPT non-nuclear weapon state, the United States, European states, and others have sought to limit Iranian nuclear capabilities, specifically its ability to enrich uranium, beyond what is permitted under the NPT. In support of this effort, in 2006 the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1696, which called on Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment program. These countries and the IAEA have also worked to ensure that Iran has not engaged and could not engage in prohibited nuclear activities without IAEA detection. Iran has agreed to a range of inspections and provided additional information to satisfy most of the concerns raised by the IAEA, but it has steadfastly asserted its “right” to the full complement of nuclear fuel cycle capabilities, including uranium enrichment, that are permitted under the NPT.⁸

While the United States and its allies have been pressuring Iran to accept additional restrictions on its nuclear activities, they have tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, condoned other states’ advanced nuclear activities—including uranium enrichment—some of which have flouted nonproliferation norms. Included among the countries to have benefited from tacit U.S. and international acceptance throughout the years are three countries that have not joined the NPT: India, Pakistan, and Israel—all of which have sizeable nuclear weapons arsenals. Japan and Brazil are examples of NPT non-nuclear weapon states that have the capacity to enrich uranium or produce plutonium. This simultaneous acceptance of some states’ nuclear weapons activities and attempted denial of Iranian “rights” to engage in dual-use activities has led to widespread accusations of international double standards and unfair treatment.

The animosity and mistrust among Iran, the United States, some European states, Israel, and others; the mixed record of Iranian compliance with its legal obligations; the regular calls for Iran to accept exceptional restrictions on its nuclear activities; and other factors have made it extraordinarily difficult for the parties involved to find an outcome to the dispute about Iran’s nuclear program that is acceptable to everyone. The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush initially chose not to actively engage Iran in resolving the dispute, leaving it to Britain, France, and Germany (the “EU-3”) to negotiate a resolution with Iran. During these negotiations, Iran temporarily suspended its uranium enrichment and offered steps to address proliferation concerns, but negotiations stalled over whether Iran could resume enrichment as part of the deal and how much economic and technological benefit would accompany nuclear cooperation. The Bush administration eventually joined the negotiations, but no final agreement was reached.

⁸ Paul Kerr, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: Tehran’s Compliance with International Obligations,” Congressional Research Service Report (R40094), September 18, 2012, p. 1. Of the outstanding questions about Iran’s nuclear program and capabilities that were raised in INFCIRC/711, dated August 27, 2007, most have since been resolved, though the IAEA and others still have few questions about potential military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program.

Prospects for a negotiated solution were expected to improve with the 2008 U.S. election of President Barack Obama, who promised to engage Iran directly. Despite intermittent attempts at diplomacy, the Obama administration and the governments of the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany) have thus far not managed to address the fundamental issues of the dispute about Iran's nuclear program. As such, they have turned increasingly to punitive economic sanctions to pressure Iran to comply with their demands. Israeli leaders and some American politicians and pundits have also called for military strikes to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities, with the Obama administration making more subtle threats about "all options" being available.

Pressuring Iran with economic sanctions and trying to force Tehran to accept the terms of agreement dictated by the United States and others has thus far been unsuccessful. Military attack might prevent Iran from developing certain nuclear capabilities in the short term, but it would violate international norms about the legitimate use of force, cause civilian and military casualties, and make it more, rather than less, likely that Iran would seek nuclear weapons in the future.

Some policy experts and government officials have raised a range of possible policy options, besides coercive diplomacy or war, some of which could have a higher probability of achieving a broader, longer-lasting outcome from the dispute. The United States, its allies, and Iran could take the time to negotiate an agreement that accounts for all parties' concerns and grievances and leaves all involved with a greater sense of security, albeit still an imperfect one. This agreement could be strictly focused on nuclear issues or it could address a broader agenda. Or governments could accept the status quo, including the risk of Iran developing nuclear weapons, knowing full well that Iran would not be able to use, or threaten to use, them. Pursuing any of these latter options would necessitate understanding Iranian strategy, politics, and preferences in greater detail and differentiating between a range of Iranian messages—some meant for domestic audiences and some meant for international audiences; some from Iranian politicians, dissidents, or ex-patriates who have particular stakes in the dispute and some from those who represent the official government position.

Methodology

This study took a relatively narrow approach to analyzing news media coverage of Iran’s nuclear program and focused on how public perceptions are being informed by English-language newspapers with a range of orientations. It performed a thematic analysis of six influential newspapers during four three-week time periods using a mix of qualitative analytical methods that mirror the approaches taken in similarly focused studies of news media coverage.⁹ In addition to doing a detailed qualitative analysis of the selected articles, this study analyzed certain quantifiable aspects of the coverage, including the types of articles published, the quantity and diversity of sources used, and the frequency of certain words and phrases in the coverage.

This study examined the news and opinion coverage of six English-language newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Financial Times* (U.K., U.S., and Asia editions), the *Guardian* (U.K. edition), and the *Independent* (U.K. edition). These newspapers were selected because they include some of the largest circulation newspapers in the United States, as well as those widely seen to have robust and agenda-setting coverage on foreign policy issues in the United States and Britain. Each of the papers also represents a distinct political and ideological perspective—including perspectives that favor international intervention in Iran and those that put more faith in international institutions to address the dispute. Three British newspapers were included to allow for a comparison between the newspapers of the United States and a close ally, and to identify the effects of U.S. papers’ heightened coverage of U.S. domestic politics. The combination of analytical methods undertaken as part of this study required limiting the selection to a manageable number of newspapers that fit these criteria.

Selected time periods
Period 1: September 22, 2009 – October 13, 2009
Period 2: June 7, 2010 – June 28, 2010
Period 3: February 16, 2012 – March 8, 2012
Period 4: September 10, 2012 – October 1, 2012

The study looked at sample time periods during the last four years in which significant events in the timeline of Iran’s nuclear program and the international response to it took place. In the hopes of capturing a range of pre- and post-event coverage, the study looked specifically at periods of three weeks in length. To examine ways that the coverage might have shifted over time, selected periods were distributed throughout the first term of the Obama administration.

⁹ See for example, Susan D. Moeller, “Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction.”

The first time period stretched from September 22, 2009 through October 13, 2009. This period included the public revelation of a new Iranian uranium enrichment facility, the Fordow Enrichment Facility, near Qom, Iran; and the subsequent U.S.-Iranian negotiations in early October 2009, which led to the short-lived fuel-swap deal.

The second time period included the three weeks between June 7, 2010 and June 28, 2010. During this period, the U.N. Security Council, the European Union, and U.S. lawmakers debated and agreed to new rounds of economic sanctions on Iran in response to its nuclear activities. The passage of these sanctions also signaled the failure of a last-minute attempt by Brazil and Turkey to resurrect a fuel-swap deal with Iran in hopes of laying the ground work for more comprehensive negotiations.

The third time period, from February 16, 2012 to March 8, 2012, included attempts to restart international negotiations about Iran's nuclear program. During this period, officials and analysts also began talking more regularly and publicly about the possibility of militarily attacking Iran, an increase that coincided with the primary campaign stage of the U.S. presidential election and the 2012 policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. This period also included Iranian parliamentary elections.

The fourth time period, from September 10, 2012 to October 1, 2012, coincided with the release of a new IAEA resolution on safeguards in Iran, the annual U.N. General Assembly meeting, which drew heightened attention to the dispute about Iran's nuclear program, and the final stages of the U.S. presidential election, in which U.S. policy in the Middle East (in Libya, Syria, and Iran) was questioned.

A brief analysis of the coverage of a single newspaper, the *New York Times*, over the entire four-year period, confirmed that the selected time periods were indeed periods of heightened coverage.

Finding #1: A policy debate adrift from the underlying facts

Much of the newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear activities focused on the official policy debates regarding Iran’s nuclear activities and what the international response should be. This approach generally overlooked assessments of Iranian nuclear capabilities and intentions and the uncertainties about each. It also failed to put into context official pronouncements in instances where consensus facts about Iranian capabilities were available or to put Iran’s nuclear activities into the context of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime.

As the U.N. Security Council debated an additional round of punitive sanctions against Iran in the first part of 2010, U.S. officials and others understandably emphasized the rationale for those sanctions and why they thought they were the right policy approach to confronting the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. News coverage of these events didn’t expand on these arguments or put them into context. The assumption was that Iran’s nuclear behavior was sufficiently aberrant to warrant such a response, and coverage made this assumption without examining in depth the specifics of Iranian nuclear capabilities. A June 10, 2010 *Washington Post* article on the passage of the sanctions makes no mention of what Iran did or didn’t do to warrant the additional sanctions, referring only to the “future of [Iran’s] nuclear program.” A June 9, 2010 *New York Times* article discussing the impending sanctions notes only that, “Despite the sanctions already in place, Iran is enriching uranium at ever-higher levels and building new centrifuges to create larger stockpiles.”

These limited references to Iran’s nuclear activities make no mention of the fact that Iran’s nuclear activities are under strict international monitoring or that they conform to widely accepted nuclear nonproliferation requirements—two details that are important to understanding the broader policy discussion. In addition, neither the U.S. intelligence community nor the IAEA has concluded that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program or that it intends to develop nuclear weapons. Some foreign intelligence officials think differently, but the difference of opinion suggests that particular care is needed when describing Iranian nuclear capabilities and how the fundamentals of Iran’s nuclear program should affect U.S. and U.N. policy choices.

The tendency of newspapers to gloss over the technical details of Iranian nuclear capabilities also surfaced in coverage of the February 2012 IAEA report on Iran’s enrichment activities. The IAEA report found that Iran was expanding its stockpiles of uranium enriched “up to 20 percent U-235.”¹⁰ Newspaper coverage of this development almost exclusively saw it as an indication of Iran’s desire to develop a break-out nuclear weapons capability:

¹⁰ IAEA Director General, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of

New suspicions over Iran's nuclear ambitions emerged Friday. In a report, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, said Iran has increased its stockpile of uranium that is enriched beyond the purity level needed for civilian power reactors, and begun producing it under a mountain of rock and soil that some U.S. and Israeli officials say could be immune from attack. Iran denies it is trying to build atomic weapons. (*Wall Street Journal*, 2/25/12)

Also:

Iran has dramatically accelerated its production of enriched uranium in recent months while refusing to cooperate with an investigation of evidence that it may have worked on designing a bomb, a confidential report by the UN nuclear watchdog says. (*Guardian*, 2/25/12)

While this is one possible explanation of Iranian advances, it is not the only possible explanation. The February 25 *Guardian* article referred to Iran's claim that "it needs the [higher enrichment] material for its research reactor, which produces medical isotopes," but then immediately counters this statement with the claims of "Western governments" that the stockpile of 20 percent U-235 "brings [Iran] significantly closer to weapons-grade fissile material." Does Iran need to make its own research reactor fuel? Does it have domestic political reasons for advancing its nuclear program in this way? Is Iran violating its nonproliferation commitments by enriching to that level? How much closer does Iran's enrichment activity move it toward "weapons-grade fissile material"? To answer these questions, the newspaper coverage would have had to dig deeper into the fundamental issues at the core of the dispute over Iran's nuclear program and move beyond the claims of the parties involved and the immediate debates about what to do next.

The release of the February 2012 IAEA report coincided with an uptick in U.S. and Israeli threats to militarily attack Iran and with an Iranian proposal to restart international negotiations (see p. C-23). While covering these events and statements, newspaper coverage moved even further from the underlying issues in the dispute. Rather than framing the discussion of threats and negotiations in terms of Iranian capabilities and intentions, the international laws that govern nuclear development and military action, and the deep mistrust among the parties, the coverage focused on who was winning political battles among the leaders involved. Rather than exploring the policy approaches that were mostly likely to lead to a mutually agreed upon resolution of the dispute, some articles focused on steps Iran could take to avoid a military strike (see p. C-23).

Many of these same tendencies resurfaced in coverage of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's September 2012 speech to the U.N. General Assembly (see p. C-36). Netanyahu infamously drew a red line on a crude drawing of a bomb to signify how close Iran was to having the fissile material to build nuclear weapons. Yet little of the newspaper coverage of the event addressed Netanyahu's assessment of Iranian capabilities and intentions, focusing instead on the

Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2012/9, February 24, 2012.

degree to which his presentation was meant to influence public and official policy debates about the appropriate response to Iran's nuclear developments.

Finding #2: What are Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions anyway?

Competing estimates and statements made it difficult for reporters and editors to clearly describe Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions in their coverage. More often than not, coverage of Iran’s nuclear program simply included a restatement of often-competing official claims. Many articles mentioned one or another intelligence estimate; rarely were the conclusions of all available estimates considered. The lack of precision in discussing these issues, inconsistency in coverage over time, and a failure to provide adequate sourcing or independent assessment of claims have the potential to obfuscate public understanding.

Exactly what are Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions? Despite the centrality of this question, descriptions of Iran’s capabilities and intentions in newspaper coverage varied widely. When discussing Iran’s nuclear work, newspapers used a range of terms to describe the activities, referencing Iran’s “nuclear program,” its “nuclear weapons program,” its “nuclear ambitions,” and the activities of a “nuclear Iran” (see Figure 1, below, for how frequently the most common terms were used).

Which term is used, and in what context, matters in that it affects the assumptions made by both the newspaper and the broader public. If an author, or a source, is referring to Iran’s “nuclear weapons program,” depending on the context, the assumption could be that Iran has an *active* nuclear weapons program. Referring to Iran’s “nuclear program” has a more vague meaning and doesn’t necessarily suggest that developing nuclear weapons is part of the larger effort. It is noteworthy that the use of terms implying that Iran has or is pursuing nuclear weapons is approximately as common as the use of phrases that neither imply nor preclude that possibility.

Beyond the heightened frequency of use of the terms “nuclear weapon(s)” and “nuclear

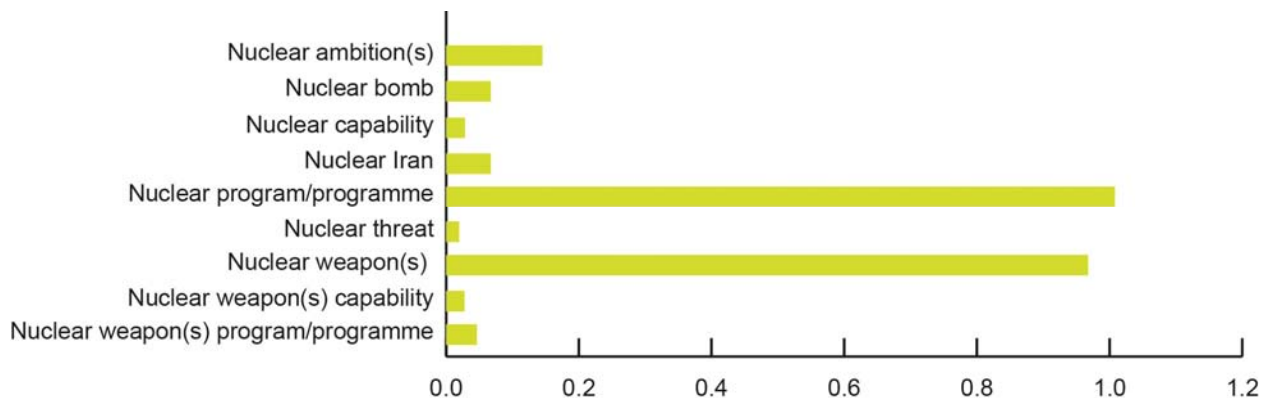


Figure 1. Average "nuclear" phrase frequency per article

program,” a few trends in usage stand out. It’s notable that neither the *Wall Street Journal* nor the *Guardian* used the term “nuclear weapons capability” in any of their coverage during the selected periods. When this term was used in other newspapers, it was most often to denote the fear expressed by analysts or government officials that Iran was getting closer to achieving a “nuclear weapons capability,” though what specifically was included in this “capability” was never outlined. The term Iran’s “nuclear ambitions” was used by all of the newspapers in question, though its use fell over time in all of the papers, except for the *Independent* and the *New York Times*, which, on average, used the term significantly more frequently than the average for all of the newspapers.

The wide variation in terminology and assessment of Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions can be attributed in part to Iran’s efforts to protect information that it sees as crucial to its national security and to the variation in government and international estimates—some public and some classified—about Iranian capabilities and intentions. National intelligence assessments and IAEA reports are two of the most frequently cited sources of information about Iranian nuclear capabilities and intentions. Before delving into how newspapers discussed these issues, it is worthwhile to review a few of these central assessments.

The IAEA monitors Iranian enrichment operations at the Natanz and Fordow enrichment facilities and has compiled reports about Iran’s enrichment capabilities and the capabilities and activities of other nuclear facilities within Iran. The IAEA has also investigated claims of Iranian weapons-related activities. Though the IAEA has not been able to conclude that Iran’s declarations about its nuclear activities are complete and accurate, the agency has also not found evidence that would indicate conclusively that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program.¹¹ The IAEA still has a few open concerns about potential nuclear weapons related work at military sites within Iran, including potential design work and testing of high explosives, but most have to do with past, not ongoing, programs.¹²

A 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran concluded with high confidence that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003; it also concluded with moderate confidence that it had not restarted it since.¹³ Although it continued to expand its capacity to enrich uranium and stockpile enriched uranium, Iran was not doing the necessary work to design a deliverable nuclear weapon or to research and test the components necessary to build one, the assessment found. It also stated that Iran has the “scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to produce

¹¹ IAEA Director General, “Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors,” June 2, 2008. See also, IAEA, “Communication Dated 27 August 2007 from the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Agency Concerning the Text of the ‘Understandings of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the IAEA on the Modalities of Resolution of the Outstanding Issues,’” INFCIRC/711, August 27, 2007.

¹² Mohamed ElBaradei, “Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors,” IAEA Board of Governors meeting, March 3, 2008.

¹³ National Intelligence Council, “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007.

nuclear weapons.”¹⁴ In other words, if Iran wanted to build a nuclear weapon it probably could in due time. A 2010 update to the NIE on Iran’s nuclear program affirmed these general findings.¹⁵

Other national intelligence officials have concluded otherwise. In particular, German and Israeli intelligence officials have at various times said that they believe Iran has decided to build nuclear weapons and is actively trying to do so.¹⁶ More recent Israeli intelligence estimates have been more cautious about saying that Iran is actively building nuclear weapons.¹⁷ In general, individual intelligence officials’ comments should be understood differently than national intelligence estimates, such as the U.S. NIE cited above, which tend to represent the informed judgment of the entire intelligence community, different parts of which could have different views.

For their part, Iranian officials have publicly stated that Iran’s nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only and that Iran doesn’t intend to build nuclear weapons. Iranian officials also regularly refer to the Islamic edicts of prominent Iranian clerics, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, which explicitly say that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic and that Iran should not develop, stockpile, or use them.

In the run-up to the October 2009 Geneva negotiations, newspaper coverage varied in how it discussed Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions, which had a significant effect on how it described the possible outcomes of the negotiations. A September 30 *Financial Times* report focused specifically on British assessments that “Iran has been making clandestine efforts to design a nuclear warhead ‘since late 2004 or early 2005,’ an assessment that would imply Tehran is taking final steps towards nuclear weapons capability.” This article did acknowledge how this assessment differed from others, in particular the U.S. estimate, but it didn’t attempt to reconcile the differences between them or explore the impact on negotiations if the British estimate was wrong.

A September 27, 2009 *Washington Post* article that focused on the U.S. bargaining position going into the Geneva talks characterized Iran’s capabilities in a different manner. The article depicted Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons as “suspected” and referred generally to Iran’s “nuclear ambitions.” The article failed to clarify whether the suspected activities were past activities or whether they were ongoing—an important point. In one respect, reference to Iran’s “nuclear ambitions” is appropriate, because no one knows with a great deal of certainty what Iran intends to do with the nuclear capabilities it already has and those it could develop in the future. On the other hand, by using a nebulous and imprecise term such as Iran’s nuclear “ambitions,” the article suggests that Iran has nuclear intentions that include developing nuclear weapons, when this is a disputed notion. This article also includes explicit mention of Iran’s “rights” under

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ James R. Clapper, “Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 16, 2011.

¹⁶ Tim McGirk, “Iran Assessment Creates an Israeli Headache,” *Time*, December 6, 2007.

¹⁷ James Risen, “U.S. Faces a Tricky Task in Assessment of Data on Iran,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2012.

the NPT to enrich uranium and possess other components of the nuclear fuel cycle—a point that is equally relevant to negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran.

A September 28, 2009 *New York Times* article took yet another tack in describing Iranian capabilities, describing the assessment of the United States and its allies that Iran's nuclear program is “meant to create a weapon.” According to its national intelligence estimates, the U.S. intelligence community does not believe that Iran currently intends or has decided to resume efforts to build a nuclear weapon. Can Iran have no intention of building a nuclear weapon and also have a nuclear program meant to create a weapon? As was the case in referring to Iran's nuclear ambition, this wording seems to assume that Iran has an intent that is different from some official estimates.

The source of this confusion could be the U.S. administration itself. In June 2010, soon after the United States and its allies passed an additional round of punitive U.N. sanctions against Iran, senior U.S. officials made several unclear public statements about Iran's capabilities. Immediately following the U.N. vote, on June 20, 2010, the *New York Times* quoted then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referring to Iran's “pursuit of nuclear weapons.” Secretary Clinton listed the “pursuit of nuclear weapons” along with a litany of other well-documented assertions about Iran's involvement in global security and human rights abuses, as if to suggest that you can't question one without also questioning another. The June 20, 2010 article focused on human rights accusations against Iran and Iran's response, so it is not surprising that it didn't go into great depth about Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions. That being said, Clinton's remarks have the potential to muddle public understanding, particularly because they seem to run counter to official U.S. estimates of Iranian intentions.

A week later, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta added to the confusion:

On Iran, [Secretary of Defense] Panetta declared publicly what officials have said privately since late last year: that the administration now believes Iran is continuing, at some low level, to work on the design of a nuclear weapon. That contradicts a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate. But he also said he believed it would take Iran two years to convert its current stockpile of nuclear material into deliverable weapons.

Mr. Panetta admitted to a disagreement with Israel's intelligence services over whether Iranian leaders had decided to produce a weapon; American intelligence believes the decision has not been made. But he said the Israelis are “willing to give us the room to be able to try to change Iran diplomatically and culturally and politically, as opposed to changing them militarily.”

He said the recently passed sanctions on Iran might “help weaken the regime,” but added: “Will it deter them from their ambitions with regard to nuclear capability? Probably not.” (*New York Times*, 6/28/10)

This report parsed Panetta's statement carefully and differentiated between what Panetta saw as Iran's restarted “low-level” work on designing a nuclear weapon and his continued belief that Iran had not decided to build a weapon as of yet. But it left Panetta's reference to Iran's nuclear

“ambitions” without a clear context. What are Iran’s “ambitions with regard to nuclear capability?” Does Iran want to master the entire nuclear fuel cycle purely in support of its nuclear energy program? Does it want these capabilities as a long-term hedge (as the comment about “low-level” work might suggest) in the event it decides to build nuclear weapons? Or do its “ambitions” include being able to build nuclear weapons in the short term? Under what conditions would Iran be likely to want to build a nuclear weapon? The answers to these questions, and others like them, are critically important to the debate.

A June 28, 2010 *Wall Street Journal* article that included similar comments from Panetta made clear the high stakes of official assessments and the potential for officials’ comments to affect policy discussions and public opinion: “Many European and Arab governments said they had already discounted the findings of the 2007 NIE. But a formal hardening of the U.S. intelligence community’s assessment of Iran’s nuclear work could limit President Barack Obama’s hopes of using diplomacy to end the standoff with Tehran over its nuclear program.”

As pressure grew on the U.S. government and its allies to act to limit Iranian capabilities in late 2011 and early 2012, newspaper portrayals of Iran’s intentions and capabilities grew even more consequential. What had been the effect of the additional sanctions on Iran’s nuclear program and on Iran’s willingness to make concessions? What else should be done? These were the central policy questions being discussed by officials, and the newspaper coverage during this period reflected this. The coverage also began to reflect a growing divergence about the goal of coercive diplomatic efforts. This divergence was well captured in a March 5, 2012 *Independent* article:

For Israel, the “red line” comes when Iran is capable of building a nuclear weapon. According to most Israeli readings, Iran is—thanks to its enrichment of uranium—not far off that point.

For the U.S. administration, the red line comes significantly later, namely if and when Iran starts building, or at least decides to build, a nuclear weapon. This is why President Obama chose his words carefully when he spoke yesterday of his determination to prevent Iran from “acquiring a nuclear weapon,” and this is why he believes there is time for sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

The difference between the point in time when Iran is “capable of building a nuclear weapon” and its actual “acquisition” of a nuclear weapon is significant. The 2007 NIE and 2010 update concluded that Iran has the “scientific, technical, and industrial capacity” to produce nuclear weapons; the NIE also concluded that Iran hadn’t decided to build those weapons and certainly hadn’t acquired one yet. The debate about “timing” has to do with the difference in U.S. and Israeli opinions about when to conclude that diplomacy has failed and military action is warranted, and not whether either the United States or Israel is willing to live with an Iran that can enrich uranium under IAEA Safeguards. The latter question is not addressed in this article or any other article from the same period.

The February 2012 release of an IAEA report on Iran's nuclear activities provided a window into how government officials began to change the way they talked about Iranian capabilities and intentions, and the ways that coverage shifted. The report noted that Iran had begun enriching uranium up to 20 percent U-235 in the Fordow enrichment facility and enlarging its total stockpiles of this type of uranium.

A February 25, 2012 *Washington Post* report was careful to characterize Iranian advances in uranium enrichment as moving Iran closer to having the requisite material to build a nuclear weapon, without suggesting that Iran had emphatically decided to build a weapon. The article did not acknowledge that the NPT does not prohibit non-nuclear weapon states from enriching uranium up to 20 percent U-235 or limit the amount of such material they can have for peaceful purposes, such as fueling a research reactor or producing isotopes for medical use. Instead the report focused on the degree to which Iran's activities moved it closer to being able to build a nuclear weapon (i.e., improving its capability to produce a nuclear weapon) and on the likelihood that the "advances" were in excess of what Iran needed to meet its stated goals.

Other coverage of the IAEA report was less nuanced, instead using less precise language about Iran's "nuclear ambitions" and simply presenting Iran's claims and U.S., European, and Israeli suspicions about Iranian nuclear activities: "New suspicions over Iran's nuclear ambitions emerged Friday," reported a February 25, 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article. "Iran has dramatically accelerated its production of enriched uranium in recent months while refusing to cooperate with an investigation of evidence that it may have worked on designing a bomb," a February 25, 2012 *Guardian* report read.

A February 25, 2012 *New York Times* article zeroed in on the central questions raised by the IAEA report:

Even as the United Nations' nuclear watchdog said in a new report Friday that Iran had accelerated its uranium enrichment program, American intelligence analysts continue to believe that there is no hard evidence that Iran has decided to build a nuclear bomb.

...

At the center of the debate is the murky question of the ultimate ambitions of the leaders in Tehran. There is no dispute among American, Israeli and European intelligence officials that Iran has been enriching nuclear fuel and developing some necessary infrastructure to become a nuclear power. But the Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence agencies believe that Iran has yet to decide whether to resume a parallel program to design a nuclear warhead.

The approach of this coverage reflected the efforts of competing governments to better frame public understanding of the policy choices confronting officials. Portraying Iran's advances as evidence of shifting intentions and growing capabilities to make weapons, as some of the coverage of the IAEA report did, makes it easier for officials to advocate for a more urgent

response to Iran's nuclear activities, possibly including the use of military force. Putting Iran's advances in the context of previous assessments, as some of the articles did, leaves open the possibility that additional coercive measures or diplomacy could succeed in thwarting Iran's nuclear advances. By framing coverage in this way, newspapers deemphasized Iran's current capabilities and intentions and the full range of policy options available.

This trend continued into late 2012, when U.S.-Israeli differences about the appropriate "red line" in dealings with Iran were the subject of a considerable amount of coverage. While news coverage focused on the Israeli prime minister's plea to the United States and the United Nations to keep Iran from stockpiling various types of uranium and therefore developing a certain capability, his assumption that "nothing could imperil the world more than a nuclear-armed Iran" went unquestioned. By failing to present alternative assessments of Iranian intentions and capabilities, these articles provided an inaccurate picture of the choices facing policy makers.

Finding #3: Official narratives dominate

News coverage of the international dispute over Iran’s nuclear program rarely veered from the narratives propagated by U.S., Iranian, European, and other government officials or explored policy assessments and options that differed from official versions. This tendency resulted in incomplete assessments of the full range of choices available to policy makers.

The most prominent example of the pattern in which the official government narratives dominated newspaper coverage was the reporting about the Obama administration’s “two track” policy of coercive diplomacy. Newspaper coverage of the 2009 Geneva negotiations and the subsequent fuel-swap deal focused on what officials from the United States and Western European states saw as the acceptable outcome of negotiations: Iranian concessions, including full cooperation with the IAEA and tight restrictions or prohibitions on Iranian dual-use nuclear capabilities. A September 27, 2009 *Washington Post* article reported that “[I]f Tehran does not respond seriously by year’s end [to U.S. demands], the United States and its partners could begin to push for crippling sanctions.” Similarly, a October 2, 2009 *Wall Street Journal* argued:

Despite initial signs of progress in talks between Iran and members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany in Geneva on Thursday, U.S. officials are expected to push for new U.N. or unilateral sanctions unless Tehran backs up its word with actions in coming weeks and months.

When negotiations didn’t yield the expected outcome within the U.S.-imposed time frame, coverage focused on the necessity of sanctions to further pressure Iran. While some newspaper coverage focused on the likely inability of sanctions to produce Iranian concessions (see p. C-19), few articles explored other potential policy options that might lead to a mutually agreeable outcome and avoid military action. Even fewer mentioned the possibility that pressuring Iran further could lead to regional instability or to Iran deciding to build a nuclear weapon. Few of the articles noted the effect of the artificial deadline imposed by U.S. officials or the contradictions present in U.S. policies that offered few incentives for Iran to agree to the terms of the P5+1.

When the U.N. Security Council finally debated and passed additional sanctions resolutions in June 2010, the logic of the sanctions went mostly unquestioned in newspaper coverage. Instead, a majority of the newspaper coverage focused on the belief of U.S. officials and others that the sanctions, in the words of a June 10, 2012 *Washington Post* article, “should prompt the Islamic Republic to restart stalled political talks over the future of its nuclear program.” Coverage during this period did give some attention to the failure of Brazil and Turkey’s efforts to avoid the sanctions, but didn’t address their substantive critique of the sanctions resolution and the policy course adopted by the P5+1.

Newspaper coverage also gave some attention to Iranian responses to the sanctions, but tended to downplay them. For instance, after running a comment from an Iranian envoy that questioned the “confrontation” in the sanctions approach, a June 9, 2010 *New York Times* article skipped directly to concerns from other sources that the sanctions had already proven ineffective in derailing Iran’s nuclear activities. This effectively returned the coverage to the discussion of the “two-track” policy, avoiding the possibility that Iran was responding rationally by resisting increased pressure.

After the imposition of additional punitive sanctions, newspaper coverage from early 2012 shifted to U.S. and Israeli officials’ attempts to coerce Iran with the threat of military attack. Israeli officials threatened the possibility of near-term military action, while U.S. officials suggested that “all options” would be considered if diplomacy didn’t yield Iranian concessions. This shift followed the sometimes public negotiations between U.S. and Israeli officials on how best to confront Iran. A February 18, 2012 *Guardian* article exemplified this shift:

U.S. officials are increasingly convinced that sanctions will not deter Tehran from its pursuit of nuclear weapons and that America will be left with no option but to launch an attack on Iran or watch Israel do so, possibly before the end of 2012.

Despite focusing on this shift in policy, very little of the newspaper coverage from this period took stock of the effects of the increased “talk of war” on Iranian behavior nor of the possibility that attacking Iran could be counterproductive. When newspapers tried to explain why Iran didn’t agree to allow IAEA inspectors into its military installations in February 2012, they rarely if ever mentioned that military threats might explain Iranian reluctance (see p. C-28).

Official skepticism of Iranian motivations and interests—whether it pertained to assessments that Iran was stalling for time in negotiations or that it was hiding the true intent of its nuclear program—also went unquestioned in news coverage. Officials had some evidence to back up this skepticism, but their interpretations of Iranian behavior did not always reflect all of the available evidence. For instance, when covering the revelation of the Fordow enrichment facility, newspaper coverage coalesced around the official assessment that because the facility was underground on a military installation and had only a limited enrichment capacity, the facility was most likely weapons related. While this is certainly a plausible explanation, it is not the only possible explanation. It ignores Iran’s explanation that this location was in response to fears that the United States, Israel, or other countries might bomb the more exposed Natanz enrichment facility, as Israel has done to other countries’ nuclear facilities, as a way to forcibly limit Iranian capabilities.

Toward the end of 2012, when the dispute about Iran’s nuclear program made news in the context of the U.S. presidential elections and the U.N. General Assembly meeting, newspapers

began to include a wider range of interpretations of Iranian behavior from analysts and experts outside of government, but they were still far outnumbered by references to official assessments.

Newspaper coverage also adopted the official notion that Iran's enrichment program represented a particular kind of challenge to the nuclear nonproliferation regime—one that required differential treatment for some NPT non-nuclear weapon states. While some coverage did acknowledge that P5+1 negotiators were asking Iran to voluntarily restrict its nuclear activities to levels below what it was otherwise permitted, most did not. Even fewer acknowledged the degree to which U.S. positions ignored the potential threats posed to Iran by NPT nuclear weapon states, all of whom were on the other side of the negotiating table from Iran, and the West's varying degrees of acceptance of India's, Pakistan's, and Israel's nuclear weapons capabilities outside the NPT. This double standard was and is seen by many other countries as discriminatory. News coverage did not give any attention to the possibility that Iran should not be treated as a special case, but rather as the leading example of a larger question about how to reconcile increased interest in nuclear energy among less economically advanced countries with growing concerns about proliferation.

Finding #4: Focusing on the political and diplomatic angles

A plurality of newspaper articles on Iran’s nuclear program focused on political and diplomatic aspects of the dispute, contributing to a heavy reliance on official sources and a focus on official policy prescriptions. This tendency has increased over time, further limiting policy discussions and failing to provide adequate context.

In total, newspapers published the greatest number of articles—40 percent of the total—on the political and diplomatic aspects of the dispute about Iran’s nuclear program. (An overview of the different categories of articles used in this study is available in Appendix B.) This total includes articles focused on countries’ domestic politics and the international diplomacy conducted between these countries, and those focused on the implementation and effects of sanctions and items related to covert efforts. Leaving aside the Side Note category of articles, which weren’t focused directly on Iran’s nuclear program, the number of Political/Diplomatic articles was greater than the combined total of Commentary/Opinion and Breaking News articles, the next largest categories of articles (see Figure 2).

The focus on political and diplomatic angles of the dispute about Iran’s nuclear program had two broad effects: It led to heavy reliance on official sources and narrowed the scope of coverage to focus predominantly on official policy positions. As a result these types of articles failed to address the range of possible political and policy outcomes, and failed to provide the necessary context for audiences to evaluate the claims and counter claims presented. Indeed, as a subset of the total sample of articles, the Political/Diplomatic articles can be seen as facilitating an unofficial dialogue between the members of the P5+1 and between the P5+1, Iran, and Israel. As such, the views and opinions expressed in these articles echoed statements made by different actors advancing their own policy agendas instead of providing more neutral facts and independent assessments.

The prevalence of Political/Diplomatic articles increased over time, suggesting that the effects of this type of coverage have become more pronounced. From the first period of stories in September 2009 to the fourth period in October 2012 the percentage of Political/Diplomatic stories increased from 35 percent of all stories to 49 percent of all stories.

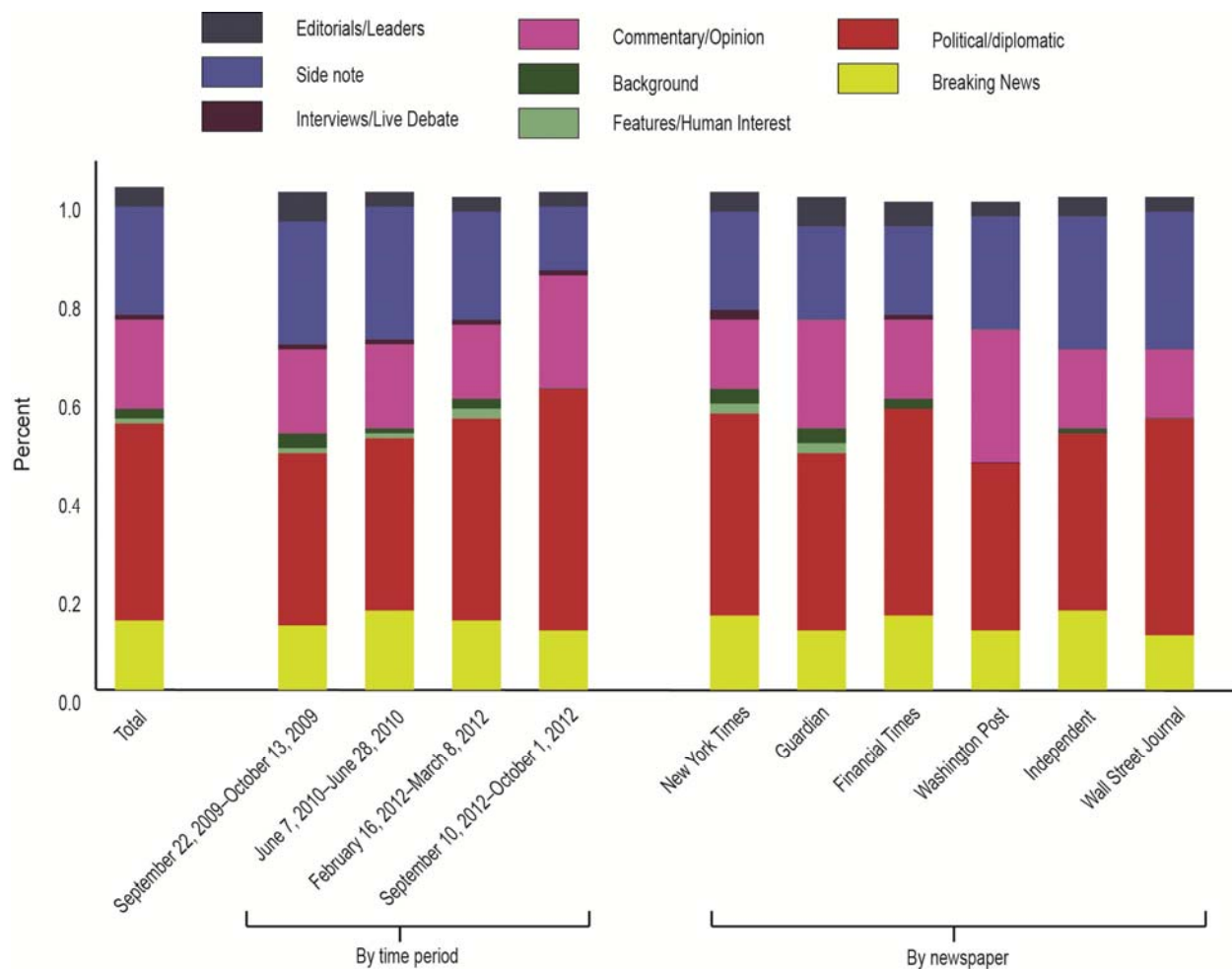


Figure 2. Types of coverage, by time period and by newspaper

Other noteworthy patterns in the types of coverage include:

- The *Washington Post* and *Guardian* devoted the greatest percentage of their coverage to Commentary/Opinion articles, with 27 percent and 22 percent of articles from these papers, respectively, falling into this category. In comparison, the other four newspapers devoted on average only 15 percent of their coverage to these types of articles.
- The prevalence of Side Note articles (22 percent of all articles published) suggests that newspaper editors and reporters are regularly highlighting purported effects of Iran’s nuclear program on a range of other topics of public significance. Doing so heightens public awareness of Iran’s nuclear program. Consistent references to Iran could also have an outsized effect on public perceptions, particularly if mentions of Iran and the nuclear dispute merely reinforce opinions and sentiments on the issue that are expressed more explicitly elsewhere in the coverage.

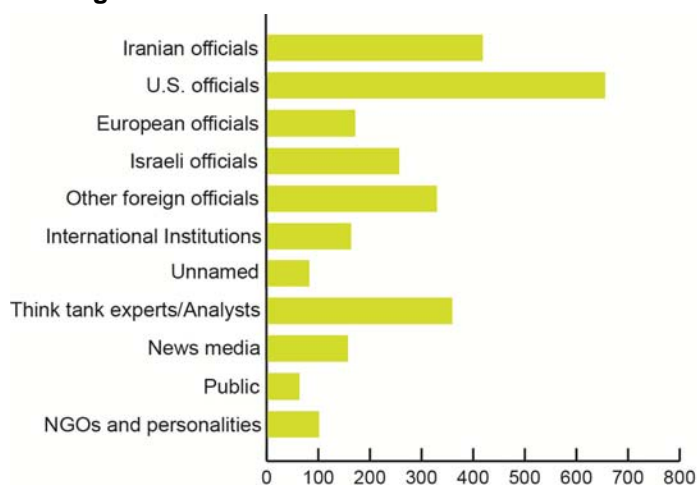
- On average only 14 percent of all articles could be categorized as Breaking News, with the *Wall Street Journal* and *Guardian* newspapers devoting the smallest percentage of their coverage to the category, 11 percent and 12 percent, respectively.
- Despite the variation in number of articles published by each newspaper in the specified periods, all the newspapers devoted roughly the same percentage of their coverage to Editorials/Leaders, with the *Financial Times* deviating the most from the average of 4 percent.

Finding #5: Taking the official line

Government officials composed the largest percentage of all sources quoted or relied on in newspaper coverage. U.S. officials were by far the most frequently quoted government officials, followed by Iranian officials. The types of government officials relied upon shifted over time, with U.S. and Israeli officials becoming more frequently quoted and Iranian and European officials becoming less frequently quoted.

Government officials—of all kinds—were the most frequent sources for newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear program. Of the 2,743 sources that were identified in the news coverage (articles identified as Breaking News or Political/Diplomatic), nearly 67 percent, or 1,824, were officially affiliated with a national government (see Figure 3). Of the government officials represented, 36 percent (or 654) were U.S. officials, 23 percent (or 417) were Iranian officials, 14 percent (or 255) were Israeli officials, 9 percent (or 170) were European officials, and 18 percent (or 328) represented other governments.

Figure 3. Total sources referenced in news coverage



Most of the newspapers quoted or relied most heavily on U.S. government officials as sources of information about their coverage of Iran’s nuclear weapons program (see Figure 4). The three U.S.-based papers (the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*) relied on U.S. government officials significantly more than they did any other type of source; U.S. officials appeared on average once in every two articles on the subject. After U.S. government officials, Iranian government officials were relied on most by four newspapers—the three U.K.-based papers and the *Wall Street Journal*—however it’s worth noting that during the four designated time periods, the three U.K.-based papers relied on Iranian officials nearly as frequently as they did U.S. officials. All of the U.S.-based papers quoted or relied on Iranian officials around half as frequently (on average once in every 5 articles) as they relied on U.S. government officials.

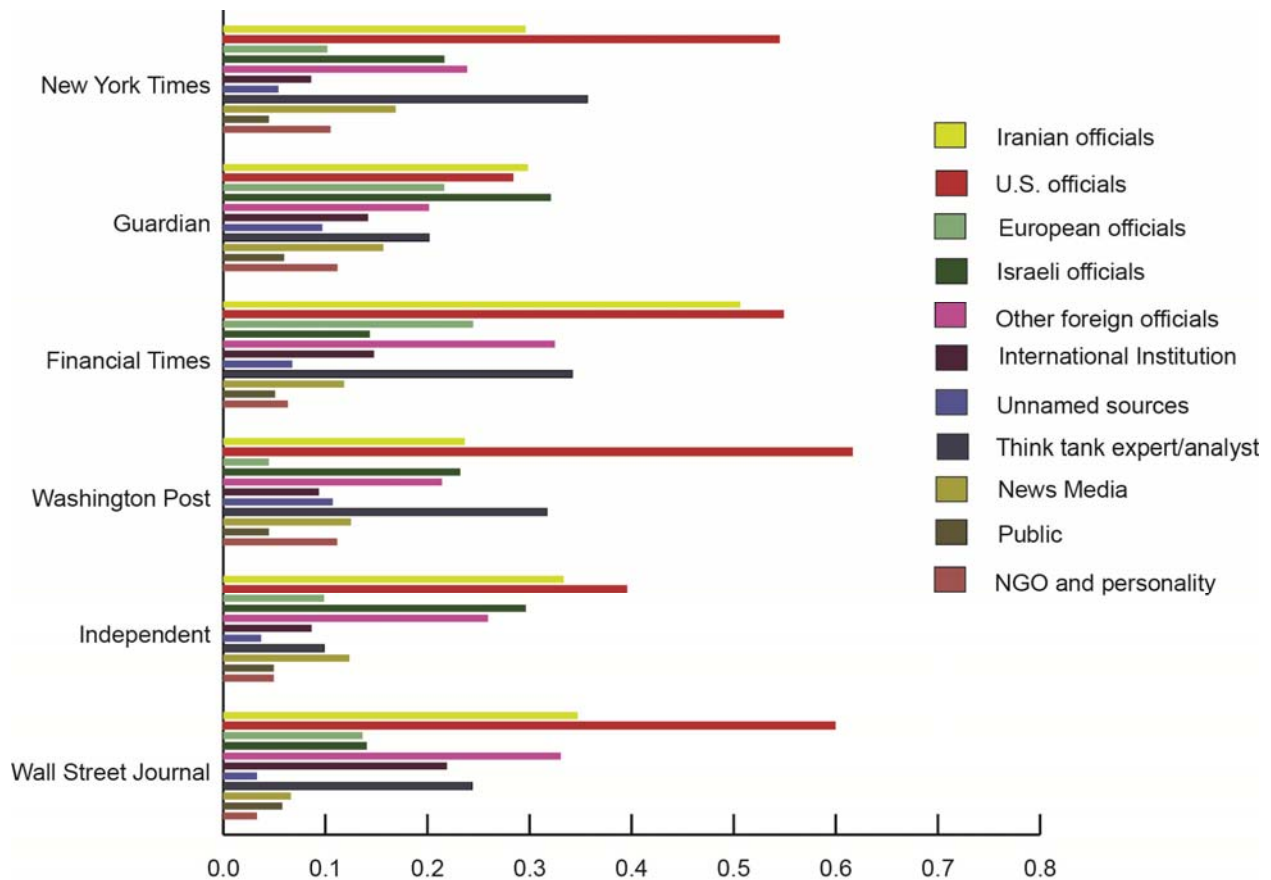


Figure 4. Average frequency of sources per article

Not surprisingly, European officials were quoted or relied upon most frequently in the *Guardian* and *Financial Times* (on average once in every five articles)—more than twice as frequently as they were represented in most of the other newspapers. The *Independent* and the *Guardian* relied on Israeli officials more frequently than other papers did (on average less than once in every three articles), with the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* both not far behind (on average a little more than once in every five articles). The *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* relied on Israeli sources the least (on average around once in every seven articles).

When U.S. government sources were broken down into subcategories (President Barack Obama, executive branch officials, legislative officials, and unnamed officials) a few patterns emerged: All newspapers quoted or relied on President Obama and other executive branch officials more than other types of U.S. government officials to inform their reporting about Iran’s nuclear program. While legislative officials (members of Congress and their staffs) were among the least relied upon U.S. government sources on this topic, their presence in news articles grew steadily and substantially over time, appearing on average less than once in every 100 articles during the

period from September 22, 2009 to October 13, 2009, but appearing on average more than once out of every 10 articles during the period from September 10, 2012 to October 1, 2012.

When the reliance on all official government sources is examined over time, two patterns stand out: the significant increase in newspapers' reliance on U.S. and Israeli government officials over time and a decrease in their reliance on Iranian and European government officials. During the first two periods, U.S. officials were quoted or relied on, on average, once in every two stories; during the second two periods this average increased to three in every five stories. For Israeli officials, the increase was dramatic, from an average of once in every twenty stories during the first two periods to more than once in every three stories in the second two periods. The decrease in reliance on Iranian and European officials was less dramatic but notable, from an average of twice in every five stories to less than once every three stories for Iranian officials and from an average of nearly once in every five stories to less than once in every ten stories for European sources.

Other noteworthy patterns in the types of sources:

- Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was rarely quoted or relied upon as a source in news coverage. This is understandable, considering his preference not to publicly announce his decisions but rather to set the tone for the direction of the country on important issues. Ayatollah Khamenei was, however, mentioned frequently in commentaries and side note articles related to the Iranian nuclear issue. It seems that when trying to explain the complex political situation surrounding Iran's nuclear program, reporters and commentators put greater emphasis on the Supreme Leader's role.
- Of the 919 non-governmental sources identified, think tank experts/analysts made up 39 percent of the total, officials from international institutions made up 18 percent and representatives of news media made up 17 percent. The least represented categories of sources were representatives from NGOs and other public personalities (11 percent), unnamed sources (9 percent), and members of the general public (7 percent).
- The *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Washington Post* relied on think tank experts and analysts at roughly the same frequency (on average one in every three articles), but more than the other three newspapers.
- The *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* quoted or relied on unnamed sources most frequently (on average around once out of 10 articles); while all six of the newspapers relied on members of the public equally infrequently (on average around once out of every 20 articles).

Finding #6: Placing the burden on Iran

Newspaper coverage typically emphasized Iran’s responsibility for the dispute, its past transgressions, and its burden to prove its intentions, make concessions, and avoid escalation. Rarely did coverage address the burdens on and responsibilities of U.S., European, or Israeli policy makers to resolve the dispute.

Coverage of the Fordow revelation provided a clear example of how newspaper coverage framed Iran’s responsibility in the dispute. The coverage acknowledged how U.S. and European leaders were using events as leverage in upcoming negotiations with Iran, but it did not acknowledge Iranian expectations that the P5+1 show a greater flexibility and willingness to consider Iranian positions. A September 26 *Guardian* article explained how U.S. and European leaders saw the Fordow revelation as an opportunity to “demand” that Iran take “concrete steps to restore ‘confidence and transparency’ in the country’s nuclear program.” In other words, according to the coverage, the negotiations were exclusively about Iranian behavior—what it was willing to do and not do. As a consequence of its failure to disclose the site earlier, Iran did bear some responsibility, but to place the entire burden on Iran is to ignore a tumultuous history of past negotiations about which all parties felt aggrieved.

Coverage of the negotiations themselves referred regularly to the hope that pressure on Iran would force it to engage in “serious” negotiations; however, the coverage did not describe in any detail what behavior would demonstrate that Iran was “serious” about negotiations and how such behavior would differ from previous behavior. Indeed, at times it seemed that “serious negotiations” was a euphemism for conceding to U.S. demands, as in this sentence from a September 27, 2009 *Washington Post* article:

Diplomats will also insist that Iran undertake confidence-building measures, including answering questions about suspected efforts to develop nuclear weapons and accepting a timetable for *serious* negotiations.
[Emphasis added]

When the negotiations yielded agreement in principle on the fuel-swap deal, newspaper coverage was cautious, focusing on the potential benefits of the deal and on how Iran needed to prove that it would accept specific terms of the U.S. proposal and that it was not just “playing for more time.” As an October 2 *Wall Street Journal* article noted, “Iranians may be seeking to defuse pressure for sanctions while continuing their nuclear program.” A *Financial Times* article from the same day was considerably more dour: “A deal remains a long shot. At stake is whether Iran builds a nuclear infrastructure that, despite all its protestations, would make it much easier to produce fissile material for a bomb.”

When the fuel-swap deal unraveled, newspaper coverage focused on how Iran's internal political struggles doomed the deal and not on U.S. negotiating demands or domestic U.S. pressure to pursue additional punitive sanctions. And once the new sanctions were passed in mid-2010, newspaper coverage focused on how Iran's ability to avoid previous sanctions necessitated the additional measures—as if Iranians imposed the sanctions on themselves.

Finding #7: A failure to explore Iranian security strategies in depth

Despite the centrality of Iranian security concerns to the discussion about Iran’s nuclear program, rarely did news coverage explore or explain Iranian security strategies and policies in depth. Instead, Iranian intentions and motivations were most often offered as quick counterpoints to assertions made by U.S. and European officials or analysts.

One of the assumptions underlying newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear program is that a nuclear-armed Iran or an Iran with the ability to make nuclear weapons would pose a serious, if not existential, threat to Israel and other U.S. allies and interests in the region. But in order to gauge this risk properly, it would first be necessary to have a better understanding of the full range of Iranian security concerns and other motivations. If Iran’s motives are not purely peaceful, for instance, are they aggressive or defensive? By whom does Iranian political leadership feel most threatened? What are Iran’s broad strategic security goals? Does it seek greater regional influence or regional domination? Why does Iran support militant terrorist groups? Why does it ally itself with repressive regimes like that of Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad? How has Iran’s evolving relationship with Iraq affected its security calculations? How does Iran’s nuclear program contribute to national prestige, national pride, and other non-security goals?

These questions and others like them were rarely addressed in any of the newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear program. Instead, the comments of Iranian officials and longstanding Iranian claims about the country’s intentions were more often than not offered as an indication of balanced coverage, such as when articles included the sentence: “Iran claims its nuclear program is peaceful.”

Coverage of the Fordow revelation emphasized how U.S., U.K., and French officials believed that the facility was intended to support a nuclear weapons program because of its size and underground location. None of the coverage mentioned the military attacks that befell Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities in the past two decades or discussed how Iranian nuclear facilities have been threatened with attack—both of these details would have lent credence to some of Iran’s security concerns and might have put U.S., U.K., and French claims in better context.

When Iranian officials couldn’t come to an agreement with the IAEA in February 2012 about visiting the Parchin military complex, the newspaper coverage focused on what was perceived to be Iranian unwillingness to cooperate. As a February 22, 2012 *Washington Post* article posited: “U.N. nuclear officials conceded failure on Tuesday after an extraordinary two-day visit to Iran yielded no progress in clearing up allegations about the country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology.” Yet coverage of this event did not reference the reluctance that any country would

have in making available its military installations to international inspectors nor did coverage put the IAEA talks in the context of heightened political discussion about the possibility of Israel and/or the United States militarily attacking Iran.

Finding #8: Overlooking the role of domestic politics

News coverage tended to underestimate and underreport the effect of domestic politics—in Iran and the United States—on Iran’s nuclear program and the international response to it.

The internal politics of Iran play a large role in Iranian officials’ positions on the country’s nuclear programs. Even opposition politicians are supportive of Iran’s nuclear program and use U.N. and other sanctions on the program as a rallying cry for Iranian nationalism. Yet, the full extent of influence that internal Iranian politics has on the nuclear dispute is hard to understand, in part because of the lack of transparency of the Iranian government and the restrictions on Western news media in Iran, but also because news coverage of these issues rarely tries to address these issues.

Newspaper coverage heading into the October 2009 Geneva negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 rarely mentioned the effects of the domestic Iranian upheaval that followed the contested June 2009 Iranian presidential elections. Nor did coverage of the failed fuel-swap deal. During this time period, the Iranian government was trying to rebuild its legitimacy among domestic constituencies. This is likely to have had a large effect on the positions it took.

In response to the imposition of the new round of U.N. punitive sanctions in June 2010, Iranian officials kicked out two IAEA inspectors from the country, and Iran increased its production of uranium enriched up to 20 percent U-235. A June 24 *Financial Times* article (and others during this period) labeled these moves as “retaliation” for the U.N. sanctions. “If confirmed, this would add to fears that Iran is getting closer to acquiring the means to develop a nuclear weapon,” the article concluded. Only a few of the articles that discussed Iranian reactions to the sanctions provided more than a sentence of context or offered potentially alternative motives for them, including domestic concerns that could have contributed to the parties’ actions.

In general, most of the coverage of Iran’s political considerations focused on the Iranian president and his chief advisors, the senior deputy minister of foreign affairs and spokespeople for the government. This reliance on senior government officials overlooked opposition voices within Iran, even those within the Iranian government who hold different views than the leadership.

It is equally important to have a nuanced understanding of the domestic political context of U.S. policies. Rarely did newspaper coverage focus on the effect of domestic political constituencies and members of Congress in the 2010 U.S. push for additional punitive sanctions. Coverage of the sanctions debate focused on the precise sanctions imposed and the exceptions granted, as well as the particular roles that China and Russia played in the process. While these were topics

worthy of coverage, the coverage discounted the larger question of why the United States and its allies had to get international agreement to the multilateral sanctions *then*. Had coverage focused on the larger context, it would likely have turned to the domestic political pressures confronting the Obama administration.

The same can be said about the effect of the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign on newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program. In February and March 2012, both President Obama and the Republican presidential candidates used provocative language to describe the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and the lengths that they were willing to go to prevent Iran from advancing its nuclear programs. Yet, very little of the coverage of these comments acknowledged the likely effect of presidential politics on the tenor of what was said and the ways that the candidates were trying to appeal to domestic constituencies.

Finding #9: Reinforcing negative sentiments about Iran

Some newspaper coverage revealed an underlying attitude of suspicion and hostility toward Iran that mirrored the negative sentiments about Iran expressed by U.S. and European publics.¹⁸

The level of hostility toward Iran is most clearly seen when coverage of Iran is contrasted with international responses to other similar events and behavior. A September 26, 2009 *Independent* article published a day after the public revelation of Iran's Fordow enrichment facility, identified a "double standard" against Iran:

Sanctions have achieved nothing with Burma and should be replaced by dialogue, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said at the start of this week. Sanctions are essential and should be increased on Iran, said President Obama at the end of the week in which it was revealed that the country had established a secret additional site for enriching uranium.

Little could so demonstrate the double standards and the particular distrust with which Iran is treated in international affairs than this contrast.

But the *Independent* article also suggested that this double standard might be Iran's fault because it is "a particularly difficult country to deal with," and "its ambitions and its willingness to compromise are so uncertain."

The Fordow revelation was talked about as vindication for suspicions of Iran's motives. And going into the October 2009 negotiations, one of the most prominent storylines was how the international community needed to keep Iran from stalling for time and demonstrate its intentions through actions, not words.

Negative public sentiments about Iran resurfaced in 2010 in coverage of the public debate about imposing another round of punitive sanctions against Iran. Iran's behavior is characterized as sneaky: "Iran and its state-backed enterprises have become adept at skirting sanctions," read a June 10, 2010 *Independent* article, and "a shadowy network of Middle East gasoline suppliers is already undermining U.S. efforts to pile pressure on Tehran," read a June 17, 2010 *Wall Street Journal* article. While Iran might indeed have developed sophisticated ways to get around U.N. and national economic sanctions, that could be because it views the sanctions aimed against it as illegitimate and part of a campaign to weaken the government and interfere in the inner-workings of the country. Other states with similar views of sanctions might be equally "adept at skirting sanctions." Moreover, the Iranian government and the Iranian people may see the ability to

¹⁸ Global Attitudes Project, "A Global 'No' to Nuclear-Armed Iran."

circumvent sanctions as innovative or resourceful, not merely evasive, but none of these alternative interpretations is explored in news media coverage of this issue.

Differences in newspaper coverage of Iranian and Israeli ballistic missile tests also demonstrated underlying sentiments about Iran. In the days leading up to the October 2009 Geneva negotiations, Iran test-fired a few types of ballistic missiles. Coverage of these events focused on the degree to which these tests were meant to send a message to U.S., European, and Israeli officials prior to negotiations. According to a September 29, 2009 *Independent* article, the Iranian missile tests were a “show of defiance.” This report also emphasized the offensive capabilities of the tested missiles and the fact that their capabilities put Israel within range. In contrast, when Israel was set to test-fire missiles as part of its anti-ballistic missile program development in early 2012, the emphasis of newspaper coverage was on the missiles’ defensive capability rather than whether its actions provoked concern. Underlying this coverage is the assumption that Iranian missile capabilities pose a threat, while Israeli capabilities are non-threatening and justified.

Another aspect of newspaper coverage that could be seen as revealing underlying sentiments about Iran is how frequently Iran is referred to as an “Islamic republic.” The newspapers in this study rarely referred to Iran by its formal name, the Islamic Republic of Iran, instead simply referring to the country and its government as “Iran.” Yet on second mention, newspapers regularly referred to the country and the government as “the Islamic republic.” Iran is a theocracy, where Islam is a central part of governance and society, yet in using this alternative term, news outlets risked associating Iran with the negative sentiments often associated with Islam.¹⁹ By comparison, though the formal name of Pakistan is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan it is rarely if ever referred to by these newspapers as the “Islamic republic.”

¹⁹ The Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life, “The Public Remains Conflicted over Islam,” August 24, 2010. This poll found that only 30 percent of Americans surveyed had favorable opinions about Islam, while 38 percent held unfavorable opinions about it, and the remaining respondents “didn’t know.”

Implications for public understanding and policy

Media scholars and political scientists have developed a range of frameworks to describe the relationship between news media, government officials, and publics, and to assess how dynamics between these actors affect public policy. Newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program can be seen to confirm and to add nuance to several of the more prominent and widely adopted frameworks. The findings of this study also suggest that news media could and should play a more active role in framing the issues at stake for the public and policy makers in such a way that a fuller range of political and security factors and policy possibilities are considered.

One prominent framework that is often used to describe the relationship between news media, government officials, and publics is the “indexing” framework, which suggests that “mass media news professionals from the boardroom to the beat, tend to ‘index’ the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic.”²⁰ According to this framework, sources that inform and are quoted in news coverage from outside of government officialdom are included in coverage when they express opinions already prominent in official circles. The applicability of the indexing framework has diminished some as a greater diversity of opinions has become more common in official circles and as information and news are dispersed by a wider range of news outlets—including some online. Yet it still offers a useful way of thinking about how news coverage of foreign policy debates can serve to amplify certain points of view while minimizing attention to alternative perspectives that might be equally or more relevant but that haven't yet gained traction in official circles.

There is little doubt that government officials played a prominent role in the newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program examined in this study. Not only were they a majority of sources quoted or relied upon by reporters and editors, but their framing of the issues at stake heavily influenced news media's framing of events and of the policy prescriptions in play. It appears as if a greater diversity of official points of view is portrayed in news coverage of Iran's nuclear program than were portrayed in news coverage of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities. Still, as long as officials' influence remains dominant, public discussion of the options that should be considered by policy makers will suffer.

While newspapers need to rely heavily on government officials when informing public discussion, particularly on foreign policy issues, these officials inevitably have a range of motivations, some of which may lead them to present happenings in a particular light. The same can be said for former government officials or analysts who hold opposing viewpoints on what the appropriate policy response should be to Iran's nuclear program. Therefore, indexing

²⁰ W. Lance Bennett, “Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States,” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1990.

coverage to official positions also potentially reinforces existing biases and stereotypes. Considering the overwhelming negative perception of Iran among U.S. officials and various publics, negative assumptions about Iran tended to go unquestioned when they appeared in newspaper coverage.

In general, news coverage that is indexed to official positions also tends to marginalize public opinion, especially if it is skeptical of official narratives.²¹ For instance, official policy discussions about Iran's nuclear program in February and March 2012, as captured in news coverage, focused on the possibility and rationale for Israel and/or the United States attacking Iran's nuclear infrastructure to set-back its nuclear program. Meanwhile public opinion in the United States and elsewhere showed a considerable reluctance to attack Iran. Only 25 percent of Americans surveyed in March 2012 supported an Israeli military attack against Iranian nuclear installations, while more than 74 percent of respondents in this survey thought the United States should work through the U.N. Security Council, presumably by engaging a broader set of stakeholders to achieve a peaceful resolution.²² These sentiments were rarely represented in news coverage during this period.

Media scholars Matthew Baum and Philip Potter find much to like in the indexing framework, but suggest that instead of being simply under the influence of government officials and elites, news media are a "separate discrete strategic actor" in the foreign policy arena whose "framing of elite rhetoric has an independent causal effect on public perceptions of conflict characteristics."²³ In this "marketplace" framework of relations, news media play "the crucial role of collecting, framing, and distributing information." What varies is the supply of information from government officials and elites, and the demand for information from the public. A key assumption under this model is that news media do not "consistently act to remedy the informational inequities in the foreign policy marketplace," instead "they react in ways that tend to exacerbate the prevailing trend." In other words, the public end up with even less information than news media have access to and certainly not enough to judge what kinds of jobs its government officials are doing.

This assumption is evident where news coverage of Iran's nuclear program often failed to provide enough context and nuance to events and policy discussions for the public to be fully informed. The failure to "remedy informational inequities" is readily seen in public opinion about Iran's nuclear intentions and the threat Iran's nuclear program poses to the region, Europe, U.S. interests, and the territorial United States. As of March 2012, a solid majority of Americans (58 percent) believed that Iran had decided to build nuclear weapons and was actively working to

²¹ W. Lance Bennett, "Marginalizing the Majority: Conditioning Public Opinion to Accept Managerial Democracy," in Michael Margolis and Gary Mauser (eds.), *Manipulating Public Opinion* (New York: Dorsey Press, 1989).

²² Steven Kull and Shibley Telhami, "Americans on Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Program," Program on International Policy Attitudes Report, March 13, 2012.

²³ Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy."

do so.²⁴ This belief contrasts with the view of the U.S. intelligence community, but most likely reflects the frequency with which claims about Iranian intentions and capabilities went unquestioned in news coverage. There were significant differences in official and independent assessments about whether Iran had decided to build nuclear weapons and was actively doing so, an uncertainty that if reflected accurately in news coverage might have led the American public to be less certain than public opinion polls suggested it was.

Though newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program seemed to be out of step with American public opinion regarding the military option in early 2012, by late 2012, the dynamic seemed to have shifted some. When U.S. and Israeli officials publicly disputed setting "red lines" for Iran beyond which a military attack would be considered, newspaper coverage gave more attention to official and independent assessments of the possible negative effects of a military attack and to official statements about letting economic sanctions run their course and seeking a peaceful resolution to the dispute. This shift in coverage could be seen to reflect what Baum and Potter see as the potential for public "demand" to affect news media's framing of issues by incorporating alternative points of views and independent assessments. It's important to note, however, that the "supply" side of Baum and Potter's market place framework continued to affect news coverage during this period as well. Because Iran's nuclear program was one of the few foreign policy issues raised during the U.S. presidential campaign, both candidates were eager to frame understanding of this issue for the public. And though the candidates framed past U.S. policy differently, they advocated remarkably similar future policy prescriptions, including the option of conducting or supporting a military attack on Iran. Both also disavowed the possibility of living with a nuclear weapon armed Iran.

The "cascading activation" framework presents yet another way to understand the relationship between government officials and elites, news media, and the public. In this view of the formation of foreign policy, the framings put forward by government officials—particularly executive branch officials—"cascade" down to journalists and news media, which then present similar framings of events and issues to the public, often including the same language and sentiments initially offered by administration officials: "What passes between levels of the cascade is not comprehensive understanding but highlights packaged into selected framed communications."²⁵ The frames adopted by lower parts of the cascade feed back into the framing adopted by more influential elements, but this feedback is far less a factor than the cascade of feelings and perceptions that comes down to the public.

According to this framework, the Obama administration's relatively firm notion of what policies to adopt in response to Iran's nuclear program can be understood to be the limiting factor in the types of policy options that were widely discussed in newspaper coverage and were widely adopted by the public at large. As much as the Obama administration's way of seeing Iran's

²⁴ Steven Kull and Shibley Telhami, "Americans on Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Program."

²⁵ Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 12.

nuclear program and the threat it posed cascaded down to newspapers and the public, the specific facts and basis on which these views were developed did not. This led to a public discussion of policy options without a complete understanding of the fundamentals of the situation, such as the significant uncertainty about Iranian intentions and capabilities, the nonproliferation norms and legal principles at stake, and the degree to which Iran posed a real threat to the region or U.S. and European interests.

While none of these frameworks entirely accounts for the dynamics at play in newspaper coverage of Iran's nuclear program, they all illustrate the degree to which news media in general, and agenda-setting newspapers in particular, play a crucial role in U.S. and international policy formation on this issue. Journalists and news media should take particular care to be aware of the ways that their choices—the words they use, the sources they rely on, the types of articles they write—affect foreign policy discussions and be sure that their influence is in line with the role they believe that the media should play in U.S. and international government policy formation and action.

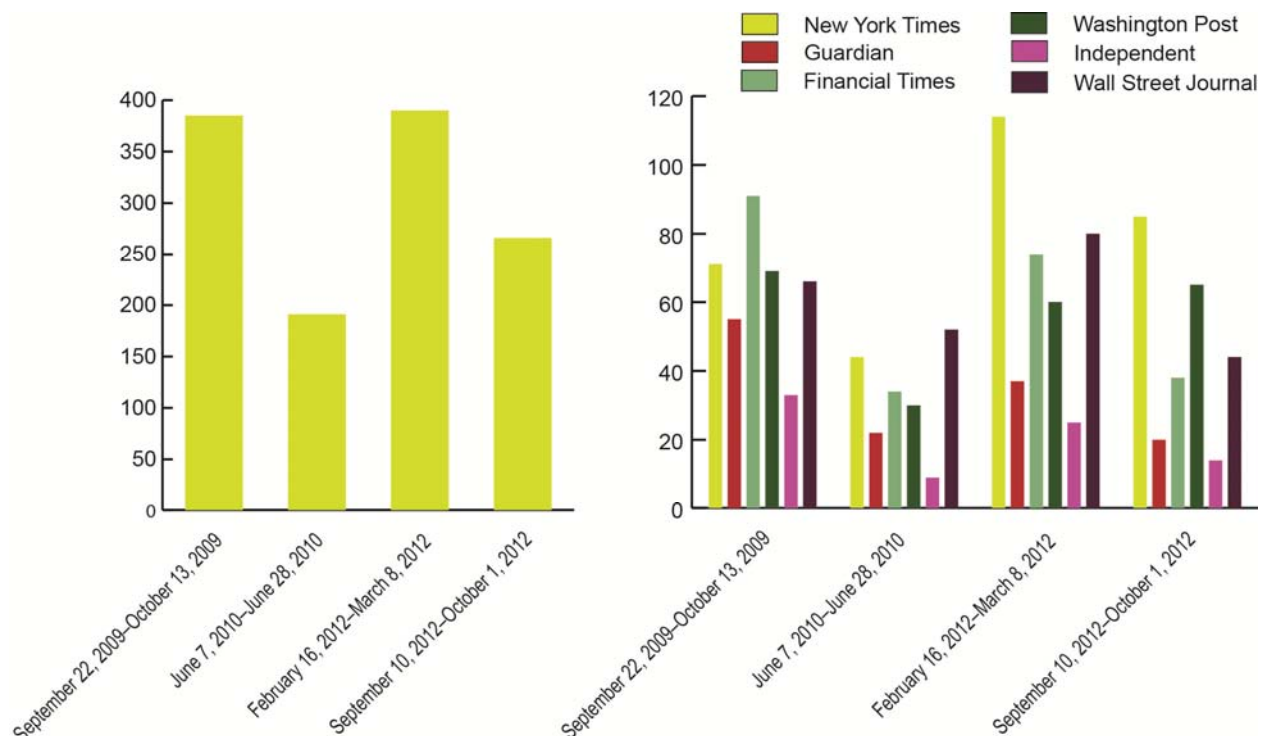
If the goal of news media is to act in the public interest, to hold public officials accountable, and to permit an informed public to play a constructive role in the foreign policy decisions made by their government in their name, then journalists ought to consider more carefully how they go about framing the facts and assessments that animate complex policy issues such as Iran's nuclear program and how the international community could and should respond. Without considering these fundamental characteristics more carefully and reflecting a broader spectrum of viewpoints and policy possibilities in their coverage, they are liable to repeat the mistakes that contributed to disastrous policy choices in the past.

Appendix A. About the sample

This study relied on Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases to assemble its sample of articles. In assembling the sample, the study initially collected all of the articles from the selected newspapers where the search term “Iran” appeared. An abundance of articles that had nothing to do with Iran or Iran’s nuclear program were among this collection. Adding the search term “nuclear” significantly limited the number of articles that did not relate at all to Iran’s nuclear program or the international response to it. In total, the sample of articles that included both “Iran” and “nuclear” for all six newspapers during each of the four selected periods comprised 1,232 articles. This total includes the “web-only” articles published by the 6 newspapers that are archived in Lexis-Nexis and Factiva.

The number of articles published in each of the selected time periods varied widely, with the first and third time periods accounting for 63 percent of all articles published (see Figures 5 and 6). The *New York Times* published the most articles (314 articles) during the four periods; the *Independent* published the fewest (81 articles). The *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* published roughly the same number of articles cumulatively during the four periods (237 articles, 224 articles, and 242 articles, respectively). Though the *New York Times* published the most articles during all four periods, large spikes in the number of articles it

Figures 5 and 6. Total number of articles in sample



published during the third and fourth time periods account for nearly two-thirds of its total; in the first two time periods, at least one other newspaper published more articles than the *New York Times*.

Appendix B. Types of coverage and sources

Types of coverage

To get a broad sense for the newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear program in the selected periods, the study divided up the coverage by type of article. General types of articles (Breaking News, News Analysis, Opinion) were identified first, and categories were added to the typology as necessary. The complete list of article types with brief descriptions of each type is below.

Types of articles	
Breaking News	These articles correspond to a specific event, process, or decision (e.g., the resumption of talks, the release of IAEA reports, the ups and downs in financial markets.) This category included news briefs.
Political/Diplomatic	These articles focus on U.S., European, Iranian, and Israeli political and diplomatic happenings relating to the Iranian nuclear program and the international response to it. This category includes items that deal with the implementation and effects of sanctions and items related to covert efforts by all parties. (If a story is predominantly about domestic politics with a brief mention of the nuclear issue, the story is coded as “side note.”)
Features/Human Interest	These articles focus on tangential elements of Iran’s nuclear program or the public discussion about it.
Background	These articles focus on broad societal and political trends in Iran and in the international community. These articles were often supplementary to political/diplomatic or breaking news articles.
Commentary/Opinion	These articles include Op-eds, commentary, and letters to the editor.
Interviews/Live Debate	These articles include transcripts or lightly edited interviews with officials and people of note.
Side Note	These articles aren’t substantively focused on issues relating to Iran’s nuclear program. Stories predominantly focused on domestic politics in Iran, the United States, Israel, and other countries are also included in this category.
Editorials/Leaders	These are opinion articles that typically represent the “voice of the paper” and don’t have a byline.

While most of the article types are relatively self explanatory, the origin of the Side Note category deserves additional attention. In reviewing the articles in the sample, a surprising number included mentions of Iran and its nuclear program but did so only in passing, as if the international dispute were simply a backdrop to other happenings. Many of these articles focused on economic issues, in particular fluctuations of oil prices and financial markets. A number also focused on European and U.S. relations with other countries (e.g. China, Russia, etc.), of which the Iranian nuclear program is only one point of discussion.

Each article in the sample was assigned a single article type that best reflected the contents and orientation of the article, even in those instances when a single article could have been placed in multiple categories.

Types of sources

News coverage during these periods relied on array of sources—some official, some not. To understand who was informing newspaper coverage and whose perspectives were represented, the study identified 11 main types of sources that were split into two main categories: Official government sources—Iranian officials, U.S. officials, European officials, Israeli officials, and other foreign officials; and non-governmental sources—those from international institutions, think tanks and academic institutions, news media, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as members of the public and unnamed sources. Sub-categories were developed for each type of official government source, so as to permit a more nuanced understanding of whose perspectives—those of the leadership, executive officials, legislators, etc.—were most prominently represented.

Types of Sources	
Iranian officials	President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; Supreme Leader Khamenei; Named Iranian officials - Individuals who work for the Iranian government (executive, legislative, military, etc.), including Iranian clerics; and unnamed Iranian officials.
U.S. officials	President Barack Obama; U.S. executive branch officials - Individuals or agency representatives associated with the executive agencies (State, Defense, NSC, intelligence, Homeland Security); U.S. legislative officials - Members of congress, their staff, etc.; and unnamed U.S. officials.
European officials	Named European officials, including heads of state; unnamed European officials.

Israeli officials	Prime Minister Netanyahu; other members of the Israeli government.
Other foreign officials	Non-American, non-Iranian, non-Israeli, non-European government officials; other unnamed foreign officials.
International Institutions	Individuals from international institutions, such as the IAEA, the UN, the World Bank, etc.
Think tank experts/Analysts	The term analyst refers to informed experts or scholars and others dubbed as analysts in a story. "Analyst" could also refer to former government officials with relevant expertise or informed opinion.
News Media	News Media outlets and journalists (Including Iranian and Israeli outlets)
Public	Members of the general public (including foreign individuals)
NGO officials and personalities	A "personality" includes well-known individuals, who don't have substantive expertise or informed opinions.

Appendix C. A content analysis of specific events

In addition to understanding the general nature of newspaper coverage of Iran’s nuclear program and the international response to it, this study was designed to allow for a close reading of coverage during periods when significant events drew increased attention to the core political and policy issues at stake. To more closely examine the relevant coverage, this analysis focuses specifically on two types of newspaper articles: News coverage (those categorized as “Breaking News” or “Political/Diplomatic”) and Editorial/Leader coverage. In total, the categories included in the news coverage made up more than half of the articles published during the four time periods. Each section of this analysis provides the necessary political and policy background to the events and trends discussed in order to put newspaper coverage of them in sufficient context.

Period 1 – September 22, 2009 – October 13, 2009: The Fordow revelation, Geneva negotiations, and the fuel-swap deal

News coverage

Fordow revelation. On September 25, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown stood before reporters on the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Pittsburgh and publicly revealed the existence of an Iranian uranium enrichment facility near the city of Qom. Iran had disclosed the existence of the under-construction facility to the IAEA in a letter dated September 21, 2009.²⁶ Prior to this revelation, negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Great Britain, Russia, the United States, and Germany) had been scheduled for the first week in October 2009. The revelation also came days after the U.N. Security Council had passed a new resolution focused on nuclear nonproliferation.

Much of the newspaper coverage immediately following the September 25 press conference led with assessments about the extent to which the existence of the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Facility (as the facility near Qom has become known) revealed anything about Iranian intentions, about how it added drama to the dispute, and about how the revelation would affect upcoming negotiations. For instance, a September 26 *New York Times* story on the subject lead off as follows:

President Obama and his allies raced Friday to use their revelation of a secret Iranian nuclear enrichment plant as long-sought leverage against Tehran, demanding that the country allow highly intrusive international inspections and propelling the confrontation with Tehran to a new and volatile pitch.

In a day of high drama at an economic summit meeting, American, British and French officials declassified some of their most closely held intelligence and scrambled to describe a multiyear Iranian effort, tracked by spies on the ground and satellites above, to build a secret uranium enrichment plant deep inside a mountain.

The lead September 26 *Guardian* story on the issue began:

The Iranian nuclear crisis reached a pivotal moment yesterday after Tehran was forced to admit it was building a secret uranium enrichment plant—a move that brought the prospect of a dramatic show-down over international sanctions a step nearer.

The leaders of U.S., Britain and France broke away from the G20 summit in Pittsburgh to condemn the Iranian regime after it informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the development. President Barack Obama said western intelligence agencies had known of the secret plant—near the holy

²⁶ IAEA Director General's Report, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2009/74, November 16, 2009.

city of Qom, a seat of Shia learning—for more than two years. He demanded that Iran allow UN inspectors into the plant and take concrete steps to restore “confidence and transparency” in the country’s nuclear programme.

The lead sentence from the September 26 *Wall Street Journal* story on the issue read:

The leaders of the U.S., France and Britain charged Iran has built a secret nuclear facility designed to give the Islamic republic the ability to build an atomic weapon, a revelation that significantly raises the stakes in the West’s intensifying face-off with Tehran.

The immediate coverage also focused on the degree to which the facility’s revelation vindicated long-standing suspicions about Iran’s nuclear intentions. A September 26 *Financial Times* report read:

Western officials and analysts have become increasingly worried that Iran might be building a secret site that could enrich uranium for a bomb away from prying eyes.

Yesterday’s revelation that Iran has indeed been building an undeclared nuclear facility does not prove such fears to be true—work is not complete on the site and the U.S., French and British intelligence about it is incomplete—but the news underlines the growing fear in western capitals that the most sensitive parts of Tehran’s programme may be hidden from view.

An analysis in the September 26 *Guardian* was blunter:

Like riverboat gamblers casting loaded dice, Iran’s leaders have played a double game of deceit, duplicity and blind man’s bluff in on-off talks with western countries since the existence of suspect nuclear facilities was first exposed. Now it seems the Iranian regime has been caught red-handed, and clean out of trumps, by the forced disclosure that it is building, if not already operating, a second, secret uranium processing plant.

The revelation will bring a triumphal roar of “told you so!” from Bush-era neoconservatives in the U.S. to hawkish rightwingers in Israel. The likes of former vice-president Dick Cheney and U.N. envoy John Bolton, and the current Israeli leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, have long insisted that Tehran’s word could not be trusted.

Most newspapers reported Iran’s assertions about the peaceful purpose of the Fordow facility and about the legality of its construction and disclosure. Yet these claims were more often than not presented merely as a counterpoint to U.S. and European official pronouncements about the facility, as in this October 5, 2009 *Washington Post* report:

The site sparked serious concern, in part because its location next to a military base and partly inside a mountain adds to suspicions that Iran’s nuclear program could have a military dimension. Obama, who accused Iran of seeking to keep the site hidden for years before notifying the IAEA about it, has said Tehran’s actions “raised grave doubts” about its promise to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes

only. Iran, which insists that its nuclear work is for nonmilitary purposes like energy production and medical research, said the site's location near a military base is intended to protect it from aerial bombing.

Only a few reports in the days immediately following the revelation focused on the technical details of the new enrichment facility and how the IAEA was relatively quick to rule that Iran had indeed violated rules on timely disclosure of the facility. Iranian officials insisted that they were acting within their disclosure obligations. Still fewer raised the core issues underlying Iran's nuclear developments: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a party, does not affect Iran's freedom to develop a range of nuclear fuel-cycle capabilities, assuming that it complies with IAEA safeguards, which are meant to detect the illicit diversion of nuclear material.

None of the coverage of the Fordow revelation mentioned the military attacks that have befallen Iraq's and Syria's nuclear facilities in the past two decades or discussed the degree to which Iran's nuclear facilities have been threatened by military action—both of which would have led credence to some of Iran's fears and might have put Western officials' claims in better context.

The newspapers' coverage remained focused on suspicions of Iran's nuclear intentions as attention turned to IAEA negotiations to gain access to the Fordow facility:

Iran has agreed to allow international inspectors to visit its uranium enrichment plant near the holy city of Qom, the head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, said yesterday.

But the proposed date for the start of the inspection—25 October—falls short of demands by the U.S. and its allies, who fear a cover-up and had sought immediate access for UN inspectors after the disclosure of the plant's existence last month. (*Guardian*, 10/5/09)

Also:

Britain yesterday expressed irritation that the International Atomic Energy Agency was being forced to wait three weeks before being given access to Iran's hitherto secret enrichment plant, amid fears that the delay could allow Tehran to cover up possible evidence of military links to its nuclear programme. (*Financial Times*, 10/6/09)

As will become apparent throughout this content analysis, coverage of Iran's nuclear program placed particular emphasis on what newspapers deemed to be the latest and most important events and information. This is not surprising; however, it is consequential, particularly with a story that has as long a history and as many moving parts—some of which are highly technical—as does Iran's nuclear program. The lack of relevant context demonstrated in the coverage of the Fordow revelation and the focus on a narrative of “pivotal moments” and “rising stakes” obscures the actual importance of this event and potentially distorts the public discussion. The manner of the revelation was meant to further portray Iran as an untrustworthy partner and to

pressure the Iranian government into agreeing to Western terms in the upcoming negotiations—points that were often lost in the mix of coverage.

Geneva negotiations. President Obama came to office with the explicit intention of engaging Iran in diplomatic negotiations over its nuclear program but doing so as part of a “two-track” strategy, where the other track was building international support for and implementing punitive sanctions. The administration gave itself a deadline of the end of 2009 for negotiations to bear fruit. A range of factors, including the disputed Iranian presidential election of 2009 and the civil unrest that followed and the domestic pressure on the administration to act more forcefully against Iran, led to the scheduling of the October 1, 2009 Geneva meetings—only months before the expiration of the administration’s deadline.

Some initial coverage of the Fordow facility explicitly acknowledged the degree to which the public revelation of the facility could have been timed to provide maximum bargaining leverage for the P5+1 when it sat down with Iranian officials in Geneva in early October 2009. Indeed, the Fordow revelation seemed to entrench further in the minds of U.S., European, and Israeli officials and subsequently newspaper coverage the existing assumption that the burden of proof in negotiations lay squarely at Iran’s feet:

The disclosure of a second uranium enrichment site in Iran has led the Obama administration to shift the emphasis in its dealings with the Islamic republic—away from engagement and toward building an international consensus for sterner action against Tehran.

The effort to directly engage Iran was a hallmark of the early months of the administration, with President Obama offering a televised greeting in honor of the Persian New Year and sending private letters to the country’s supreme leader. But the gestures went largely unreciprocated. Now, while not shutting the door on engagement entirely, the United States and its allies plan to forcefully press the case that Tehran has been caught, red-handed, in yet another violation of international rules.

Officials hope that the pressure—to be applied at previously scheduled talks Thursday in Geneva—will force Iran into a broader discussion about its program and then into a serious set of negotiations.

(Washington Post, 9/26/09)

The administration and its international partners’ position was that Iran had to prove, through action, the peaceful nature of its program, and at the very least, the sincerity of its efforts to negotiate about its nuclear activities. The newspaper coverage of these events appears to have adopted this formulation. This was evidenced by the repeated questions, both before and immediately after the October 1 meeting, raised about whether Iran was using negotiations to stall for time, for example:

The clearest risk is that the Iranians may play for time, as they have often been accused of doing in the past, making promises and encouraging more meetings, while waiting for political currents to change or the closed ranks among the Western allies to break. (*New York Times*, 10/3/09)

A majority of the newspaper coverage leading up to and following the negotiations also focused on how the negotiations fit into the Obama administration's and other Western nations' strategy to pressure Iran into engaging in "serious" talks, where "serious" ostensibly meant talks in which Iran conceded to Western negotiating terms, including ceasing uranium enrichment:

At talks scheduled for Thursday in Geneva with Iran, the United States and five other major powers will demand immediate and unfettered access to the newly exposed nuclear facility in Iran, including access to people and documents involved in its construction, and they will insist that Tehran abide by international rules to reveal such projects before construction begins, Obama administration officials said Saturday.

Diplomats will also insist that Iran undertake confidence-building measures, including answering questions about suspected efforts to develop nuclear weapons and accepting a timetable for serious negotiations. Officials said that there is no stated deadline, but that if Tehran does not respond seriously by year's end, the United States and its partners could begin to push for crippling sanctions targeting Iran's economic and financial links to the world. (*Washington Post*, 9/27/09)

Because so much of the newspaper coverage of the Geneva negotiations was premised on the "two track" framing, considerable attention was also given to the possibility of additional punitive sanctions on Iran or other strategies that the United States and its allies could pursue:

The U.S. has begun to ratchet up enforcement of existing sanctions on Iran, including cracking down on illegal exports of American products, even as it threatens fresh economic restrictions if Iran doesn't stop enriching nuclear material.

Despite initial signs of progress in talks between Iran and members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany in Geneva on Thursday, U.S. officials are expected to push for new U.N. or unilateral sanctions unless Tehran backs up its word with actions in coming weeks and months. (*Wall Street Journal*, 10/2/09)

Also:

Robert Gates, the U.S. defence secretary, expressed optimism in weekend television interviews that, if need be, Iran could be brought to heel by additional penalties. But many profoundly disagree. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Eliot Cohen, a former Bush administration official, said Gates was kidding himself. "A large sanctions effort has been under way against Iran for some time. It has not worked to curb Tehran's nuclear appetite, and it will not," he said. Sanctions were a mere fig leaf for weak politicians. And since doing nothing was not an option, Washington's only logical alternative was to "actively seek the overthrow of the Islamic Republic" by whatever means necessary, barring all-out invasion.

With such dangerously ill-considered threats emanating from the world's only nuclear superpower, little wonder Tehran's own hardliners are circling the wagons. And little wonder Beijing, the new voice of reason in global affairs, is pleading for calm. (*Guardian*, 9/30/09)

Also:

The Obama administration is laying plans to cut Iran's economic links to the rest of the world if talks this week over the country's nuclear ambitions founder, according to officials and outside experts familiar with the plans.

While officials stress that they hope Iran will agree to open its nuclear program to inspection, they are prepared by year's end to make it increasingly difficult for Iranian companies to ship goods around the world. The administration is targeting, in particular, the insurance and reinsurance companies that underwrite the risk of such transactions.

Officials are also looking at ways to keep goods from reaching Iran by targeting companies that get around trading restrictions by sending shipments there through third parties in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Hong Kong; and other trading hubs.

The administration has limited options in unilaterally targeting Iran, largely because it wants to avoid measures so severe that they would undermine consensus among countries pressing the Iranian government. A military strike is also increasingly unpalatable because, officials said, it probably would only briefly delay any attempt by Iran to produce a nuclear weapon.

Whatever steps are taken, officials said, their goal would be to disrupt the Iranian economy across many sectors, particularly businesses that help support Iran's military and elite. (*Washington Post*, 9/29/09)

In discussing the possibility of additional sanctions, coverage also focused on the potential unintended effects of those sanctions and their likely efficacy:

Western countries do not want to impose measures that deepen the misery of ordinary people, because it could help the government and strangle the fragile protest movement. (*New York Times*, 9/28/09)

Also:

As the West raises the pressure on Iran over its nuclear program, Arab governments, especially the small, oil-rich nations in the Persian Gulf, are growing increasingly anxious. But they are concerned not only with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran but also with the more immediate threat that Iran will destabilize the region if the West presses too hard, according to diplomats, regional analysts and former government officials. (*New York Times*, 10/1/09)

Also:

Iran's small private sector has spent a lot of time and money over the past few years on finding ways to evade international sanctions imposed over the country's nuclear programme. That activity could become even more costly than before if further sanctions were imposed against the Islamic regime following the make-or-break talks in Geneva today.

While western leaders seem more reluctant than before to go for petrol sanctions as the next step, the possibility of further financial limitations is on the rise.

“The biggest impact of sanctions has been on the cost of trade transactions . . . with financial settlement instruments such as letters of credit becoming more costly and time consuming,” says Amir Cyrus Razzaghi, head of Ara Enterprise, a private business consulting group. (*Financial Times*, 10/1/09)

Also:

Hans Blix, the former chief UN weapons inspector, last night warned Western leaders they risked strengthening the hand of hardliners in Iran if they rush to “corner” President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the crisis over the country’s nuclear programme. (*Independent*, 9/28/09)

In limiting their coverage of the negotiations to examining the policy course explicitly taken by the U.S. administration and its allies, the newspapers perpetuated a relatively narrow framing of the policy options available both to the United States, its allies, and Iran. Indeed, despite the fact that the Geneva negotiations were between the P5+1 *and* Iran, relatively little attention was given to examining Iranian strategic interests and motivations. What was Iran’s negotiating position? What kind of deal was it likely to accept and why?

Though the newspapers did discuss a range of possible outcomes of the “two-track” course and potential unintended consequences of punitive sanctions, they failed to raise several important possibilities. For instance, none of the newspapers raised the possibility that sanctioning Iran further could lead Iran to decide to build a nuclear weapon, a matter about which it was likely undecided, or that the P5+1 knew that its general framework for negotiating with the Iranians neglected to take particular Iranian sensitivities and interests into consideration and was likely to fail.

The fuel-swap deal. As the main outcome of the Geneva meeting, Iran and the other parties agreed in principle to a fuel-swap deal, whereby Iran would ship a majority of its low-enriched uranium (enriched to less than 5 percent U-235) out of the country in exchange for enriched and fabricated uranium fuel (enriched up to 20 percent U-235) for its medical isotope production reactor.²⁷ The negotiating parties and the IAEA had discussed the possibility of such a confidence building measure as the fuel swap prior to the Geneva meeting, and at the meeting, they left the details of the fuel swap to be worked out at a later date.

The newspaper coverage of the fuel-swap deal was universally cautious, focusing on the potential benefits of the deal—both in terms of improving diplomatic efforts and limiting Iranian nuclear capabilities—and on suspicions that Iran was merely stalling for time, trying to avoid additional sanctions and to continue to build out its nuclear capabilities. Absent from the

²⁷ For additional background on the fuel-swap deal, see Ivanka Barzashka and Ivan Oelrich, “The Twenty-Percent Solution,” Federation of American Scientists Issue Brief, April 16, 2010.

coverage was any substantive consideration of Iranian suspicions of U.S. and international conditions for the fuel-swap deal, which were key to ultimately undermining the deal.

The October 2 *Wall Street Journal* lead article on the topic began:

Iran agreed to transfer the bulk of its known nuclear fuel to other countries to enrich it, Western officials said. The officials said the surprise move could temporarily reduce Tehran's potential to make bombs, but analysts cautioned that the Iranians merely may be seeking to defuse pressure for sanctions while continuing their nuclear program.

Also:

Iran agreed on Thursday in talks with the United States and other major powers to open its newly revealed uranium enrichment plant near Qum to international inspection in the next two weeks and to send most of its openly declared enriched uranium outside Iran to be turned into fuel for a small reactor that produces medical isotopes, senior American and other Western officials said.

Iran's agreement in principle to export most of its enriched uranium for processing—if it happens—would represent a major accomplishment for the West, reducing Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon quickly and buying more time for negotiations to bear fruit.

If Iran has secret stockpiles of enriched uranium, however, the accomplishment would be hollow, a senior American official conceded. (*New York Times*, 10/2/09)

Also:

Yesterday's meeting in Geneva fell short of a dramatic breakthrough but has put Iran and the six powers meeting it—the U.S., Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany—on a path of negotiations after months of public posturing over its nuclear programme.

In theory, that could yield results in a few months' time—staying the hand of countries such as Britain and France, which have threatened sweeping sanctions if Iran does not change course this year.

Speaking in New York, Manouchehr Mottaki, Iranian foreign minister, said the atmosphere in the Geneva talks had been “constructive,” adding that Tehran was ready to hold such meetings up to the summit level.

In practice, however, a deal remains a long shot. At stake is whether Iran builds a nuclear infrastructure that, despite all its protestations, would make it much easier to produce fissile material for a bomb. (*Financial Times*, 10/2/12)

The assumptions that animated most of the immediate coverage—that there was reason to be suspicious of Iran's motives for agreeing to the deal, that the deal could still be undone, and that the deal shouldn't alter plans to further pressure Iran—were made more explicit in some articles:

French officials are concerned by the implications of such a deal. While they accept it would be a confidence-building measure, they insist Tehran must also pledge by December to freeze expansions of uranium enrichment—otherwise new sanctions will have to be imposed.

“There is no logic in taking the LEU out of Iran, if Iran simply continues to produce 100kg of the material per month,” said a French government source. “Iran is looking for more time and a move which would give legitimacy to its programme. Imposing the freeze is absolutely essential.” (*Financial Times*, 10/3/09)

Also:

The sudden show of cooperation by Tehran reduces for now the threat of additional sanctions, which has been made repeatedly by the United States and others over the past week after the revelation of a secret Iranian nuclear facility. The United States will need to keep the pressure on Iran to avoid being dragged into a process without end. (*Washington Post*, 10/2/09)

Indeed, the fuel-swap deal did unravel in the months following the Geneva meeting. Negotiators for all sides couldn’t agree on the sequence of events for Iran to ship out its low enriched uranium and for the P5+1 to return the enriched, fabricated fuel pads. The P5+1 also wanted Iran to decide about the deal quickly, and Iran wanted assurances that the P5+1 wouldn’t renege on the deal once its stockpile of low enriched uranium was transported out of the country.

The United States, European states, and others, subsequently continued to pursue additional punitive sanctions against Iran in the United Nations and with national legislatures in the early months of 2010. The push for sanctions continued despite a last-gasp effort by Brazilian and Turkish diplomats, who agreed to a revived variation of the fuel swap deal with Iranian diplomats, with the written encouragement of President Obama, in mid-May 2010.²⁸ U.S. officials had apparently already decided that it needed to pursue additional sanctions to further pressure Iran and to placate domestic political constituencies.

The coverage leading up to and following the Geneva negotiations placed the burden for the success of the negotiations squarely on Iran, and thus the deal’s failure was seen, fairly or not, by U.S. and European newspapers as primarily an indictment of the dysfunction of Iran’s government and the uncertainty of its intentions. This was not the only lesson that could have been drawn from this failure.

Editorial/Leader coverage

Fordow revelation. Following the Fordow revelation, editorial and leader writers focused on many of the same broad themes found in the news coverage of events. They focused on how the revelation was exactly what they were expecting and how it reinforced suspicions that Iran had additional undisclosed nuclear facilities. Some used the revelation to criticize Obama

²⁸ The sequence of events related to the “Tehran Declaration” are captured in detail in Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2012), p. 186.

administration policy and Obama personally; some took the opportunity to dismiss the IAEA's role as a watchdog.

However, many of the articles provided more historical and policy context to the discussion than did the news coverage, referring to Iran's obligations under the NPT, the affect of domestic unrest in Iran, etc.

Most striking was the degree to which the editorials called for a reevaluation of U.S. intelligence assessments of Iranian capabilities and intentions, as if the United States had been basing its assessments and policy choices on faulty information all along. They also directly questioned Iranian intentions and posited that Iran posed a threat greater than is widely accepted:

Let's also not forget the boost Iran got in late 2007, when a U.S. national intelligence estimate concluded that Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and kept it frozen. The U.S. spy agencies reached this dubious conclusion while apparently knowing about the site near Qom. The intelligence finding stole whatever urgency existed for the Bush Administration to act against Iran, militarily or otherwise, which perhaps was the intended goal. The Iranians got more time and cover.

In an interview with *Time* magazine this week, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad didn't sound overly concerned, saying that if the U.S. mentioned the previously secret facility, it "simply adds to the list of issues to which the United States owes the Iranian nation an apology over." Following the violent protests this summer in response to Iran's fraudulent presidential elections, Mr. Ahmadinejad has kept power but looks both weaker and more ruthless. He makes explicit threats against Israel and he engaged in more Holocaust denial at the U.N. this week. (*Wall Street Journal*, 9/26/09)

Also:

Strong sanctions could help the Iranian opposition if average citizens blame the regime for shortages, rising prices or other economic disruptions. But Mr. Ahmadinejad probably reckons that he can use them to rally the country behind him.

That will be harder if the steps have the backing of Russia and China as well as the West—which is why the Obama administration is focusing diplomacy on those governments. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev hinted at support for sanctions last week, but it's not clear that Moscow's real ruler, Vladimir Putin, agrees. China continues to oppose sanctions in public while quietly striking deals to supply Iran with the gasoline that would be one of the best targets for an embargo.

The United States must make clear to those governments that it will not settle for inaction against a regime that is brazenly defying international treaties and U.N. Security Council resolutions. At the same time, the administration should reassess the intelligence community's conclusion about whether and how quickly Iran is seeking a weapon. If it had not been discovered, the Qom plant could have given Iran the means for a bomb by 2011 without the world knowing about it. And if there is one clandestine facility, most likely there are others. (*Washington Post*, 9/26/09)

Also:

The revelation that Iran is secretly building a second enrichment plant near Qom adds urgently to pressure for a solution. U.S. officials say this is an enrichment plant based at an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Base and therefore has military application. They say it is designed to manufacture weapons grade uranium.

After the Iraq debacle, the outside world listens sceptically to western intelligence claims. But what is not in doubt is that this plant was kept secret from the United Nations for years. Iran's claim that it is part of a peaceful civil nuclear programme cannot be taken remotely seriously.

On Thursday, all six powers—including Russia and China—must tell Iran to bring its charade to an end. Iran must give the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. watchdog, immediate access to the Qom plant. It must clarify the meaning of a range of documents that suggest it has sought to build a weapon in the past. Above all, Iran must agree by December that it will halt all further expansion of its nuclear programme. If it does not, the imposition of tough new sanctions by the U.N. will be fully justified.

Negotiations with Iran, if they get under way, will not be easy. Regrettably, the U.S. may have to concede at some point in talks that Iran can continue processing low enriched uranium for civil nuclear power in return for a pledge not to expand its programme. But if Iran is to be given this concession, it must be accompanied by the most intrusive U.N. surveillance of every aspect of its nuclear activities. For one thing is clear. Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad and his cronies cannot be remotely trusted. They are cheats and deceivers. After the events of the last few days, the world can make this judgment with confidence. (*Financial Times*, 9/28/09)

This last article makes explicit the deep-seated animosity and distrust that can be seen in both news and opinion coverage of Iran's nuclear program. Despite their hostile characterizations of Iranian officials, many of these editorials also advocated punishing Iran with additional punitive sanctions with the hope that somehow these same officials would become reasonable in the long-run and curtail Iranian nuclear activities in response to Western demands:

The fact is that Iran has now been caught a second time trying to conceal a major facility for a programme it claims is above board and purely civilian. It is well past time Tehran stopped playing these games. Yesterday one could feel the international opposition to punitive sanctions melt. True, there was a marked difference in tone between Mr. Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy and Gordon Brown at their joint press conference yesterday, with the U.S. president stressing that a negotiated solution still existed, while Mr. Brown talked of serial deception and drawing lines in the sand. The truth is that neither man has the luxury of waiting to find out what Iran's true intentions are. The existence of a second site, and the distinct possibility of others besides, makes a mockery of the IAEA's cameras at Natanz and their painstaking attempts to verify how many centrifuges are working, how much uranium they have enriched and to what level. Iran itself has just made the best possible case for the deadline that it will now have to meet—to agree to a new inspections regime by December or face a fuel blockade. Set to one side, if one can, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's obnoxious and primitive Holocaust denial at the U.N. this week. Iran's cat-and-mouse game with nuclear inspectors hands a propaganda victory on a plate to Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli premier who has made little secret of his air force's preparations for a long-range air strike. (*Guardian*, 9/26/09)

Also:

Iran has been caught red-handed time and again—buying equipment from Pakistan's nuclear black market, hiding sites and even bulldozing the evidence when the world got wise. As a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran was required to disclose the Qom project when it decided to begin construction. And more than three years after the United Nations Security Council ordered it to stop producing nuclear fuel at Natanz, the centrifuges are still spinning.

Given that long, faithless history, there are some who insist there is no point in talking at all. But their alternative—military strikes—would be a disaster, and unlikely to set Iran’s efforts back for long.

Talks scheduled to begin on Oct. 1 must proceed. It should soon be apparent if Iran’s leaders are serious. If not, the United States and the Europeans must push robust sanctions in the Security Council. They must also be prepared to toughen their own penalties if Russia and China (too often Tehran’s protectors) balk. (*New York Times*, 9/26/09)

Geneva negotiations and the fuel-swap deal. The editorials/leaders following the October 2009 P5+1 negotiations with Iran in Geneva continued to be skeptical of Iranian intentions, suggesting that the fuel-swap deal was probably another stall tactic. They emphasized the need to continue pursuing more stringent sanctions and cautioned against striking Iranian nuclear facilities militarily:

More intriguing was Iran’s reported acceptance, in principle, of a proposal under which most of the uranium that Iran has already enriched would be processed by Russia and France for use in a nuclear medical research reactor that Iran has possessed for decades. Considering that the Iranian stockpile had grown large enough to supply the core of a nuclear bomb if it were further enriched, that diversion could lower, for a while, the level of international alarm about how close Iran may be to producing a weapon.

Administration officials say such practical confidence-building measures are an improvement over the standoff between Iran and the West during the last year. In that they are right. But it remains the case that the international coalition is in the position of offering proposals that have been previously rejected and hoping for a different answer. Last year the Bush administration threatened new sanctions if Iran rejected the freeze proposal, but then was unable to deliver. The Obama administration now suggests the same consequences if the new talks fail. We can all hope it will be more successful if its bluff is called. (*Washington Post*, 10/2/09)

Also:

Hillary Clinton, U.S. secretary of state, is right to strike a note of caution, saying that the “meeting opened the door.” But that door has been closed for 30 years, and was sealed up during the eight years of the Bush administration.

President Barack Obama, by contrast, by deciding to engage, has got more out of Iran in eight hours than his predecessor’s muscular posturing did in eight years. Of course, that will not end the controversy—or the potential threat.

Iran will say, correctly, it has not given up its right to enrich uranium; its adversaries will say, correctly, it is buying time. Yet, to the extent that the risk of an Iranian “break-out” into weaponisation has been eliminated in the short term (and perhaps longer), we have all bought time. That must now be used intelligently.

Iran, first of all, has to deliver. Only transparency can build confidence. The talks need then to combine the nuclear dossier with ways of alleviating Tehran’s legitimate security concerns, and the equally valid worries of its neighbours.

The best way to confront Iran is with a deal: eventually allowing it to enrich uranium under strict monitoring, once it starts demonstrating its wish to contribute to the stability of its region. (*Financial Times*, 10/3/09)

Also:

Buyer beware has to be the rule when dealing with Iran and its nuclear ambitions. For years, Iran has cheated and lied and made just-in-time concessions to sidestep any real punishment.

So we are skeptical about Tehran's offer this week to send most of its stock of low-enriched uranium to Russia and France to be turned into reactor fuel. It could be good news—delaying the day when Iran would be able to build a nuclear weapon and, we hope, quieting calls in Israel for military action.

But that would only be true if Iran isn't hiding more stocks of enriched uranium somewhere else. And one must not forget that Tehran is continuing to churn out enriched uranium at its plant in Natanz—in direct defiance of a United Nations Security Council order.

...

Odds are Tehran is just playing for more time. But given all of the political ferment in the wake of June's stolen presidential elections—and the disclosure of the Qum site—there is a chance that Iran's leaders are getting nervous about their future and their ability to avoid or withstand tough international sanctions.

We are encouraged that more talks are set for later this month. But this is no time for complacency or wishful thinking. The United States and its partners must push Iran to open all of its declared nuclear facilities and allow inspectors to interview any Iranian scientist they choose to—the only way to figure out what else Iran may be hiding. The leading powers must also be ready to impose tough sanctions if Iran resists or if negotiations go nowhere. (*New York Times*, 10/3/09)

While most of the editorials/leaders focused on Iranian intentions *and* the need for the United States and Europe to be firm in response—short of militarily attacking Iran—the *Wall Street Journal's* editorials during this period stood out in their nearly singular focus on criticizing and undermining U.S. intelligence assessments of Iranian capabilities:

When it comes to politicized intelligence in the Bush years, the critics may finally have a point. Perhaps the work of America's intelligence agencies was manipulated to suit the convenience of a small group of willful officials, intent on getting their way against the better judgment of their colleagues.

Except the intelligence was about Iran, not Iraq, and the manipulators weren't conniving neocons but rather the Administration's internal critics on the left.

That's one way to look at last month's revelation that Iran is building a secret second site to enrich uranium, among other emerging intelligence details. The Qom site—too small for civilian purposes but ideal for producing weapons-grade uranium—is supervised by Iran's Revolutionary Guards and was only declared to the International Atomic Energy Agency after Tehran got wind that the nuclear watchdogs knew about it.

...

Yet some of us noted at the time that the NIE added, in a crucial footnote, that by “nuclear weapons program” it meant “weapon design and weaponization work and . . . uranium enrichment-related work,” rather than Iran’s “declared” nuclear facilities. The NIE’s main authors—including former intelligence official Tom Fingar and other internal critics of Bush Administration policies—downplayed this critical detail. Never mind that it was precisely Iran’s “declared” nuclear facilities that constituted the core element of any nuclear-weapons program.

Fast forward to the present, and it turns out the NIE was misleading even on its own terms: Iran did have a covert facility, perhaps for enrichment, and the intelligence community knew or at least strongly suspected it. We are also learning that the NIE’s judgment puts the U.S. intelligence community at odds with its counterparts in Britain, Germany and Israel, which have evidence to show that Iran resumed its weaponization work after 2003. (*Wall Street Journal*, 10/8/09)

This focus has the effect of narrowing the range of possible responses to Iran’s nuclear activities by calling into question a basic assumption of the Obama administration policy toward Iran. If, as this editorial suggested, the second facility is to be used to produce weapons-grade uranium—how could the United States or anyone be able to limit Iran’s capabilities without using force? Even if this were the case, U.S. and European policy makers still had options available to them, including the “two-track” course, or negotiations without the threat of punitive sanctions or without artificially imposed deadlines.

Period 2 – June 7, 2010 – June 28, 2010: Approving punitive sanctions

News coverage

Approving punitive sanctions. From 2006 through early 2010, the U.N. Security Council passed three separate resolutions that imposed new economic sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear activities. An additional round of sanctions came to a vote in the Security Council on June 9, 2010 and was passed.²⁹ These sanctions froze the funds and assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, tightened and expanded restrictions on specific individuals, authorized states to inspect ships suspected of carrying banned cargo, etc. The United States and European Union followed up on U.N. sanctions by approving additional sanctions of their own.

Whether or not to further sanction Iran for its nuclear activities was the topic of considerable newspaper coverage throughout the last three months of 2009 and first half of 2010. The sanction “debate” loomed large behind the events described above. For example, days after the public revelation of the Fordow facility and a day before negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, on September 30, 2009, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article devoted exclusively to describing how China was an obstacle to additional U.N. sanctions:

To be sure, China and the United States, leading members of the club of nuclear nations, share a practical interest in halting the spread of nuclear weapons to volatile areas like the Middle East. And it is in China’s interest to avoid alienating the United States, its economic and, increasingly, diplomatic partner on matters of global importance.

But beyond that, many experts say, their differences over Iran are not only economic but also ideological and strategic.

The United States has almost no financial ties with Iran, regards its government as a threat to global stability and worries that a rising Tehran would threaten American alliances and energy agreements in the Persian Gulf.

In contrast, China’s economic links to Tehran are growing rapidly, and China’s leaders see Iran not as a threat but as a potential ally. Nor would the Chinese be distressed, the reasoning goes, should a nuclear-armed Iran sap American influence in the region and drain the Pentagon’s resources in more Middle East maneuvering.

The potential for China, and also Russia, to derail U.N. sanctions was also noted in coverage of the preceding U.N. General Assembly meeting. The lead of a September 25, 2009 *Guardian* article about the meeting read: “China yesterday maintained its opposition to further sanctions on Iran, disrupting western attempts to present a united front at a critical meeting next week.” The

²⁹ “U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929,” June 9, 2010, available at www.un.org.

article went on to detail Chinese and Russian concerns about the U.S. and European focus on punishing and isolating Iran.

By the time the U.N. Security Council formally took up debate about additional sanctions, the coverage had only intensified. Some of the coverage leading up to and following the June 9, 2010 U.N. Security Council vote continued to focus on how to overcome divisions between Security Council members, particularly China and Russia, and the precise sanctions imposed and exceptions granted. Coverage also gave attention to the growing influence of the two states that voted against the U.S. sanctions, Brazil and Turkey, whose efforts to secure the revived fuel-swap deal were rebuffed by the United States. The coverage acknowledged that the two were upset about the failure of their initiative but did not highlight their substantive critique—that sustained engagement with Iran on equitable terms, not punitive sanctions, was the only way to resolve the dispute.

Far more of the coverage focused on the stated goals of additional sanctions and how the sanctions fit in with the broader strategy of the United States and its partners to pressure Iran into making concessions about its nuclear program. The coverage also reinforced the notion put forth by U.S., Western, and international officials that the onus was on Iran to show movement on their policy and political positions.

The lead of a June 10, 2010, *Washington Post* article exemplified this focus:

After several months of grueling diplomacy, the U.N. Security Council on Wednesday imposed a fourth round of sanctions on Iran’s military establishment—a move that the United States and other major powers said should prompt the Islamic Republic to restart stalled political talks over the future of its nuclear program.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the foreign ministers of allied nations asked the European Union’s chief diplomat to pursue talks with Iran at the “earliest possible opportunity,” and President Obama asserted that “these sanctions do not close the door on diplomacy.”

“We think that the sanctions send a kind of message to the entire Iranian leadership, which is quite diverse in their assessments and reactions, that there is still an opportunity for you to participate and to work with us,” Clinton said after the 15-nation council adopted Resolution 1929 in 12-to-2 vote, with Brazil and Turkey casting no votes and Lebanon abstaining.

The diplomatic outreach was aimed at underlining the commitment of the United States and its allies to moving beyond punishment to cooperation with the Iranian government. But it also appeared calculated to shift the burden to Tehran to decide whether it will embrace negotiations with the United States and other key powers.

Some of the coverage also focused on how Iran perceived the sanctions and their likely effects and effectiveness, including their political impact:

Iran called the pending resolution proof that the West does not seek negotiation.

“These hasty measures are merely a deviation from the path of constructive transactions and are indicative of the fact that the other parties rather prefer confrontation,” Mohammad Khazaee, the Iranian envoy to the United Nations, said in a statement.

Skeptics noted that this would be the fourth round of sanctions the Security Council has imposed on Iran since 2006, and that none have succeeded in pushing Iran back into negotiations over accusations that it is defying the International Atomic Energy Agency and trying to develop a nuclear bomb. Iran denies it is trying to build a nuclear weapon.

Despite the sanctions already in place, Iran is enriching uranium at ever-higher levels and building new centrifuges to create larger stockpiles. (*New York Times*, 6/9/10)

Also:

For President Barack Obama, passage of the resolution cannot come too soon. He originally set the end of last year as a deadline for new sanctions on Iran. However, the vote is coming at a moment when tensions in the region are already extremely high as Iran squares off against Israel over its continuing blockade of Gaza. There may be some risk that the vote in New York will convince Iran to step up its anti-Israel rhetoric and maneuvering.

The endless cycle of international confrontation continues, meanwhile, to serve some useful domestic purposes for President Ahmadinejad who will portray the UN vote as a fresh attack on Iran and its sovereignty engineered by its foes—the U.S. and Israel. All these events help him distract the Iranian people from problems at home. (*Independent*, 6/9/10)

Also:

No one in the Obama White House believes that, by themselves, the newest rounds of sanctions against Iran’s military-run businesses, its shipping lines and its financial institutions will force Tehran to halt its 20-year-long drive for a nuclear capability.

So what, exactly, does President Obama plan to do if, as everyone expects, these sanctions fail, just as the previous three did? (*New York Times*, 6/11/10)

It is curious that the Iranian positions presented in the above articles roughly equate with the perceptions expressed about the newest round of U.N. sanctions, and particularly about the motives of the Obama administration. Both suggest that the sanctions are a distraction and counterproductive, yet very little attention is given to alternative courses of action or to a general critique of the two-track formulation that seemed to make additional sanctions inevitable. Was it possible that the U.S. strategy of pressuring Iran into making concessions on its nuclear program was having the opposite effect? And that what was being perceived by Western officials and the newspapers in question as Iranian intransigence was instead rational calculation in response to additional punishment?

In the days following the U.N. vote and as the United States and European Union prepared to approve additional sanctions of their own, the coverage began to more readily question the utility of relying on sanctions:

Proposed U.S. sanctions aimed at starving Iran of foreign gasoline could be signed into law before the end of June, but a shadowy network of Middle East gasoline suppliers is already undermining U.S. efforts to pile pressure on Tehran.

Oil traders and oil industry analysts say Iran will have little trouble finding other gasoline supplies in the Persian Gulf, where a black market in fuel-products thrives, even if Washington passes measures that would penalize firms or individuals with business in the U.S. that supply gasoline to Iran. (*Wall Street Journal*, 6/17/10)

Also:

So far, Iran's leaders have shown no inclination to negotiate seriously over its nuclear program, which they say is entirely peaceful. But some U.S. officials detect what they say are exploitable fissures within Iran's leadership.

"The sanctions are not an end unto themselves; they are a means to an end," said Robert Einhorn, the senior State Department official in charge of implementing the sanctions. "They will make it harder for Iran to support their nuclear and missile ambitions, and hopefully they will alter Iran's calculation of costs and benefits and encourage them to negotiate much more seriously with us than they have in the past." (*Washington Post*, 6/18/10)

Also:

Threatening direct sanctions against third-country banks and companies that do business with the designated groups, as the new legislation is poised to do, would dramatically raise the stakes, although it might also give rise to charges of extraterritoriality. (*Financial Times*, 6/21/10)

Also:

Some critics have questioned the effectiveness of sanctions in general, noting that the Iranians may simply develop new business partners in Asia and the Persian Gulf and that Iran is significantly lessening its dependence on refined oil imports. (*Washington Post*, 6/22/09)

Also:

The U.N., European Union and U.S. Congress all imposed substantial new economic sanctions on Iran this month in an effort to curb Tehran's nuclear work.

The sanctions seek to cut off Iran from the global financial system and to hobble its oil-and-gas sector. The measures also target the businesses of Tehran's elite military unit, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Mr. Panetta [the U.S. Secretary of Defense] on Sunday expressed doubt that these new financial penalties would be enough to pressure Iran into ending its nuclear activities. (*Wall Street Journal*, 6/28/10)

In response to the new punitive sanctions, Iran's leaders made a range of public statements condemning the moves and threatening retaliation, some of which made it into newspaper coverage:

One day after the Security Council approved new sanctions against them, the authorities in Tehran threatened on Thursday to revise their relationship with the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, using familiar language that has in the past presaged moves to limit global oversight of Iran's nuclear program.

State-run Press TV quoted Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the head of the National Security and Foreign Policy in the Iranian Parliament, as saying legislators would meet on Sunday to "push for legislation to reduce" Iran's relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency. (*New York Times*, 6/11/10)

Also:

As has become the established pattern in the battle of wits between Tehran and the west, the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, dismissed the EU move in advance. "Big powers want to impose their will on other nations . . . we do not need the financial support of these countries," he said. "The arrogant countries ink deals (with Iran) but later decide at some other place to pass a resolution and then unilaterally cancel the deals." (*Guardian*, 6/16/10)

Also highlighted in the sanctions coverage were various Iranian actions that were perceived by Western officials as retaliation for the sanctions, including the kicking out of two IAEA inspectors and reported increases in Iranian enrichment activity:

Iran claimed to have increased the production of a more highly enriched form of uranium yesterday, making what appeared to be a new gesture of retaliation against the United Nations' decision to impose more sanctions.

Ali-Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, announced that some 17kg of uranium had been enriched to 20 per cent purity.

If confirmed, this would add to fears that Iran is getting closer to acquiring the means to develop a nuclear weapon, which would need uranium enriched to the level of 90 per cent. (*Financial Times*, 6/24/10)

Only a few of the articles that discussed these statements and actions provided more than a sentence of context or offered potentially alternative motives for them, including the domestic concerns that contributed to the parties' actions. Instead, the sequence of events was reported in a manner that highlighted the competition among the parties for public opinion and moral standing, much as political reporters do when engaging in "horserace" journalism.

Editorial/Leaders coverage

Approving punitive sanctions. The passage of an additional round of U.N. sanctions drew a mixed reaction from editorial/leader writers. While many applauded the sanctions as long overdue and a political victory for President Obama, nearly all expressed pessimism that this latest round of sanctions would have the desired effect of getting Iran to agree to restrictions on its nuclear activities. Indeed, some even suggested that “pressure and persuasion” may not have any chance of achieving this goal—ever. What then? The June 10 *Washington Post* editorial suggested supporting Iran’s opposition movement in the hopes of inspiring regime change:

The question is whether the pressure will be strong enough to cause the regime to rethink its pursuit of nuclear weapons—in other words, whether the administration’s victory will be more than diplomatic. On that score there is reason for doubt. Though President Obama rightly says that the new sanctions are the toughest ever approved against Iran, they fall far short of the standard—”crippling”—that he originally set. Forty Iranian companies are targeted, which is more than double the existing number, but none are in the energy sector. A Russian-built nuclear plant will go forward, as will massive new investments by China in oil fields and refineries. Sales of heavy weapons to Iran are banned—but not the advanced air defense missile system that Russia has already pledged to deliver.

The administration hopes that broad and sometimes vague language in the resolution about energy, insurance and financial transactions will prompt the European Union and other friendly governments to adopt more stringent measures. But will that be enough to force Iran to accept the freeze on uranium enrichment it has resisted for four years, or even to agree to serious negotiations?

...

Encouragingly, Mr. Obama spoke of the anniversary this Saturday of last year’s fraudulent presidential election and of how the regime “brutally suppressed dissent and murdered the innocent” in its aftermath. Though it has been forced off the streets, the Green movement probably has a better chance of forcing meaningful change in Iran than the sanctions approved Wednesday. The Obama administration would do well to devote as much attention to a strategy for supporting the opposition as it has to collecting votes at the United Nations.

A June 10 *Financial Times* editorial suggested doubling down on current strategy:

The screw has been turned a further notch on Iran with the decision of the UN Security Council to tighten sanctions on the regime. There is, however, little sign that the nuclear negotiating game is any nearer conclusion.

This can happen only when Iran enters into negotiations with the west to legitimise its nuclear programme. It was Iran’s refusal to accept this principle that killed the deal brokered last month by Turkey and Brazil that would have transferred part of Iran’s uranium stockpile to Turkish territory.

In the absence of a deal, the west had no alternative but to keep the sanctions juggernaut rolling. It has always been the policy of the U.S. and its allies to rein in Iran’s nuclear programme while avoiding two evils—the first being Iran with the bomb and the second, Iran itself bombed. As time is the enemy—each

month that passes potentially brings the Iranians closer to the possession of weapons-grade material—the west could not stay its hand.

These and other editorials from the period seem to place the burden for the failure of past negotiations and for the success of future efforts on Iran, and to a lesser degree China and Russia, but never the United States and Europe. They also take liberties in characterizing negotiations to date and Iran's intentions and capabilities. For instance, the above-mentioned *Washington Post* editorial refers twice to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons—a controversial and unsubstantiated assumption—without acknowledging these caveats.

It is also clear that Iran met most U.S. demands in its last-minute agreement with Brazil and Turkey, so it was disingenuous for the *Financial Times* to blame solely Iran for the deal's failure.³⁰ The more likely explanation was that the United States, the E.U., Russia, and China were intent on punishing Iran regardless of the outcome of negotiations, counter to the argument put forth in the June 10, 2010 *New York Times* editorial:

New sanctions were not inevitable. Not if Iran had heeded repeated Security Council demands to halt nuclear fuel production. Instead, it expanded and increased the level of uranium enrichment. The International Atomic Energy Agency's most recent report says Iran has produced enough fuel that, with further enrichment, could make two nuclear weapons. Iran is still thwarting the agency's inspectors. Last fall, it was caught hiding yet another major nuclear facility.

Since 2006, the major powers have repeatedly offered to negotiate. Iran never showed sincere interest. The big powers made a smart move on Wednesday by reaffirming a 2008 proposal, offering Iran diplomatic, security and economic incentives if it suspends nuclear fuel production. If Iran truly wants a diplomatic resolution, it should take them up on the offer.

We don't know what, if any, mixture of pressure and persuasion might change Tehran's mind. We are sure that one more round of incrementally tougher sanctions won't be enough. All the major powers are going to have to keep pressing. (*New York Times*, 6/10/10)

If editorials written in this period reflect prevailing opinions or inform the public's and policy makers' understanding, then all of these parties share a particularly skewed view of how to resolve the ongoing dispute.

³⁰ Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice*.

Period 3 – February 16, 2012 – March 8, 2012:

Resumed negotiations, talk of war, and inconclusive IAEA talks

News coverage

Resumed negotiations. After more than a year break from direct negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, during which the range of new sanctions against Iran were implemented and in some cases tightened, Iranian officials sent a letter to the head of the P5+1 negotiating team, the EU’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, on February 14, 2012, asking to resume talks at the “earliest” possible time. The P5+1 agreed to the new talks on March 6, 2012, but not after some public consternation, in which the newspaper coverage raised many of the same questions that had been previously raised about Iranian intentions, the effectiveness of sanctions, and who carried the onus for compromise³¹:

Iran made its first concrete move in five months to relaunch nuclear negotiations with world powers even as it flexed its muscles in the oil market and announced a series of fresh nuclear advances.

The country’s Supreme National Security Council, which is in charge of nuclear talks, replied yesterday to a letter sent in October by Lady Ashton, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, expressing a readiness to resume negotiations.

According to people familiar with the letter from Saeed Jalili, the council’s head, Iran said it was “ready for dialogue” and called for “fundamental steps for sustained co-operation.”

European diplomats said the letter did not rule out the possibility of discussing the nuclear programme, in contrast to Iran’s previous insistence that its atomic activities should have been excluded. The last round of talks took place in 2010 and ended in failure. (*Financial Times*, 2/16/12)

Also:

U.S. and European officials who viewed the letter said it was vague and didn’t allay serious concerns in Washington and Brussels that Tehran would seek to use any new talks to buy time to advance its nuclear work and stave off new sanctions.

But these officials also said their governments were closely studying Mr. Jalili’s position and that they believed they needed to further test Iran’s willingness to re-engage in direct talks after a hiatus of more than a year.

The officials said Washington and Brussels are holding consultations and would need about a week to decide whether to set a date and location for new talks. They said they aren’t interested in conducting new negotiations with Tehran without assurances that Mr. Jalili will discuss the nuclear issues.

³¹ European Union Press Release, “Statement by High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Iranian nuclear issue,” March 6, 2012, A 104/12.

Western officials noted that Mr. Jalili didn't lay out any of the preconditions, such as a lifting of sanctions, that have scuttled earlier negotiations. He also mentioned a willingness to discuss Iran's nuclear development, which he evaded in past correspondence with Ms. Ashton.

The letter "remains in our eyes ambiguous, but it seems to be the start of an opening from [Iranians] who are saying they are ready to talk about their nuclear program," French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said.

The Obama administration didn't publicly respond to the letter. Senior U.S. officials said Iran appeared to be getting closer to convincing the West that is willing to return to direct talks. (*Wall Street Journal*, 2/17/12)

Also:

Despite stiff sanctions, Iran has refused to agree to curbs on its nuclear program, which it says is intended only for generating electricity. Western governments contend that Iran is moving systematically toward a nuclear weapons capability under the cover of a civilian nuclear energy program.

But Iran has also hinted that it might be open to making concessions. Iranian officials last week sent a letter to E.U. officials expressing willingness to resume international talks on its nuclear program. Western governments cautiously welcomed the proposal, which could lead to the first direct talks in more than a year. Iran agreed to host a special visit by a delegation from the International Atomic Energy Agency, which traveled to Tehran on Sunday for what the U.N. agency hoped would be a detailed discussion of Iran's past nuclear activities. (*Washington Post*, 2/20/12)

The possibility of negotiations in late February and early March 2012 was also framed by a growing public discussion about the potential for the United States or Israel to militarily attack Iran in an effort to set back its nuclear capabilities. As such, the coverage took on a slightly different framing, in which sanctions and negotiations were seen explicitly as alternatives to war and were discussed less directly in the context of the two-track strategy that animated previous coverage:

A successful resumption of talks would represent a victory for the Obama administration, which mobilized dozens of countries in an effort to apply economic and political pressure on Iran. Meanwhile, Obama has pressed Israel not to launch a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, arguing that economic sanctions could yet result in a diplomatic solution. (*Washington Post*, 3/7/12)

Also:

The resumption of negotiations could relieve rising pressure from Israel to use military force against Iran. But the decision is not without risks. Direct talks could allow Iranian negotiators to exploit various nations' differences. Failure could offer a rationale for military strikes.

Ms. Ashton's positive response to an Iranian offer made last month to resume the talks comes at a delicate moment in the years-long effort to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions. Her response came one day after President Obama urged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to give diplomacy and economic sanctions a chance to work before taking military action. (*New York Times*, 3/7/12)

The shift in framing noted in these last few articles was significant, because although it changed the context for negotiations from trying to avoid additional sanctions to trying to avoid an Israeli attack, it still effectively placed an artificial time limit on negotiations. While this might be exactly what U.S., European, and Israeli officials wanted, it distracted from the fundamentals of Iran's nuclear program and the international response.

Talk of war. Shifts in official U.S. and international strategy account for some of the changes in coverage that occurred in early 2012, but heightened public discussion about the possibility of the U.S. and/or Israel attacking Iran—conversation that took place in the context of a U.S. presidential campaign—had a more sustained effect on how newspapers covered events relating to Iran's nuclear program. All of the then-candidates for the Republican U.S. presidential nomination, and President Obama addressed the issue of Iran's nuclear program in events at or surrounding the 2012 policy conference of the U.S. lobbying group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which ran from March 4 through March 6, 2012:

Mitt Romney vowed on Tuesday to “bring the current policy of procrastination toward Iran to an end” if elected president, saying at a huge conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that he would impose “crippling sanctions,” station carriers and warships “at Iran’s door,” and suspend all diplomatic relations.

“Hope is not a foreign policy,” he said. “I will make sure Iran knows of the very real peril that awaits if it becomes nuclear.”

“I will be ready to engage diplomacy,” he added. “But I will be just as ready to engage our military might.”

...

Like Rick Santorum, one of his rivals for the Republican presidential nomination, Mr. Romney criticized Obama administration officials who have described Iran's leaders as “rational actors” and suggested that the United States and Iran share “common interests.” (*New York Times*, 3/6/12)

Also:

Barack Obama yesterday coupled a pledge that he was prepared to use military action if necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons with a clear warning that “too much loose talk of war” had actually been helpful to Tehran.

On the eve of a crucial meeting today with the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, the U.S. President repeatedly emphasised his preference for a diplomatic solution, backed by sanctions. “For the sake of Israel’s security, America’s security and the peace and security of the world, now is not the time for bluster. Now is the time to let our increased pressure sink in, and to sustain the broad international coalition that we have built,” he said in a speech to a conference organised by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac) in Washington, D.C.

In doing so, and while forcefully warning that a nuclear-armed Iran ran “completely counter to both Israel’s and the U.S.’s security interests,” Mr. Obama did little to gloss over the issues at the heart of a

disagreement between the U.S. and Israel over their strategy towards Tehran's nuclear programme. Key to these differences are two closely linked issues of timing. For Israel, the "red line" comes when Iran is capable of building a nuclear weapon. According to most Israeli readings, Iran is—thanks to its enrichment of uranium—not far off that point.

For the U.S. administration, the red line comes significantly later, namely if and when Iran starts building, or at least decides to build, a nuclear weapon. (*Independent* 3/5/12)

The role of Israel in the international response to Iran's nuclear program, and the state of U.S.-Israeli relations more specifically, provided near-constant fodder for newspaper coverage, as resumed negotiations were being considered and as the U.S. presidential campaign and the AIPAC policy conference drew heightened attention to the possibility of war:

U.S. officials are increasingly convinced that sanctions will not deter Tehran from its pursuit of nuclear weapons and that America will be left with no option but to launch an attack on Iran or watch Israel do so, possibly before the end of 2012.

Barack Obama has made clear that he is determined to give time for new sanctions to bite deeper in to Iran's already battered economy before abandoning the diplomatic approach.

But there is a strong current of opinion within the Pentagon and the state department that sanctions are doomed to fail, and serve only to delay Israeli military action and reassure Europe. "The White House wants to see sanctions work," said an official familiar with Middle East policy. "Its problem is that the guys in Tehran are behaving like sanctions don't matter, like their economy isn't collapsing, like Israel isn't going to do anything. Sanctions are all we've got to throw at the problem. If they fail then it's hard to see how we don't move to the 'in extremis' option."

...

However, the Americans are uncertain as to whether Israel is serious about using force if sanctions fail or has ratcheted up threats primarily to pressure the U.S. and Europeans in to stronger action. The U.S. is keen to ensure that Tehran does not misinterpret a commitment to giving sanctions a chance to work as a lack of willingness to use force as a last resort.

American officials are resigned to the fact that the U.S. will be seen in much of the world as a partner in any Israeli assault on Iran whether or not Washington approved of it. The administration would then have to decide whether to join in by using its firepower to finish what Israel starts.

"The sanctions are there to pressure Iran and reassure Israel that we are taking this issue seriously," said one official. "Israel is sceptical but appreciates the effort. It's willing to give it a go, but how long will it wait?" (*Guardian*, 2/18/12)

Also:

The fear of an Iranian nuclear bomb has been at the centre of Israeli government thinking for more than a decade. Until recently, however, Israel itself was never at the centre of the international effort to halt Iran's nuclear programme.

For all their concerns, Israeli leaders knew that the campaign to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions through diplomacy and sanctions was best left to others. Its involvement in sabotage and covert operations aside, a supporting role made sense to Israel. Framing the issue of an Iranian nuclear bomb as a standoff between Israel and Tehran would have damaged the international consensus. No less important, it would also have drawn unwanted attention to Israel's own nuclear capabilities.

What a difference four months make.

When Benjamin Netanyahu sits down with Barack Obama, U.S. president, in Washington today for a potentially fateful discussion on Iran, the Israeli leader faces a new strategic landscape. Since November, an incessant stream of speculation and leaks about an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities has pushed Israel out on to the diplomatic playing field—and into a position that is far more advanced than that of its western allies. Never before has an Israeli government been so exposed, and rarely so isolated, on the issue of Iran. (*Financial Times*, 3/5/12)

Also:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday played down a rift with President Barack Obama over the timing of possible military strikes against Iran, suggesting that Israel and the U.S. are so united that their policies are indistinguishable.

“We are you. And you are us,” said the Prime Minister in an unexpected remark designed to underscore the closeness of the two allies as he chatted at the start of an Oval Office meeting with President Obama, who stressed his strong support for Israel. “Israel and the United States share common values,” said Mr. Netanyahu.

Echoing comments from his speech on Sunday to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, President Obama also spoke about the “rock solid” commitment to Israel. The public show of unity by both leaders is clearly aimed at raising the diplomatic pressure on Iran. They want to convince the Iranian leadership that the U.S. is not bluffing when Obama says that military force to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability remains an option. (*Independent*, 3/6/12)

In addition to facilitating a public discussion about the political implications of the possibility of attacking Iran, the newspaper coverage also included a more general discussion about the risks that such an attack would carry:

The United States is stepping up efforts to dissuade Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, with a strong public warning by the U.S. military's most senior figure and the dispatch of two high-ranking officials to Jerusalem.

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. joint chiefs of staff, said in a television interview that it was “not prudent at this point” to attack Iran, and “a strike at this time would be destabilizing.”

But in a comment likely to fuel speculation about Israel's military plans, he added: “I wouldn't suggest we've persuaded them that our view is the correct view.” The two countries were having a “candid, collaborative conversation” which was continuing, he said.

His concerns were echoed by William Hague, the British foreign secretary, who said it was “not a wise thing at this moment” for Israel to launch military action against Iran. (*Guardian*, 2/20/12)

Also:

The Obama administration asks what would be accomplished if an attack set Iran back by only three or four years, unified even the country’s opposition leaders against the West and pushed the program further underground. As Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, a former official of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Energy Department with a deep background in nuclear proliferation, put it on Tuesday: “Both sides say we don’t want Iran to get the bomb. Where there’s a difference of opinion is that we don’t think an airstrike solves the problem, and the Israelis do.” (*New York Times*, 3/7/12)

As a consequence of the ongoing U.S. presidential election, the newspaper coverage of this period is particularly focused on the opinions of serving government officials and political candidates. As such, it is fair to assume that domestic political concerns play a significant role in the language used, yet very rarely did newspaper coverage acknowledge this dynamic. Instead, the officials’ characterizations of the challenges posed by Iran’s nuclear problem are often presented without question and the sometimes-explicit threats without context.

Inconclusive IAEA talks. On February 21 and February 22, 2012, Iranian officials met with IAEA officials to negotiate about IAEA access to an Iranian site where international officials and the IAEA suspect activities related to Iran’s nuclear weapons program took place. The status of this site is one of the few remaining “open” items in the IAEA dossier on Iran.³² After two days of negotiating about access to the site, the IAEA officials left without inspecting it. Newspaper coverage of these events focused specifically on what the negotiations said about Iran’s intentions and about how it narrowed international options to resolve rising tensions:

The failure of talks this week between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency over the Iranian nuclear programme has triggered dismay in western capitals, heightening concerns that any forthcoming negotiations with world powers are destined to make little progress.

As an IAEA team returned to the agency’s headquarters yesterday from a fruitless two-day meeting with officials in Tehran, western diplomats said Iran’s stance during the encounter suggested it was unlikely to negotiate seriously over its programme any time soon.

The team returned as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, reiterated the regime’s long-held view that the country was not pursuing nuclear weapons and said “pressure, sanctions, terrors and threats” could not force it to abandon its programme.

³² IAEA Director General, “Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors,” June 2, 2008. See also, IAEA, “Communication dated 27 August 2007 from the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Agency concerning the text of the ‘Understandings of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the IAEA on the Modalities of Resolution of the Outstanding Issues,’” INFCIRC/711, August 27, 2007.

In a meeting with nuclear scientists, Ayatollah Khamenei, who has the last say in all state affairs, said Iran considered having nuclear weapons ideologically and religiously a “great sin” with “high risks” and that its authority was not dependent on such arms. (*Financial Times*, 2/23/12)

Also:

But the refusal to accommodate U.N. inspectors will fuel Western suspicions that the regime has something to hide, and play into Israel’s hands. Jerusalem has lobbied for a pre-emptive air strike, arguing that Iran is nearing a “zone of immunity,” when its nuclear facilities will be moved into impregnable underground bunkers. The latest U.N. setback will also dash hopes of an early renewal of negotiations with the West after Iran suggested that it was willing to bring “new initiatives” to the table. (*Independent* 2/23/12)

Also:

A visit by international nuclear inspectors to Iran ended in failure Tuesday. Tehran not only blocked access to a site the inspectors believe could have been used for tests on how to produce a nuclear weapon, they reported, but it also refused to agree to a process for resolving questions about other “possible military dimensions” to its nuclear program.

...

Iran’s refusal to deal with the inspectors’ questions is likely to increase tension, at a moment of heightened sanctions and after the assassination of nuclear scientists in Iran and suspected retaliation against Israeli diplomats. Iran struck an increasingly bellicose tone on Tuesday, with an Iranian official warning that the country would take pre-emptive action against perceived foes if it felt its national interests were threatened. The country also laid down new conditions for oil sales. (*New York Times*, 2/22/12)

Also:

U.N. nuclear officials conceded failure on Tuesday after an extraordinary two-day visit to Iran yielded no progress in clearing up allegations about the country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology.

A spokesman for the International Atomic Energy Agency said a delegation from the U.N. nuclear watchdog was returning home after being blocked by Iran from access to key records and sites. The team arrived in Tehran on Sunday at the government’s invitation to resolve long-standing disputes over whether Iranian scientists had secretly experimented with nuclear warhead designs nearly a decade ago.

But the IAEA officials were barred from visiting a key testing facility known as Parchin, where some of the research was alleged to have occurred, the spokesman said. Moreover, the U.N. officials were unable to reach an agreement with Iran on a basic work plan for addressing the questions about past nuclear experiments. (*Washington Post*, 2/22/12)

Despite the coincidence of the IAEA talks with the heightened public discussion of the possibility of Israel and/or the United States attacking Iran, few of the articles about the talks mentioned the threats of attack made toward Iran in the surrounding weeks nor the possibility that the outcome of the talks was related to the threats of attack. Nor did the newspaper coverage address the assessments of U.S. intelligence agencies that Iran had ceased its nuclear weapons

program in 2003. This is not to belittle the importance of the need for Iran to answer relevant questions about its nuclear activities, but it is equally important to put Iran's suspected activities in context when discussing the policy options available in 2012 to resolve the dispute.

Editorial/Leader coverage

Resumed negotiations. In light of the likely resumption of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, editorials and leaders from mid- to late-February 2012 devoted a fair amount of attention to understanding (and undercutting) Iranian motivations and at the same time trying to lay the ground work for successful talks:

Iran this week signalled it was willing to resume negotiations with the international community—including over the opaque nuclear programme both its neighbours and the west find threatening—in search of what its national security chief Saeed Jalili called “fundamental steps for sustainable co-operation.” It is time to find out what, if anything, those words mean—perhaps the last chance before this protracted standoff spirals into a potentially catastrophic new war in the Middle East.

This ostensible overture should not be dismissed because it comes packaged in Tehran's now ritualised breast-beating and exaggeration of its nuclear prowess. If this is yet another attempt by the regime to buy more time, that will soon become apparent. If the Islamic Republic really wants to negotiate, it has to turn up with proposals, not just bluster about preconditions.

But the international community—through the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the U.S., UK, France, Russia and China) plus Germany—also has to be realistic.

Ratcheted-up sanctions, including an imminent oil embargo and the obstruction of Iran's ability to finance its trade, are having a big impact on the Iranian economy. But it would still be optimistic to believe they will force the theocrats in Tehran to renounce the right to enrich uranium. (*Financial Times*, 2/18/12)

Particular attention was paid to Iranian defiance of international demands, defiance that was aimed at rousing domestic Iranian support. Rather than seeing through Iranian politics, however, the editorials suggested that the Iranian leadership's courting of the public belied a sense of desperation and weakness:

No one can accuse Iran, or its current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, of meekly rolling over in the face of international opprobrium. Which, of course, may be the precise point Mr Ahmadinejad wanted to make, when he starred in a bizarre sequence on Iranian state television yesterday. Clad in a white coat, the President inspected the loading of nuclear fuel rods into a reactor at the Natanz research plant. The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation then showed off what he said was a new generation of super-efficient centrifuges, stressing that they, like the reactor fuel, were of domestic manufacture.

Nuclear fuel rods and centrifuges, though, are not toys; nor should they be used as propaganda props. To trifle with such sensitive apparatus—even if, as Iran still insists, it is designed to produce nothing more harmful than much-needed electricity—is to play with something more dangerous than fire. And while Mr

Ahmadinejad and his officials may have been trying to underline that Iran can and will press ahead with its nuclear programme, in defiance of sanctions, they merely demonstrated their remoteness from reality. The impression was of a regime trying to bolster its possibly shaky position.

Iran's leaders are also, potentially, courting disaster. Thus far, those individuals—mostly in Israel and the United States—who have argued that Iran is well advanced on a nuclear weapons programme and that the window for shutting it down is fast closing have been in the minority. However shrill and insistent their voices, wiser counsel has prevailed. There is as yet no definitive proof that Iran is either developing a nuclear weapon, or anywhere near achieving one; the only evidence is of dissembling and obfuscation. (*Independent* 2/16/12)

This last paragraph is particularly convoluted, because it seems to hold Iran responsible for the spread of misconceptions about its nuclear intentions and capabilities. Iranian officials have steadfastly maintained that their nuclear activities are peaceful in nature and have not attempted to convince anyone that they have a nuclear weapons program.

A *Guardian* leader article during this same period is equally spooked as other editorials during this period by the frequent calls from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Republican presidential candidates for militarily attacking Iranian nuclear facilities. It comes to an uncommon conclusion, though, suggesting that President Obama and European leaders change course:

A way out still exists: it means allowing Iran the ability to produce civilian nuclear energy as it is entitled to do under the non-proliferation treaty. To date, Iran has not broken the provisions of the NPT. The IAEA has a list of unanswered questions about suspected research into warhead miniaturisation and nuclear triggers, but nothing has been proved. The gap between suspicion and proof creates the space for negotiation which would cap the amount of low-enriched uranium hexafluoride that Iran could produce, limit the sites in which such enrichment could take place, and prevent enrichment to military-grade levels. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose “deviant current” is battling Khamenei for candidates in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, has offered to stop higher enrichment in exchange for fuel rods. At the moment Iran, Israel and U.S. are watching who will blink first. In the Middle East, that is a dangerous activity. (*Guardian*, 2/22/12)

The possibility of accepting an Iranian enrichment capability or of the international community finding a way to live with a nuclear-weapons capable Iran, however, led to a fair amount of push-back from some editorial pages:

The immediate question is whether Iran is using diplomacy—as it has several times before—as a way of buying time, even as it presses ahead with steps toward a bomb. Recent reports say that the nuclear program is close to passing another major milestone, with the startup of a uranium enrichment facility buried under a mountain near the city of Qom.

Fortunately, a test of Iran's seriousness was underway this week as a delegation from the International Atomic Energy Agency visited the country. Its aim was to obtain agreement to a plan to answer outstanding

questions about alleged work on weaponization, including interviews with scientists and a visit to a military base. On Tuesday night, the IAEA reported another Iranian failure to cooperate—which suggests that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has not changed his long-standing refusal to come to terms with the West.

In fact, it appears likely that Tehran perceives talks as an opportunity to undermine sanctions. Mr. Jalili's letter referred to negotiations "based on step-by-step principles and reciprocity," language that could describe a proposal originally put forward by Russia last year. Moscow outlined a sequence of steps in which Iran would receive relief from sanctions in exchange for incremental actions to satisfy the IAEA. Iran rejected the idea, but now the P5+1, urged on by the Obama administration, is discussing a modified version. Reportedly, it could grant some sanctions relief if Iran suspended only its higher-level enrichment of uranium, and surrendered material enriched to that 20 percent level.

Such a deal would be a retreat from Security Council resolutions that require Iran to cease all uranium enrichment and would ease the pressure on the leadership at precisely the wrong moment. Worried about that possibility, a bipartisan group of a dozen senators dispatched a letter to Mr. Obama last Friday opposing "any proposal that caps or limits sanctions" in exchange for "anything less than full, verifiable and sustained suspension of all enrichment activities." If Iran is serious about a deal, it will meet the senators' terms. (*Washington Post*, 2/22/12)

The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page continued to focus on what it saw as flawed and naïve U.S. intelligence assessments. It took its argument a step further for the occasion, though, and suggested that not only are U.S. assessments of Iranian capabilities flawed but that they lead to dangerous notions of acceptable outcomes:

According to a weekend story in the *New York Times*, [intelligence officials] still believe the conclusions of a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which argued that Iran put its nuclear weapons-work on the shelf in 2003.

Mr. Clapper and friends are drawing a narrow distinction between having the ability to build a nuke and actually building one. In this ever-hopeful analysis, Iran might decide that it is better served possessing enough nuclear capability to keep its options open and its enemies on guard, without having to incur the risks of building and maintaining an actual arsenal. The model here is Japan, another country that could easily build nuclear weapons but chooses not to out of strategic, moral and political considerations.

There's a problem with this logic: Japan is not Iran. Democratic Tokyo threatens nobody. Theocratic Tehran never ceases making threats. The idea that Japan could, in theory, field a nuclear arsenal might serve as a deterrent against Chinese military planners, but it doesn't keep ordinary people in Seoul, Taipei or Manila awake at night.

By contrast, if the mullahs can readily acquire nuclear weapons, they will instantly change calculations in the Middle East and beyond. That event would broaden Iran's strategic and tactical options while complicating those for Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Gulf states and the U.S.

It would lead almost inevitably to a policy of seeking to placate Tehran at the expense of U.S. allies—lest, for example, some "provocative" Israeli action tempt Iran into building the bomb it nearly possesses anyway. The Obama Administration is already moving in that direction with its campaign, first private and

increasingly public, to put a higher priority on deterring an Israeli attack on Iran than on preventing a nuclear Iran. (*Wall Street Journal*, 2/27/12)

While news coverage of Iran's nuclear program was somewhat careful to limit the ways that it prejudged Iranian intentions, this editorial betrays outright hostility toward Iran and for the notion that the nonproliferation regime should be applied without discrimination.

Talk of War. In trying to put in context the disagreement between Israel and the United States over how to proceed with policy toward Iran, *New York Times* editorial writers betray the same negative sentiments toward Iran:

Iran's nuclear appetites are undeniable, as is its malign intent toward Israel, toward America, toward its Arab neighbors and its own people. Israel's threats of unilateral action have finally focused the world's attention on the danger. Still, there must be no illusions about what it would take to seriously damage Iran's nuclear complex, the high costs and the limited returns.

This would not be a "surgical" strike like the Israeli attack in 1981 that destroyed Iraq's Osirak reactor, or the 2007 Israeli strike on an unfinished reactor in Syria. Iran has multiple facilities, and the crucial ones are buried or "hardened." Pentagon analysts estimate that even a sustained Israeli air campaign would set back the program by only a few years, drive it further underground and possibly unleash a wider war.

It would also cast the Iranian government as the victim in the eyes of an otherwise alienated Iranian public. It would tear apart the international coalition and undermine an increasingly tough sanctions regime, making it even easier for Iran to rebuild its program. (*New York Times*, 3/6/12)

Yet despite suggesting that Obama's version of diplomacy could still succeed in wringing concessions from Iran, several editorials ultimately conclude that a military attack against Iran might be necessary:

It's also possible—even likely—that, having established the principle that Israel is prepared to act unilaterally, Mr. Netanyahu and his government will choose not to do so. That would give the United States and its allies an opportunity to probe Iran's willingness to make concessions in another round of negotiations, which are expected this spring. Otherwise, Mr. Obama's pledge that "the United States will always have Israel's back when it comes to Israel's security" will be put to the test. (*Washington Post*, 3/6/12)

Also:

What if sanctions and diplomacy are not enough?

Mr. Obama has long said that all options are on the table. In recent days his language has become more pointed—urged on, undoubtedly, by Israel's threats to act alone.

Last week he told *The Atlantic*, “when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say.” In a speech on Sunday to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, he declared that his policy is not to contain Iran, it is “to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”

The United States military is far more capable of doing serious damage to Iran’s facilities than the Israeli military, but the cost would still be high, with many of the same dangers and uncertainties.

Mr. Obama is right that military action should only be the last resort, but Israel should not doubt this president’s mettle. Neither should Iran. (*New York Times*, 3/6/12)

The heightened threat of an attack against Iran and the very public disagreements between U.S. and Israeli officials about how much Iranian capability to tolerate, led other editorial writers to draw the opposite conclusion:

There are many alarming aspects to the escalating tension over Iran’s nuclear programme. But perhaps the most worrying of all is that every pressure on Barack Obama—be it political, economic, or, most of all, electoral—is pushing him to take a hard line. He must resist.

This week’s fractious talks between the U.S. President and his Israeli counterpart have only added to the strain. Mr. Obama attempted to set a temperate tone: blending the assurance that the U.S. will “always have Israel’s back” with a much-needed warning about the dangers of too much “loose talk” of military conflict.

Benjamin Netanyahu showed little sign of softening his bellicose stance, however. “I will never let my people live under the shadow of annihilation,” the Israeli Prime Minister told his U.S. audience, adding a darkly emotive comparison with U.S. unwillingness to bomb the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz.

It is not that Israel’s concerns about Iran are unjustified, or that it has no right to defend its interests. And with Iran rapidly shifting its enrichment facilities into heavily fortified bunkers beyond the reach of Israeli weapons, Mr Netanyahu’s assertion that “none of us can afford to wait much longer” is an understandable one.

Nonetheless, both sense and feeling argue in the strongest possible terms against an attack on Iran. Not only would such a move achieve little, setting Tehran’s nuclear ambitions back by perhaps two years at best. The cost—in terms of loss of life, of diplomatic relations soured for a generation, and of the potential for wider geopolitical catastrophe—is simply too high. (*Independent* 3/7/12)

Also:

As the history of every other successful piece of multi-lateral negotiation has shown—seven years elapsed between Libya ratifying the NPT and the security council vote lifting sanctions—Mr. Obama will have to invest significant resources and time to defuse this crisis peacefully. For sanctions to work as an incentive, they have to be liftable. EU sanctions are enforced by an executive, the EU commission, but U.S. sanctions are locked into place by a legislature, the U.S. Congress.

Left to the laws of gravity, naval flotillas around the strait of Hormuz, and the opportunity for unscripted events, U.S. relations with Iran will deteriorate further unless energy is put into creating incentives for Iran to change course on enriching uranium. It is more important than ever to remember that while the IAEA

have serious concerns about a possible bomb programme, there is no proof. To launch a full-scale war in the Middle East on the basis of a hunch, would be folly itself. (*Guardian*, 3/6/12)

Period 4 – September 10, 2012 – October 1, 2012: U.S. presidential elections

News coverage

U.S. presidential elections. Starting in September 2012, much of the discussion of public policy in the United States revolved—directly or indirectly—around the U.S. presidential campaign between President Obama and Republican presidential nominee former-Governor Mitt Romney. Iran’s nuclear program and U.S. policy toward Iran was one of the relatively few foreign policy issues to receive prominent news coverage during the campaign, in part because of the uneasy dynamic between U.S. and Israeli officials about the appropriate policy course. Negotiations between U.S. and Israeli officials about the appropriate response to Iran’s nuclear program were on full display early in the month, with Israeli Prime Minister repeatedly and passionately calling on U.S. officials to set clear and firm “red lines” to discourage Iranian nuclear development; U.S. officials responded by committing the United States to keeping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons but refusing to “set deadlines for the Iranians.”

This very public debate continued at the U.N. General Assembly meeting in late September 2012. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called particular attention to how close Israeli officials assessed Iran was to having sufficient nuclear material to build a nuclear weapon. When framing Netanyahu’s presentation, news coverage focused on the degree to which it was meant to influence public and official policy debates about the appropriate response to Iran’s nuclear developments, rather than on the developments themselves. This was particularly the case when reporters and editors noted that Netanyahu’s timeline extended into 2013 rather than requiring immediate action:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that a firm ultimatum to Iran is the only peaceful way to stop the regime in Tehran from getting atomic weapons, increasing pressure on President Obama weeks before the U.S. presidential election.

Netanyahu’s address to the U.N. General Assembly was a highly public argument for a stronger U.S. threat to attack Iran if it does not back off from what the Israeli leader described as the final push toward a nuclear weapon. Israel and the United States say the program is intended to develop a weapon, an accusation that Iran denies.

Netanyahu made a case, laced with historical references, for telling Iran explicitly where it must stop to forestall an outside attack. He also warned that time was running out.

“At this late hour there is only one way to peacefully prevent Iran from getting atomic bombs,” Netanyahu told the annual gathering. “And that is by placing a clear red line on Iran’s nuclear weapons program.”
(*Washington Post*, 9/28/12)

Also:

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli prime minister, piled fresh pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear programme in a speech to the U.N. yesterday that spelt out for the first time an Israeli “red line” for Tehran .

Brandishing a red marker and a diagram showing a bomb, Mr. Netanyahu warned that Iran was on track to produce enough enriched uranium to build a nuclear bomb by next summer. The only way to stop it reaching that goal, he added, was for the world to set a clear limit for the nuclear enrichment programme.

The Israeli leader said the line should be drawn just before the final stages of the enrichment process, a point that could be reached as early as spring next year.

Though his speech contained some of the most direct threats towards Tehran to date, Mr. Netanyahu also suggested the critical moment for Israel was not likely to arrive until next year. That estimate is likely to dampen, if not dispel entirely, recent speculation over a possible Israeli strike on Iran before the US presidential elections in early November.

...

Mr. Netanyahu did not spell out what would happen if Iran decided to move beyond the red line. However, the prime minister and other senior Israeli officials have warned repeatedly that they stand ready to order air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities should diplomacy and sanctions fail to halt Iran's progress towards a bomb.

Mr. Netanyahu made his plea for a red line despite a series of recent statements from senior U.S. officials rejecting the idea. The rare public spat is widely seen as emblematic of a broader divergence between the two sides over Iran. Washington remains, at least for the time being, deeply opposed to the idea of a military strike on Iran, a move senior U.S. officials warn could trigger a regional conflict. (*Financial Times*, 9/28/12)

Instead of focusing on Netanyahu's speech, the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage jumped directly to the tensions between Israeli and U.S. officials and their policy positions:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, denied a chance to meet this week with President Barack Obama to advance his plea for a firmer U.S. line on Iran, spoke with Mr. Obama by phone on Friday -- yielding a White House statement that both governments share the same objective.

The two leaders spoke for about 20 minutes, and agreed they are both committed to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, the White House said. The White House said Mr. Netanyahu welcomed the U.S. president's commitment "to do what we must to achieve that goal."

Mr. Netanyahu later spoke by phone with Republican presidential challenger Mitt Romney, underscoring how the Israeli leader's campaign for the Obama administration to agree to a "red line" that would trigger an attack on Iran has become more politically charged during the election year. (*Wall Street Journal*, 9/29/12)

Netanyahu, like many others, viewed the outcome of the U.S. presidential election as having repercussions for U.S.-Israeli relations, and U.S. policy toward Iran. While much of the news coverage of Iran during the period focused on these political dynamics, several articles also focused on understanding the technical and security concerns underlying policy choices and gave

some coverage to independent analyses of how specific policy choices would likely affect Iran's program:

Advocates of airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities have long held that the attacks would delay an atom bomb for years and perhaps even buy Israel enough time to topple the Iranian government. In public statements, the Israeli defense minister, Ehud Barak, has said that an attack would leave Iran's nuclear program reeling, if not destroyed. The blow, he declared recently, would set back the Iranian effort "for a long time."

Quite the opposite, say a surprising number of scholars and military and arms-control experts. In reports, talks, articles and interviews, they argue that a strike could actually lead to Iran's speeding up its efforts, ensuring the realization of a bomb and hastening its arrival.

"An attack would increase the likelihood," Scott D. Sagan, a political scientist at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, said of an Iranian weapon.

The George W. Bush administration, it turns out, reached an even stronger conclusion in secret and rejected bombing as counterproductive.

The view among Mr. Bush's top advisers, recalled Michael V. Hayden, then director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was that a strike "would drive them to do what we were trying to prevent."

Those who warn against attacking Iran say that such a move would free officials in Tehran of many constraints. An attack, for instance, would all but certainly lead to the expulsion of international inspectors, which, in turn, would allow the government to undo hundreds of monitoring devices and safeguards, including seals on underground storage units. Further, an Iran permitted to present itself to the world as the victim of an attack would receive sympathy and perhaps vital imports from nations that once backed trade bans. The thinking also goes that a strike would allow Iran to further direct its economy to military ends. (*New York Times*, 9/30/12)

Also:

A bipartisan group of ambassadors, retired generals and foreign policy experts is warning against a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities without a more thorough public discussion to weigh the costs and benefits.

In a paper and letter to be released Thursday, the group argues that an attack could delay Iran's development of a nuclear weapon for up to four years, but would have other consequences, such as rallying the Iranian people behind the current regime and solidifying the government's hold on power.

The group, which includes retired Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, former National Security advisor Brent Scowcroft and former deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who served in Republican administrations, doesn't oppose military action across the board. But members argue that the country needs a more thorough debate about the consequences of an attack on Iran.

"Big national security decisions are not easy to make," said veteran diplomat Thomas Pickering, a former ambassador to the United Nations, who helped organize the group. "As you go ahead we think the national debate of the issue should be well informed... people should understand it is not a slam dunk, these are very hard issues."

In an interview, Mr. Pickering said if it turns out that the U.S. or Israel struck Iran's nuclear facilities before Tehran had decided to build a nuclear weapon, any Iranian opposition to building a nuclear weapon in Iran could evaporate.

But the paper doesn't rule out the need for any military involvement, and Mr. Pickering said it argues that a strike may be required if Tehran moves to build a weapon. (*Wall Street Journal*, 9/12/12)

The ongoing presidential election also gave newspaper reporters reason to focus on the entire previous four years of Obama administration policy toward Iran, a tack that lent itself to more introspective analysis of the policy choices available to the United States and Iran, and the impact of years of mistrust between the parties involved:

As Obama nears the end of his first term, the mixed results of his Iran policy have provided ammunition for supporters—who point to the president's unparalleled success in uniting the world against a nuclear Iran—but also for his chief political rival, Republican Mitt Romney, who has pounded the White House for failing to halt Iran's march to a nuclear-weapons capability and accused the president of abandoning Israel, the United States' top ally in the region.

The Iran record offers unique insights into Obama's use of power in dealing with an intractable foreign policy challenge that threatens to dominate the agenda of whoever occupies the White House in 2013. On Monday, at the U.N. General Assembly, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remained defiant in the face of calls for his country to curb its nuclear program and suggested that the United States was being bullied by Israel. Obama is expected to address the issue in remarks before the United Nations on Tuesday.

For now, the Obama administration is seeking to further increase the pain for Iran, responding in part to pressure from Israel and from Congress, which has consistently urged harsher measures, including some that U.S. officials fear could hurt allies as well as Iranians. Although sanctions rarely work, independent analysts say a groundswell of economic unrest could force the regime to make concessions if it sees its survival at risk. (*Washington Post*, 9/25/12)

This dual focus—on the political maneuvering between the United States and Israel and on the effects of current policy and the likely effects of a military attack—during the peak period of the U.S. presidential election offered two contrasting framings of policy toward Iran. On the one hand, the news coverage was focused on the broad U.S. domestic political backdrop and thus the policy choices discussed were seeped in political meaning. On the other hand, newspaper coverage was tempered by a retrospective framing of U.S. policy that relied on a far wider spectrum of sources and viewpoints.