

Legitimate and de-legitimate discourse and self-representation in the killing of Qasem Soleimani.

شرعية و لاشرعية الخطاب و التمثيل الذاتي في مقتل قاسم سليمانى

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Received: 20/05/2021

Accepted: 03/07/2021

Published: 14/07/2021

Abstract: this study investigates the argumentative strategies employed by American Republicans, Democrats and Iranian leaders to legitimize and de-legitimize the killing of Iran Revolutionary Guards commander, Qasem Soleimani, and to represent Iran's regime as an eternal enemy to US. For this purpose, a critical discourse analysis approach based on Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) was applied on 12 statements of US Republicans and Democrats senators, and 3 statements of Iranian leaders taking place the day Qasem Soleimani was killed. The results show that the arguments of the American republicans and democrats (Us) and the Iranians leaders (Them) are legitimized by topoi, and the image of Iran is still that orient who is a danger and enemy to the American people.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis (CDA), Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), argumentative strategies, legitimate discourse, Qasem Soleimani Killing.

المخلص : يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة الطرق الاستدلالية المستعملة من طرف الجمهوريين و الديمقراطيين الامريكيين و القادة الايرانيين لإعطاء الشرعية و اللاشرعية في قتل قاسم سليمانى قائد الحرس الجمهوري الايراني و اظهار من خلاله طبيعة النظام الايراني كعدو ابدى للولايات المتحدة الامريكية. لأجل هذا الهدف تطبق طريقة الناقدة روث وداك Discourse Historical Approach على 12 مقولات للجمهوريين و للديمقراطيين سيناتور و 3 مقولات لقادة الايرانيين. النتائج تظهر ان الادلة شرعية و ذلك باستعمال topoi و صورة النظام الايراني مازالت تهدد الشعب الامريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحليل النقدي للخطاب، الطرق الاستدلالية، الخطاب الشرعي، طريقة التحليل الخطاب التاريخية، (DHA) مقتل قاسم سليمانى.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the field of critical discourse analysis, this study attempts to unveil the implications and ideological stances that the American elites (Democrats and Republicans) and Iranians carry towards the killing of Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The study mainly focuses on the argumentative strategies employed by these Elites to legitimize and de-legitimize Suleimani's murder by Trump decision on 3 January, 2020.

Most of the critical discourse studies carried on the Iranian nuclear issue since 1979 have primarily analysed ideological stances of whether media (press, Tv channels), American Elites (specifically Democrats and Republicans), or social media (Twitter) towards Iran. This study is very concerned with the ideological discourse of the dichotomy Us/Them (i.e. US vs Iran). In this context, ideology could be explained as 'the mental framework, language, categories, concepts, imagery of thoughts, and system of representation that different groups use to explain and understand the workings of society' (Hall, 1996, p.2). Fairclough (2003: 9) defines ideology in terms of its relationship with power, as 'representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation', or much interestingly, Fairclough (2006) states that 'some ideologies may thus function to legitimate domination, but also to articulate resistance in relationships with power, as is the case for feminist or pacifist ideologies' (P. 117).

Ideologies are constantly formed and reshaped by new discourses and inter-discursive strategies. Elites (politicians, journalists, scholars, writers, directors and policy makers) carry different ideologies, and they have control over their re/production and re/creation of hegemonic narratives in media, hence, they enjoy power which enables them to control the public and to distinguish between the positive properties of Us (the Ingroup), and the negative properties of Them (the Outgroup). Usually the ideological discourse exhibits this kind of polarization of structures (Us vs Them), and it affects all levels of discourse (surface and meaning) (van Dijk, p.180). This polarization happens by means of pronouns such as *us* and *them*, and possessives and demonstratives such as *our people* and *those people*. Thus, ideological discourse is generally organized by *self-representation* whether positive or negative.

This general polarizing principle when applied to discourse affects both forms and meanings. Thus, we may enhance the negative properties of terrorists by reporting gruesome acts of them (a question of meaning or content), but then do so at great length, on the front page, with big headlines, with grisly pictures, repeatedly so, and so on, which are formal characteristics. We may also do this by syntactic means, for instance by reporting their gruesome acts as being accomplished by active, responsible agents, that is by referring to them in first, topical positions of clauses and sentences, and not as implicit agents or in passive sentences in which agents are de-emphasized (van Dijk, 2006, p.127).

As this study is concerned with the analysis of meaning of the American Elites incorporated in their statements about the killing of Soleimani incident, CDA assumes the explanation and analysis of such object. Indeed, CDA is theoretically founded on the analysis of meanings as they are formed in society (language in use or discourse) rather than isolated linguistic structures. The analysis of discourse takes into consideration three essential processes: the production of the text, the text itself, and the text reception/interpretation (Fairclough, 2003: 10). In doing so, CDA does not specifically adhere to one approach, but it offers a range of grand to micro-level theories as well as an abundance of methodological categories to choose from, depending on their applicability to the data, and the research question.

Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach is considered as an interdisciplinary approach that is adopted in this research. I apply DHA in analyzing and understanding the research object of this study because it is an interdisciplinary approach, and it takes into account the historical context and puts, as Wodak indicates, emphasis on argumentation and classical rhetorical categories. What motivates me to elaborate this case study is the data it provides, they are very fit to the focus of DHA. Additionally, the case study is one phase or part of a big issue, Iran's nuclear program, which is still influencing many critical discourse researchers.

This research, which examines the linguistic and discursive structures used by American republicans and Democrats and Iranian leaders in aftermath of killing Soleimani, is actually one of the stages the Iran-US relation pass on. There have been a number of case studies examining the representation of Iran

from a Western point of view. For example, Richardson (2007) discussed the characteristics of Iran's representation in the Western press through an inherently Orientalist lens. He argues that the substantiation of the notion 'imminent', 'serious threat' and 'danger' of the constructed Other-in this case Iran- is founded upon a combination of the elements of 'Islam' and 'weapons' in the representation (see Richardson, 2004:75-8 for examples of the representation of Iran in the British press). This study investigates the argumentative strategies in which the American republicans try to justify the legitimate killing of Soleimani and to portray the Iranian regime as an enemy to US. So the study stands for the following research questions:

- **How are the argumentative strategies (topoi) implemented to legitimize/de-legitimize the American and Iranian elites discourse about the killing of Soleimani?**

2. Tension between Iran and US: The Killing of Qasem Soleimani

The Iran-US relation has been characterized by escalating in tension each time especially by the coming of Donald Trump to the white house in 2018. This was preceded by a period of rapprochement in terms of the historical nuclear deal struck by the two nations during Obama second term presidency. This deal committed Iran to abandon its nuclear weapon program, and in turn, Iran benefits from lifting sanctions against its economy. At last and unfortunately, when Trump was elected, he pulled the US out of the deal and re-imposed more sanctions.

Tension between Iran and US has started to escalate again when trump accused Iran of spreading terrorism in the gulf region and killing his people. He described Iran as a threat and a real danger to US. In the early hours of Friday 3 January, 2020, Trump ordered an air strike to target General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC's) Quds Force, and architect of its regional security apparatus. U.S. officials justified the strike by claiming that it was necessary to stop an "imminent attack".

3. Research Methodology

The study uses Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (2001), argumentative strategies. **Argumentation strategies** use a number of topoi to justify and question claims of truth and negative/positive attributions, e.g. positive and

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negative treatment, discrimination, social and political inclusion and exclusion as shown in table.1 below. Also, qualitative analyses are carried out to describe the findings.

1 Usefulness, advantage	9 Finance
2 Uselessness, disadvantage	10 Reality
3 Definition, name-interpretation	11 Numbers
4 Danger and threat	12 Law and right
5 Humanitarianism	13 History
6 Justice	14 Culture
7 Responsibility	15 Abuse
8 Burdening	

TABLE.1 List of topoi

Source: Wodak & M. Meyer, 2001, p.74

The analysis of the arguments stated in the data chosen regarding the killing of Qasem Suleimani by US can be carried out against the background of the list of topoi. Yet, not all of the topoi aforementioned in table.1 can be used; I rather chose the following because they are relevant to the content of the arguments: Usefulness/ advantage, Uselessness/disadvantage, Danger and threat, Reality and History. A brief of their explanation is given under the title of data analysis.

3.1 Samples

The data of the study are 12 statements of some Republican, Democratic and other figures in the American government, and also 3 statements from senior leaders in the Iranian government. They all delivered their statements the day of the incident (3rd January, 2020). I fetched these statements from internet links enlisted in the references.

3.2 Data analysis

The data were analyzed based on the argumentative strategies (topoi) of advantage, disadvantage, threat, reality, and history proposed by Reisingl and Wodak (2001). According to topos of advantage or usefulness, “if an action will be useful then one should perform it”. This topos is categorized into three subtypes which include 1) to the advantage of all, 2) to the advantage of us, and 3) to the advantage of them (p.75). The topos of **uselessness** or **disadvantage** states that “if existing situation or rulings do not help to reach the declared aim, they have to be changed” (p.75). Topos of **threat** or **danger** states that “if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them” (p.77). Topos of **reality** can be paraphrased as: “the necessity of an action because the reality is as it is” (p.79). Topos of **history** can be paraphrased as follows: because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (P.76). In the following analysis, I will introduce the argumentative strategies (topos) employed in the excerpts selected accompanied by a discussion of the purpose they serve.

A. Topos of advantage and usefulness

This topos can be applied into two subcategories: the first one is what is advantageous to **us** (United States). The killing of Soleimani is a big success to the US and its allies. Soleimani killed hundreds of Americans and soldiers, and the decision made by the president Trump is a big advantage and useful to US and its people. The following statements by American republicans contain this topos.

Statement1:

- ‘Qassem Soleimani was an evil and deadly terrorist with the blood of thousands, including hundreds of Americans, on his hands. President Trump was right to order decisive action to kill Soleimani to prevent further attacks and defend American lives and interests’ (**Rep. Liz Cheney**) (axios 3rd January, 2020)

The order of Trump to kill Suleimani is an advantage to America because it stops murdering the American people and their soldiers, and this is according to the Republican Liz Cheney.

Statement2:

- The Pentagon statement said: "At the direction of the president, the US military has taken decisive defensive action to protect US personnel abroad by killing Qasem Soleimani."
- It added: "The United States will continue to take all necessary action to protect our people and our interests wherever they are around the world." (BBC 3rd January, 2020)

The Pentagon statement can be deciphered as they fully accept Trump decision and they considered it as useful to end up the killing of US personnel abroad. Moreover, they will not stop at this decisive action; they will take other actions in the future that can protect the American people around the world.

The second subcategory is the one advantageous to them (Iran). Suleimani is Iran's most powerful military commander of the Iranian regime. His killing raged Iranians, but it raised their determination to stand against US. This was expressed in the following statements:

Statement1:

- President Hassan Rouhani said in a statement: "Iran and the other free nations of the region will take revenge for this gruesome crime from criminal America." (BBC 3rd January, 2020)

Trump order to kill Suleimani encouraged Iran to take action against American. This is an advantage to Iran to take revenge and continue to resist US.

Statement2:

- His death, Mr Rouhani added, had redoubled Iran's determination "to stand against America's bullying" (BBC 3rd January, 2020)

Rouhani's statement implies that Iran has been given another opportunity to proceed with its nuclear program to protect itself from US. The killing of Suleimani has redoubled its determination and conviction that there is no way only to stand against US.

Statement3:

- Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif posted on Twitter that the attack was "an extremely dangerous and foolish escalation" and released a statement saying that "the brutality and stupidity of American terrorist forces in assassinating Commander Soleimani ... will undoubtedly make the tree of resistance in the region and the world more prosperous."

Zarif considers this criminal action as a spark to trigger resistance in the region, and this is undoubtedly an advantage to Iran to gain more allies in the region and the world.

B.Topos of disadvantage and uselessness

This topos embodies in the the action of killing one of the most important figures in the Iranian military army. Iran has lost Suleiman who was regarded as "the strategic mastermind behind its vast ambition in the Middle East and the country's real foreign minister when it came to matters of war and peace" (analysis of Lyse Doucet, BBC Chief international correspondent) (*BBC 3rd January, 2020*).

C.Topos of threat or danger

The argumentative strategy of threat and danger of this murderous action falls into two subcategories: the first one: it is a direct threat to the American people that Iran will take revenge and kill more US people especially those who are in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere in the region, and it may well put the two state at the stake of war. This was expressed in the following statements:

Statement1:

- **Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.)** "Wow - the price of killing and injuring Americans has just gone up drastically. Major blow to Iranian regime that has American blood on its hands. Soleimani was one of the most ruthless and vicious members of the Ayatollah's regime. He had American blood on his hands. I appreciate President Trump's bold action against Iranian aggression. To the Iranian government: if you want more, you will get more." (*axios 3rd January, 2020*)

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The Republican Senator **Lindsey Graham** considered the person of Suleimani “the most ruthless and vicious”. This means that Suleimani was a real danger and threat to its nation. She also threatened Iranians for more escalation if the Iranian regime did not stop its aggression.

Statement2:

- Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, said in a statement that Soleimani "masterminded Iran's reign of terror for decades, including the deaths of hundreds of Americans." (axios 3rd January, 2020)

Tom Cotton wanted to say that Suleimani was a threat and he described him a source of terror.

Statement3:

- Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, who sits on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called Soleimani a "depraved terrorist" who was "doubtlessly planning operations to further harm our citizens and allies." (axios 3rd January, 2020)

Senator Romney described Suleimani as a "depraved terrorist". The word terrorist implies threat and danger.

The second category of the argumentative strategy is that Trump’s order to strike and kill Suleimani is itself a threat and can be a danger to the American government and people. This is expressed in the following statements:

Statement1:

- **Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.):** "Trump Admin owes a full explanation of airstrike reports—all the facts—to Congress&the American people. The present authorizations for use of military force in no way cover starting a possible new war. This step could bring the most consequential military confrontation in decades. My immediate concern is for our brave Americans serving in harm’s way." (axios 3rd January, 2020)

The Democrat Senator **Richard Blumenthal** means that Trump, by his step to kill Suleimani, has put America in danger of War with Iran, and he expressed his concern that this step was a threat and would not protect his people.

Statement2:

- Former Vice President Joe Biden said overnight that Soleimani “deserved to be brought to justice for his crimes against American troops and thousands of innocents throughout the region.” But the Democratic presidential frontrunner stopped short of praising the Trump administration and warned of adverse consequences, adding “this is a hugely escalatory move in an already dangerous region.”
- “President Trump just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox,” (*Euronews 03 January, 2020*).

Joe Biden, the now president of the united states, expressed his fear and anxiety of the decision taken by the US administration, and he considered it as “a hugely escalatory move”, and this would threaten the American interests and people in the region. He further described trump’s action as he “tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox”, and this implies that the killing of Suleimani is an explosive bomb which could obliterate the whole region.

Statement3:

- **Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.):** "Soleimani was an enemy of the United States. That’s not a question. The question is this — as reports suggest, did America just assassinate, without any congressional authorization, the second most powerful person in Iran, knowingly setting off a potential massive regional war?" (*Axios 3rd January, 2020*)

Here in this statement the Democratic Senator Chris Murphy does not hide his anxiety of the consequences of killing Suleimani “setting off a potential massive regional war”

D. Topos of reality

If we look back at the periods of time before this incident, the US-Iran relation has passed under two major events. The first event is that both nations came to sign a nuclear agreement on 15th July, 2015 (Iran nuclear deal). This deal obliges Iran to abandon its nuclear programme, and in turn, Iran benefits from the ease of economic sanctions imposed by the United States. The second event is when Trump violated the deal and pull US out of the deal, consequently, he re-imposed more sanctions on Iran and brought the two nations to the verge of war. The reality is that Iran is still untrusty nation. The Americans believe that Iran is still producing nuclear weapons, enriching uranium and spreading terror in the world. Trump's order to kill Suleimani is a consequence of the Iran's dangerous and vicious plan. We can drop this topos in the following statements:

Statement1:

- A Senior Iran analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG) Ali Vaez told Euronews that “Iran is very powerful country; it has a network of proxies and partners around the region. It can go after US and US allies’ interests..... The reality is that the US has done everything in the past few years to provoke the Iranians” (*Euronews 03 January, 2020*).

Ali Vaez mentioned two realities here. The first one is that Iran is a powerful country, and this can mean that Iran possesses nuclear weapons that enable it to be a force in the face of the Americans in the region. The second reality is that the Americans are always pursuing Iran and its moves and never let it be stronger.

Statement2:

- In a twitter, Bolton said that “long in the making, this is a decisive blow against Iran’s malign Quds Force activities worldwide. Hope this is the first step to regime change in Tehrane” (*Euronews 03 January, 2020*)

Bolton pointed out to the fact that Iran regime does not change. This can be read as Iran is still going ahead with its nuclear program and spreading terror especially in the Gulf region.

E. Topos of history

Because history teaches lessons, Suleimani was a target of the American government to shot him dead. He had been followed for decades and convicted as a murder and terrorist. Suleimani was a responsible for killing thousands of Americans abroad. Therefore, the American government should perform an action against him, and they allegedly determine to kill him. The following statements conclude this topos:

Statement1:

- The U.S. had been pursuing the shadowy leader for decades. Soleimani was the face of Iran's military interventions overseas and what the U.S. government describes as the country's "malign activity," including training and deploying proxy fighters and supporting Bashar Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq. His operations within Iraq at the height of the Iraq war killed hundreds of U.S. personnel.
- Since 2003, Iranian proxies in Iraq have killed more than 600 American, the state department said last year (CNBC 3rd January, 2020)

This is a short history of who is Suleimani. The state department introduced Suleimani's history of murder and training and developing proxy fighters, as well as his direct involvement in wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. So before performing any decisive action, US learned the lesson from Suleimani killing its people. It is important to know history before acting.

4. CONCLUSION

Regarding the research question of this study, the result reveals that the argumentative strategies used by all the participants seemed influenced by the ideology of the dichotomy Us/Them and positive/negative self-representation. *Us* carries the ideology that the US has the legitimate right to kill Suleimani and stop his terrorism and danger around the world. This is argued by the topos of threat,

history and reality. All the statements delivered by the American republicans and Democrats emphasize the bad things of the Other (Iran), and they also enhance the negative properties of the Iranian commander Qasem Suleimani by reporting his gruesome acts and giving him the image of criminal, murder, killer, powerful person, depraved terrorist, enemy, ruthless and vicious, danger, threat, evil and deadly terrorist. Moreover, the use of syntactic means like active clauses in almost statements where the responsible agent (Suleimani) is made explicit has also enhanced the Americans' (Us) legitimation to act against the Iranians (Them).

However, the statements delivered by the Iranians leaders emphasize the brutality and illegitimate act of the Americans such as 'America's bullying', 'the brutality and stupidity of American terrorist forces', 'this gruesome crime from criminal America'. This may give the Iranians the legitimacy to stand against the United States.

All in all, we could infer from the data analysis of this research that the ideological discourse structures are organized in such a way that the positive things are emphasized for the benefit of *us* (United States of America and its allies), and the negative things are emphasized for *Them* (Iran). The Iran-US issue has been an issue of research which always provides data for the theory of self/other presentation and the legitimacy of discourse.

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