
MEMRI's Narrative of Iran in the Context of Current US-Iran Tensions

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Abstract

Drawing on narrative theory and the notion of framing, this paper focused on the translated material from the Islamic Republic of Iran's media outlets in the website of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) to explore how this institute constructed its desired narratives about Iran in the context of the current tensions between Iran and the U.S. In so doing, the paper applied the technique of framing through selective appropriation around the text to see what interpretive context MEMRI had made for its readers through its patterns of selection. The sites around the text at which this sort of framing could occur were investigated to see what patterns of causal emplotment had been made as a result. The results showed that MEMRI had selected its translated material mostly from among those remarks made by Iran's non-moderate political and military individuals and institutions with a firm stance against the U.S., and also focused on their most hostile remarks with antagonistic themes to activate a pattern of causal emplotment which presented a reductionist and negative image of Iran. The findings of this study might cast light on the political role of translation in the context of political conflicts .

Keywords: Framing; Iran-U.S. tensions; MEMRI; narrative; selective appropriation

INTRODUCTION

Constructing misleading and dehumanizing knowledge about certain communities by translating material from their media outlets has now become a big industry around the world; some institutions have a 'vested interest' in presenting a negative image of certain groups of people and in so doing mostly rely on translation (Baker, 2010, pp. 347, 362) However, it should be noted that such translations "do not have to be linguistically 'inaccurate' in relation to their source text [in order] to [. . .] mislead" the audience (Baker, 2010, p. 347). In fact, such institutions do not tamper with the text itself so as to be able to present themselves as 'non-partisan' and 'trustworthy'; instead they achieve their purpose "by

intervening in the space around the text (footnotes, prefaces, addition of visual material) [or] by the very selection of texts to be translated" (Baker, 2010, p. 347).

One of the major producers of such 'accurate' translations is the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), a 'pro-Israel advocacy group' (Baker, 2010, p. 347, 353), which has been the subject of several research projects in translation studies (See Baker, 2007, Baker 2010, Al-Sharif 2009) and that tries to "generate dehumanizing narratives of Arabs and Muslims through carefully planned and generously funded programs of translation" (Baker, 2010, p. 347) . Such translation projects "involve selecting, translating and distributing various types of text that emanate from Arab and Muslim countries: newspaper articles, film clips, transcripts of television shows,

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selected excerpts from educational material [and] sermons delivered in mosques”” (Baker, 2010, p. 347)

Baker has been among the first scholars in translation studies who have focused on MEMRI's translation projects and analyzed the subtle devices it utilizes in making its misleading translations. Drawing on narrative theory and the notion of framing that allow “us to look beyond the accuracy of individual translations to reach a better understanding of [. . .] MEMRI's entire translation programme” (Baker, 2010, p. 349), she examines the variety of ways through which MEMRI promotes its narratives.

The present paper also draws on Baker's narrative theory and her notion of framing to analyse one of MEMRI's translation programs. Out of the projects MEMRI defines in its website, including ‘Jihad & Terrorism threat monitor project’, ‘Reform project’, ‘Antisemitism documentation project’, ‘South Asia Studies project’, and ‘Iran Studies project’¹, this paper focuses on the latter, which according to MEMRI's 2019 *about us* page “is the only research project in the world that monitors, studies, and translates materials from the Iranian media on a day-to-day basis” and “has produced hundreds of hours of translations from Iran's most important media outlets and websites, including over 40 newspapers and more than 16 TV channels”.

Out of the issues covered under this project, the paper focuses on the current 2019 tensions between Iran and the U.S., which has to do with the latter's measures against the former including attempts for reducing its oil exports to zero or designating one of its military units as a terror organization, in order to see how MEMRI narrates the Islamic Republic of Iran's attitude and stance towards the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East, i.e. Israel and Saudi Arabia in this context. Therefore, this study addresses the following question:

How does MEMRI narrate IRI's attitude and stance toward the U.S and its allies in the Middle East in the context of current U.S.-Iran conflict?

This overall question requires engaging with certain issues, which are spelled out in the following subquestions:

- 1) *What patterns of selection MEMRI applies in elaborating its narratives?*
- 2) *What patterns of causal emplotment are activated as a result?*

In the following section, first Baker's narrative theory and her notion of framing will be explained very briefly in order to provide the reader with the tools of analysis. This will be followed by a summary of two of the previous studies on MEMRI's translational projects within the frameworks of the theory to throw some light on MEMRI's working mechanism.

Narrative Theory and Translation Studies

The narrative approach to translation introduced by Baker (2006) draws on the notion of narrative as defined in the social sciences. Narrative, accordingly, refers to any “episode in the story of life” that has “a beginning, middle and end” or “any set of events that can be arranged in a sequence and related” (Baker, 2006, pp. 9-10). According to White (Cited in Baker, 2006: 9), It is through such events that “we experience the world”(Baker, 2006, p.9. However, it should be noted that such events are not ‘disinterested’ but are rather constructed accounts (See Baker 2006, pp. 4, 10) , that is to say, “we are all born with the ability to construct narratives, and that the narratives we construct constitute the world as we know it” (Al- Herthani, 2009, p. 39).

Therefore, narratives, “do not merely represent, but constitute the world” (Harding, 2012, p. 287) ; they “place events in a sequential order with a clear beginning, middle and end” and “connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insight from the world and/or people's experience of it” (Hinchman and Hinchman, cited in Al- Herthani, 2009, p. 38). People are embedded in such narratives and these narratives shape their “views of rationality, of objectivity, of morality, and of their conceptions of themselves and others”(Bennett and Edelman, cited in Baker,

1. see www.memri.org

2006, p. 19.

Narratives are constructed through four inter-related features, namely, ‘temporality’, ‘relationality’, ‘selective appropriation’ and ‘causal emplotment’. **Temporality** “refers to the embeddedness of narratives in time and space and highlights the fact that all narratives are temporally and spatially constituted” (Baker, 2014, p. 167). **Relationality** “means that individual elements [...] derive their meaning from the overall narrative within which they are configured as building blocks” (Baker, 2014, p. 168). **Selective appropriation** has to do with the decision “to include or exclude, and to background or foreground, any narrative element including events, details within events, and the way in which a protagonist is identified by particular attributes rather than other” (Baker, 2014, p. 167). For example, “Muslims are often identified simply as Muslims ... are much less likely than non-Muslims to be identified in terms of their job or profession” (Moore et al cited in Baker, 2010, p. 352). **Causal emplotment** means that “narrative items take on narrative meaning only when they are emplotted, when the narrator has engaged in the crucial process of weighting them and signaling what links obtain between them” (Baker, 2014, p. 169). To put it simply, “causal emplotment means that two people may agree on a set of facts or events but disagree strongly on how to interpret them in relation to each other” (Baker, 2006, p. 67).

Baker considers this strand of narrativity as having implications for the works of translators, because from the perspective of constructivist narrativity, “translation is [...] understood as a form of (re)narration that constructs rather than represents the events and characters it renarrates in another language” (Baker, 2014, p. 158). She employs the notion of framing to explain this process of renarration. She believes that, “translators [...] face a basic ethical choice with every assignment: to reproduce the existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text [...] or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies” (2006, p. 104). Therefore, drawing on the notion of framing “as an active strategy that im-

plies agency” (2006, p. 106), Baker investigates “some of the many ways in which translators [...] accentuate, undermine or modify aspects of the narrative encoded in the source text” (Baker, 2006, p. 5). This process of reconfiguration can be done either in the text by exploiting, for instance, “linguistic devices such as tense shift” (Baker, 2007, p. 158) or around the text (Baker, 2010, p. 355) by employing paratextual devices like footnotes (Baker, 2007, p. 160) or by renegotiating the features of narrativity (Baker, 2006, p. 105) for instance by exploiting the patterns of selective appropriation around the text (Baker, 2010, p. 355), which is the methodological basis of the present study. The details of this sort of framing will be explained in the Methodology section of the paper.

Narrative-Based Research on MEMRI’s projects

a) Baker (2010) elaborates on the ways in which MEMRI promotes its narratives through translation without tampering with the source text, and simply by intervening in the space around the text. One of the most important of such strategies is the exploitation of the patterns of selective appropriation around the text. (p. 355) There are two ways by which MEMRI exploits such patterns: by the choice of the source and target texts and also by the stories they select for translation. In discussing the former, Baker refers to a version of MEMRI’s ‘about us’ page and writes that this page lists Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Pashtu, Dari, Hindi and Turkish as the source languages (2010, p. 354) and “*English, German, Hebrew, Italian, French, Spanish and Japanese* as target languages” (Baker, 2010, p. 355).

She then argues that, “[t]he pattern of selective appropriation evident in the choice of source and target languages of translation here [...] constructs a narrative that divides the world into two camps: those who represent a threat to progressive, democratic societies, and who therefore have to be monitored very closely (through translation)”, on the one hand, “and those who bear the burden of monitoring these sources of security threat to protect the innocent, democratic, civi-

lised Western world against terrorist activities” on the other hand (Baker, 2010, p. 355).

This pattern of selective appropriation “in turn activates a specific pattern of causal emplotment that characterises MEMRI’s overall narrative” (Baker, 2010, p. 355) : “The source language group, which represents protagonists who pose a threat to the free world, is emplotted as aggressor, and the target language group, which represents protagonists who are under threat from the first group, is emplotted as victim” (Baker, 2010, p. 355) Accordingly, “[e]ach language accrues a specific value by virtue of its positioning within the narrative. Any change in position in this narrative, from target to source language, signals a change [. . .] in political reality” (Baker, 2010, p. 356). For example, Turkish was once among the target languages, so it was part of the democratic world, but now because of a political change it has moved to the source language group and thus it is now a source of threat (See Baker 2010, p. 356)

With regard to the stories selected for translation, Baker writes that “[t]he stories MEMRI selects for translation [. . .] reflect badly on the character of Arabs” (2010, p. 356). To put it simply, “[s]elective appropriation allows MEMRI [. . .] to frame the Arab world as extremist and dangerous by simply choosing to translate the worst possible examples of Arabic discourse” (Baker, 2007, p. 158). In other words, as Harris puts it, “MEMRI engages in the practice of publishing selective and decontextualized excerpts of the Arabic press in ways that can present [Arabs] as religious extremists” (Cited in Baker, 2010, p. 356)

In addition to the exploitation of selective appropriation, MEMRI strengthens its narratives “by grouping its translations under damning headings.” Headings such as ‘Jihad and Terrorism Studies project’ or ‘Islamic Websites Monitor project’ “act as powerful frames that signal the culpability of the protagonists it depicts as source of threat.” These headings, which “structure the massive archive of translation available on” MEMRI’s site can “establish a pattern of relationality in which disparate elements such as Islam, terrorism and antisemitism [. . .] come to be depicted as closely connected and best unders-

stood as aspects of the same phenomenon” (Baker, 2010, p. 357).

As another strategy of framing, it should be said that while keeping close to the original, MEMRI often adds its own titles to translations to frame Muslims and Arabs as threatening (See Baker 2010, p. 360).

MEMRI also makes use of images and captions, which do not appear in the source texts to promote its narratives. As Baker states, “photos and accompanying captions bear no relationship at all to the content of the article [. . .] but they succeed in establishing a narrative framework [. . .] in which what might otherwise be seen as unconnected elements are brought together and made to look like interdependent phenomena” (2010, p. 361)

Finally, MEMRI frames its narrative through video clips. Baker says that “English translations of articles from Arab and Iranian newspapers are often accompanied by a suitably annotated link to a video clip [. . .] encouraging the reader to interpret even the most reasonable of Arabic discourse as one that hides an extremist subtext” (2010, p. 361)

b) Al- Sharif (2009) focuses on MEMRI’s translation project with regard to the widely-recognized conflict in the Middle East, i.e. the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to see how this advocacy organization, which “invests in embedding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within the meta-narrative of a global ‘war on terror’”, actively makes use of translation to elaborate dehumanizing narratives of Palestinians in this context (Al-Sharif, 2009, p. 11). In order to answer this question, “Al-Sharif carries out a detailed analysis of MEMRI’s online reports and investigates ways in which the site actively uses translation to select, deselect and frame material in order to systematically elaborate and widely circulate negative, dehumanizing, and reductionist narratives of Palestinians and Palestinian women” (Harding, 2012, pp. 288-289).

Along the same lines, the present paper offers an analysis of a range of data connected with one of MEMRI’s translational projects. The details of the study will be presented below.

METHODS

As mentioned earlier, this study investigates the way in which MEMRI narrates the Islamic Republic of Iran's attitude and stance toward the U.S. and its allies in the context of the current tensions between Iran and the U.S. by applying the technique of framing through selective appropriation around the text. This sort of framing, as noted above, might be evident in the choice of the source and target texts or in the stories selected for translation (See Baker 2010, pp. 355-356). Furthermore, selective appropriation around the text might have to do with the "inclusion or exclusion of specific texts, authors, languages or cultures" (Baker, 2006, p. 114) or any narrative element including 'events' and 'details within events' (Baker, 2014, p. 167). Accordingly, the present paper seeks to investigate the patterns of selection used by MEMRI to see what patterns of emplotment are made as a result. In other words, it tries to investigate the way in which MEMRI "turn[s] a set of propositions into an intelligible sequence" (Baker, 2007, p. 155) through its patterns of selection.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the section entitled 'Special Dispatches' in MEMRI's site ¹(see MEMRI's archive) was checked to find all the news items taken from Iranian media outlets and websites, and published by MEMRI in 2019, that is, the time of the current U.S.-Iran tensions. A total number of 32 items was examined, from the special dispatch No. 8087 dated May 24, 2019 back to the special dispatch No. 7841 dated January 11, 2019. All the possible sites in the dispatches at which framing through selective appropriation around the text could occur including the stories selected for translation and the people or writers responsible for producing such stories were investigated to elaborate on the potential patterns of emplotment which might be made through such selections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having analysed the Special Dispatches, two dif-

ferent patterns of selection were distinguished. The first one had to do with the people and institutions MEMRI had taken its translated materials from and the second one dealt with the themes of such materials. In what follows the two patterns will be explained in more details.

1) As far as the first pattern is concerned, it was found that each of the dispatches selected for this study presented views of different individuals and institutions on a particular topic. Except for a few cases, most of these people and institutions were among those that do not have a very moderate view toward the United States and its allies, and are generally classified as conservative factions in the political spectrum in Iran. Such people and institutions included the IRGC and its commanders, IRGC-affiliated newspapers and news agencies, Friday prayer Imams and fundamentalists in Majlis. The views of more moderate politicians, including the Iranian President, Foreign Minister Deputy, atomic energy chief and reformist members of Majlis were rarely included. Statistically speaking out of the 42 people and institutions involved in the dispatches, only five cases had to do with moderate Politicians and institutions.

Moreover, MEMRI had considered some famous non-moderate individuals in its dispatches as representing certain organizations, while those organizations deny having any links with them. For example, in the Special Dispatch-No. 8064- May 14, 2019, MEMRI refers to the former IRGC commander, Saeid Qassemi, and quotes him as saying that IRGC forces trained mujahideen in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the cover of being Red Crescent members. He is reported to have claimed that "the IRGC worked alongside Al-Qaeda during that time." However, IRGC spokesman, Ramazan Sharif, dismissed his comments, saying that "these remarks by Saeid Qassemi, who for a while was in Bosnia voluntarily and retired a long time ago, are his personal views, devoid of credibility and are not shared by the IRGC"². On April 23, 2019 a spokesman for the Iranian judiciary announced that this former Guard's commander has been summoned to court

1. www.memri.org

2. www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/951816/

for his remarks and IRGC officially sued him for his words¹.

Such selections can activate a particular pattern of causal emplotment, which presents these non-moderate individuals and institutions as representing Iran's stance toward the United States.

2) As far as the themes of such special dispatches are concerned, MEMRI had selected decontextualized excerpts of these individuals' speeches or interviews to present them as aggressive extremists who can be a potential threat for the Western world. As a case in point, there are several excerpts from General Hossein Salami, the then IRGC deputy commander, which show him as an aggressive person who welcomes wars with the Americans and disapproves of any negotiations with them. In a TV interview aired on Iranian state television on May 6, 2015, Salami in reaction to threats from Americans, gives them a warning²:

we welcome war with the Americans ... we have built our strength for the purpose of long, extended wars ... more than for the purpose of dialogue with them... If the Americans rely on their aircraft carriers as a point of strength, they should know that the carriers will be destroyed. The military bases used [against us] will be burned. If their warplanes want to fly in the sky, they should know that the skies set ablaze.

Salami does not reject negotiations with the Americans, but only asks Iranian negotiators to reject any agreement which might harm Iran's dignity: "I advise the negotiators to leave the negotiation table if the Americans once again try to establish their political supremacy through intimidation, threat and humiliation. If that is the case, they should leave it to us; we will handle them³."

However, MEMRI selects only some parts of this interview so as to make it appear that Salami is an extremist who prefers to fight against Americans and does not approve of negotiations of any

sorts:

In an Iranian TV interview, IRGC deputy commander Hossein Salami threatened the Americans, saying: "We welcome war with the Americans." The U.S. aircraft carriers would be destroyed, its airbases in the region burned, and the skies set ablaze, he said. "We have built our strength for the purpose of long, extended wars ... more than for the purpose of peace, compromise, and dialogue with them," said Salami. The interview aired on the Iran TV's channel 1 on May 6, 2015.⁴

As the quote indicates, there is no context to see that Salami's comment is in reaction to the Americans' threats and the part dealing with negotiations with the Americans has not been selected and simply the part in which Salami threatens the U.S. has been foregrounded.

Furthermore, in some cases, MEMRI reports on an institution or individual as making certain remarks and selects those remarks for its special dispatches, though the institution or individual denies having made such remarks or provides further explanations to say what they have actually meant. However, such explanations or denials do not find their way into MEMRI's reports. For instance, in the Special Dispatch- No.8063- May 14, 2019, MEMRI quotes IRGC General Naser Sha'bani as saying that "the regime of the Islamic Revolution had ordered the Pro-Iran Ansar Allah (Houthi) militia in Yemen to attack two Saudi tankers, and that it had carried out those orders." However, the head of IRGC Public Relations, Ramezan Sharif, denied Sha'bani made that statement and said that the quote has been misattributed. According to Sharif, Sha'bani actually said "the enemy and some Western officials and outlets are trying to make it appear that we have told the Yemenis to strike the Saudis' frigates, while the Yemenis and Lebanese have reached the capability to defend their national interests⁵."

Such decontextualized themes show that MEMRI has been trying to construct a narrative

1. See www.isna.ir/news/98020301550

2. See www.mostazsafin.tv/article/4939

3. See www.mostazsafin.tv/article/4939

4. See MEMRI's site- Special Dispatch- No. 8019- April 23, 2019

5. www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/05/16/1796780/

which presents a hostile Iran threatening the United States and its allies. Accordingly, Iran is a big threat to the U.S. and its allies both in the Middle East and in the Western world (see Special Dispatch No. 8019). It causes insecurity in the Middle East by supporting and instructing militia groups in doing terror operations with the aim of reducing Saudi oil exports to zero (See Special Dispatch 8082). It is shown as an aggressive country which thinks fighting against the U.S. preferable to negotiating with it (See Special Dispatch No. 8019. Iran is even depicted as threatening Europe to find a solution for its oil export, or it refuses to play its role in providing Europe's security (See Special Dispatch No. 8055).

The most important themes of MEMRI's selected materials are as follows:

- 1) Destroying Israel, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia (see for example Special Dispatch- No. 8046 and 8019 at memri.org)
- 2) Supporting and instructing militia groups to reduce Saudi oil exports to zero (see for example Special Dispatch- No. 8082 at memri.org)
- 3) Avoiding negotiations with the Americans (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8077 at memri.org)
- 4) Showing off missile capabilities as an offensive gesture (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8019 at memri.org)
- 5) Enriching uranium beyond the JCPOA's enrichment limit (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 7882 at memri.org)
- 6) Destroying U.S. aircraft carriers by IRGC's missiles (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8019 at memri.org)
- 7) Threatening Europe to be targeted by IRGC's missiles (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8019 at memri.org)
- 8) Refusing to provide Europe's security if it does not solve the problem of Iran's

oil export (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8055 at memri.org)

- 9) Instructing militia groups in the region to harm the U.S. and Israel (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 8082 at memri.org)
- 10) Threatening to install more centrifuges in the not-so-distant future (See for example Special Dispatch- No. 7993 at memri.org)
- 11) Training militia groups such as Al-Qaeda (See for example Special Dispatch- No. at memri.org)

Therefore, by selecting and putting together certain individuals and institutions that are famous for not having a very moderate view toward the U.S. and its allies and by selecting some decontextualized excerpts from their words, MEMRI tries to show Iran's stance as radical; it gives a warning to the world to the effect that you are dealing with a country with such dangerous individuals who do not understand the language of peace and negotiation.

CONCLUSION

As the results of the study might suggest, MEMRI, a pro-Israel advocacy group and thus on Iran's rival camp in the context of ongoing conflicts between Iran and the U.S., actively makes use of translation to select, deselect and frame material and people in order to promote and circulate negative and reductionist narratives about Iran in general and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in particular hoping that a flare-up of tensions between the countries will occur. Such narratives can contribute to Israel's lobbying against Iran among the members of the international community and mobilizing the world countries to take more serious measures against Iran's nuclear and military projects. As a result, one can refer to the major role translation might play as a political tool in the hands of rival parties in flaring up political conflicts. There might be different voices in each party involved in a conflict with different stances. However, these voices might be merged in such a way that it is

not possible to state clearly what stance a certain party is taking. Translation can act here to make a clear image out of this vague picture. Rival parties can actively use translation to deselect some of the voices and to put together the elements of the remaining voices in such a way that they can present a transparent image.

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