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Challenging a Terrorist Tag in the Media: Framing the Politics of Resistance and an Iranian Opposition Group

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Abstract

Scholars have shown that media framing has a powerful effect on citizen perception and policy debates. Research has provided less insight into the ability of marginalized actors to promote their preferred frames in the media in a dynamic political context. The efforts of an exiled Iranian opposition group to get its name removed from official terror lists in the United States, United Kingdom, and EU provides a valuable platform to examine this problem. Using content analysis, I explore how the group promoted its frames in the opinion sections of major world news publications over nine years (2003–2012). I then examine the extent to which journalists aligned to its frames, as opposed to rival official frames, over time in the larger arena of news. The results support research showing that by nurturing small opportunities, marginalized political actors can expand media capacity and influence, but these effects are mediated at least in part by critical or focusing events that make rival frames less salient. The study sheds light on the complex relationship between activists, the government, and the media. It has implications for the ability of marginalized political actors to get their frames into public discourse. It also has implications for terror tagging and media coverage of other controversial issues.

Introduction

In 1997, the U.S. State Department added the exiled Iranian resistance group Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), also known as People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO). The purported basis was the killing of six American military personnel and defense contractors 20 years earlier in the 1970s. Two years later, in 1999, the United States went a step further, alleging that the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a political organization of several Iranian opposition groups that reject clerical rule, was a front for the MEK and designated it too as a terrorist group.[1] Subsequently, the United Kingdom and EU followed suit, tacking the MEK/PMOI (although not the NCRI) to their terror watch lists. These listings reflected a shared

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institutional logic that the group had engaged in terrorist activity in the past and thus constituted a security threat. However, as Friedland and Alford (1991) have observed, institutions can contain contradictions, and individuals operating within them may call on multiple logics. While the dominant, official logic was that the MEK was a terrorist group, there existed a challenger logic (McAdam & Scott, 2005) that presented a very different set of beliefs and premises.

MEK supporters argued that far from being terrorists, the MEK was a legitimate opposition group, that the terrorist listing was based on evidence that even government insiders contested, and that it was politically motivated (to placate the Iranian regime). They contended that the UK and EU listings, occurring in March 2001 and May 2002, were even more direct quid pro quos (the price of opening talks over Iran's nuclear pursuit). In addition, they argued that contrary to "misinformation" orchestrated by the Iranian regime, the MEK had specifically renounced violence as early as 2001 and was dedicated to democracy and freedom in a secular, democratic, nonnuclear Iran. Within short order, they took their case to the courts. They also went public (i.e., they began penning op-eds for the world's major newspapers).

The politics of resistance is predicated on a belief that power is ubiquitous (Foucault, 1980), and as a result, resistance must be diffuse (Pickett, 1996)—occurring at micro as well as macro levels (Thomas, 2005). For the MEK, going public was vital to countering a message that stigmatized them as terrorists and made it virtually impossible for them to organize, raise funds, or conduct their mission, namely peaceful opposition to the current dictatorship in Iran.

How did they frame their case in the media and to what extent were their efforts a success? More specifically, to what extent were the frames they promoted in outside commentary picked up in the broader more influential arena of news? While considerable attention has been paid to the effects of media framing, scholars have largely ignored how activists and marginalized political players get their preferred frames into the media in the first place (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Rabinowitz, 2010). This may be because of a long-held assumption that the media are simply mouthpieces for elite, official government views, or it may be because of a belief that the media, because of their own professional norms, are autonomous and impervious to outside influence.

The obstacles activists and policy challengers face in getting their messages inserted into public discourse have been well documented. But there is a growing recognition that activist–media–government interactions constitute a dynamic process in which all players struggle for advantage. There is also a growing recognition that "small opportunities, strategically nurtured by collective actors over time, can expand into bigger opportunities" to improve media standing and capacity and generate more permanent impact (Ryan, Anastario, & Jeffreys, 2005, p. 114).

Most policy issues, for example, have an issue culture dominated by a particular frame. Terrorism, as a policy issue, is dominated by a security frame. But issue

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cultures often contain alternative frames at odds with a dominant one. These additional frames provide opportunities for activists and policy challengers to redirect the public's attention. Activists can take advantage of other opportunities. Scholars have shown, for example, that critical or focusing events can be catalysts for policy change insofar as they draw media attention and serve as signals of policy failure (Birkland, 1998, p. 55). As such, events also provide a window of opportunity to reframe an issue in a policy debate. Finally, there is a growing recognition that while dominant frames are "difficult to eclipse" (Matesan, 2012, p. 672), they can be vulnerable, especially at times "when the political leaders setting forth these frames lose legitimacy and credibility with the public" (Matesan, 2012, p. 672).

Building on these concepts of political resistance, opportunity, framing, and legitimacy, this article uses a content analysis to explore the media campaign activists and other political players waged over a decade to get the MEK's name removed from terrorist lists in the United States, United Kingdom, and EU. While the focus is on the influence of activist inputs (in the form of op-eds) on journalist outputs (in the form of news), I also examine the role of critical or focusing events in drawing media attention and providing opportunities for policy challengers to shift the debate.

The MEK delisting issue is a useful platform to explore the dynamics of framing and activist–media interactions since it was salient in national and world news for over a decade. Also, like many political issues, it evoked strong emotions and highly polarized rhetoric with one side casting it as sensible policy to contain potential terrorism and the other side framing it as a violation of human rights and justice.

The study has implications for the ability of marginalized groups and political players to promote their frames in public discourse. It also has implications for terror tagging, a phenomenon that is becoming more widespread; has severe contingent consequences; and is much easier "to do than undo" (Gross, 2011, p. 52).

Historical Background and Context

The Case of the MEK

To understand the specific struggle of the MEK to get its name removed from terror lists and the obstacles it faced, it helps to provide a little background. The MEK/PMOI was originally formed by three university students in Tehran in 1965. Its mission then was to democratically oppose the regime of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, a dictatorship that came to power following a U.S./UK-led coup ousting Iran's first democratically elected government. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of its members had been arrested and executed by the Shah's secret police for civil disruption. The revolution deposing the Shah in January of 1979 posed a new dilemma for the MEK who, having fought for a socialist-styled

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democracy, were not ready to accept the theocratic regime by the recently returned Ayatollah Khomeini and actively campaigned against it. These activities earned it the enmity of Islamic clerics who were now in control and attacked the MEK as *elteqati* (eclectic), contaminated with *Gharbzadegi* ("the Western plague"), as *monafeqin* (hypocrites for not aligning with the new Islamic Republic) and *kafer* (unbelievers) for supporting democracy (Moin, 2001, pp. 234, 239). The group and its supporters soon underwent new rounds of arrests and executions, this time conducted by the clerics and Islamic Revolutionary Guards. Subsequently, the leadership fled to Paris, then Iraq where it regrouped and formed a 3,000 strong national liberation army as well as a government in exile dedicated to overthrowing the theocratic regime now operating in Iran and replacing it with a democracy.

The United States did not add the MEK to its list of foreign terrorist organizations until 1997. The purported basis was the killings of six American military personnel and defense contractors in Iran in the early 1970s. The State Department would later allege that the MEK participated in the February 1979 occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and that after fleeing to Paris, then Iraq in the early 1980s, it conducted terrorist attacks inside Iran. Today, there is good evidence that Iran lobbied hard to get the United States and other Western governments to designate the MEK as terrorists although the allegations were baseless. Only a day after the United States added the MEK to its list of FTOs in October of 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: "One senior Clinton administration official said inclusion of the People's Mojahedeen was intended as a 'goodwill gesture' to Tehran and its newly elected moderate president Mohammad Khatami."[2] Five years later, the same official told *Newsweek*: "[There] was White House interest in opening up a dialogue with the Iranian government. At the time, President Khatami had recently been elected and was seen as a moderate. Top administration officials saw cracking down on the [PMOI/MEK]—which the Iranians had made clear they saw as a menace, as one way to do so."[3]

Across the Atlantic, similar political considerations operated. In an interview with the BBC Radio in 2006, then British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted that the UK designation of the MEK in 2001 was specifically made in response to demands made by the Iranian regime (Safavi, 2010). That same year, classified documents, later unclassified by a UK court, revealed that senior foreign service officials were concerned about possible adverse foreign policy consequences if the terrorist designation was lifted since the Iranian regime prioritized "tough legal and political measures" against the organization (Fender, 2007, p. 4).[4] The EU too is now known to have bowed to pressure in designating the MEK in 2002.

Supporters of removing the terrorist designation soon took their case to courts. These efforts met with strong resistance, not only from spokespersons for Iran but also from representatives of a new Iran-tilting government in Iraq. By 2006, seven European courts, to be sure, had ruled that the group did not meet lawful criteria for

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terrorism in the first place. They had also ruled that the terrorist designation should have been moot after 2001, when the group's leadership ceased its military efforts that year to focus on a political and social campaign to bring about democratic change in Iran.[5] Despite these rulings, and the humanitarian crisis that evolved when a new Iran-tilting government in Iraq began threatening to "repatriate" the remaining MEK in Iraq to Iran (where they faced likely torture and execution), it took two to three years for the United Kingdom and EU to comply with the courts and delist the MEK. In the United States, where the courts similarly ruled repeatedly in favor of the MEK, and as many as 200 members of Congress signed statements endorsing its cause, the process was also slow, and the MEK continued to be proscribed until the end of September 2012. In the interim, a growing number of supporters of the MEK began writing op-eds and letters to the editor in the world's major print publications.

Terror Tagging as an "Issue Culture"

Terrorism like other policy issues could be said to have a culture. That is, it became a commanding concern evoking a belief set.[6] But a characteristic of issue cultures is that there is debate around them, and the media can draw on more than one package (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). After 9/11, the most prominent package was *security* and terrorist designation, designed to prevent terrorist financing and sanction groups thought to be a security risk, fell squarely within that category and package.

Proscription, however, was coming under increasing scrutiny, and the media could have called on other packages although it only occasionally did so. Within the *security* and think tank sectors, critics such as Paul Pillar (2001, p. 150) assailed the process for being too bureaucratic and too slow "to respond to the changes in the international gallery of terrorists." Others noted that the process had become inefficient and "inflexible" (Cronin, 2003, p. 7). As an example, Nathan Stock (2012) points out that as late as 2008—18 years after he was celebrated for ending apartheid—it took an act of Congress to allow Nelson Mandela to enter the United States without a waiver, and it was not until November of 2011 that his terrorist designation was finally removed.

Sociologists, meanwhile, were raising *definitional* issues. Part of the problem, observed Tilly (2004, p. 5) is that the terms terror, terrorism, and terrorist are themselves imprecise since they "do not identify casually coherent and distinct social phenomena." This imprecision allows governments and society-wide discretion to decide who gets labeled a terrorist and who does not.

Civil rights advocates weighed in on the *politicization* of the process. As early as 2003, Human Rights Watch's Joanne Mariner noted that all too often, individuals and groups appear on terror lists as a "political concession" (Mariner, 2003, para. 17). Others attacked proscription for failing to distinguish between terrorism and

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legitimate struggles for democracy thereby criminalizing self-determination movements and closing off opportunities for negotiation and dialogue around the world (Dudouet, 2011; Gross, 2011; Muller, 2008). The definitional issue (terrorists or freedom fighters) did get picked up routinely in the media, though without much depth. Relatively little attention, however, was paid to the larger argument that the process, whether conducted by the United States, EU, UN, or another organization, was being used increasingly as an instrument of domestic and foreign policy, for example, to silence opposition at home and appease allies abroad (Dreyfuss, 2002; Muller, 2008; Shapiro, 2008).

In a climate that placed security as the most salient package, *rights* arguments (i.e., that proscription violated fairness, transparency, and due process) were also given short shrift, although these arguments were being raised in the legal community (Shapiro, 2008; Sullivan & Hayes, 2011).

In the meantime, proscription, whether applied by the United States, United Kingdom, EU, UN, or another government or organization was casting an ever-widening net. In the last quarter of 2012, 51 groups were on the U.S. State Department's FTO list (U.S. Department of State, 2012a), and there were 126 entries on the Individuals and Entities Designated by the State Department Under E.O. 13224 (U.S. Department of State, 2012b) list, many overlapping with the FTO list. Today, nearly half of the State Department's FTOs are based in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region although only 6% of the world's population lives in that region (Stock, 2012). Although not solely a counter-terrorism tool, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control also keeps a list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons that now runs to 556 pages (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2013). Across the Atlantic, the EU, as of mid-2012, had 25 groups and entities on its primary terrorist list (Eurlex, 2012) and, as of March 2013, the UN had designated over 230 individuals and 63 entities and other groups associated with al-Qaida (UN Security Council, 2013). Taken together, the above listings of these organizations alone include as many as 45% of all non-state armed groups involved in armed conflicts from minor clashes to wars around the world (Themner & Wallensteen, 2011) and a broad range of non-armed opposition movements. The breadth of this net has renewed debate about the legitimacy of proscription, a process that is difficult to overturn (Gross, 2011).

Theoretical Background

Media Opportunity

While the court is a valuable forum for policy challengers, there are additional benefits to going public. As Lazarsfeld and Merton observed as far back as 1948 (p. 101), press emphasis confers status on an issue. There are other potential rewards.

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Media coverage allows activists to expand the debate around an issue. It can also energize a movement by mobilizing a population, and it can increase the legitimacy of a group in the political arena (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; McCarthy & Zald, 1994; Rohlinger, 2002).

This does not mean that activists challenging a particular policy do not face barriers. Going public does not guarantee media attention. In fact, much of the literature on agenda setting indicates that in a market-driven media environment where reporters are pressured to produce fast, interesting stories, policy issues take a back seat to stories that are more easily dramatized and sensationalized (Hamilton, 2004). Or, as Gans (1979) observes, what's newsworthy is prioritized as what has drama, conflict, novelty, timeliness, and visual appeal. Moreover, when policy is covered, the topics of interest to political elites (decision makers) tend to be favored over those that matter to political challengers (Reese, 1991). Indeed, there is good evidence that journalists marginalize activists whose opinions are outside the mainstream (Hooks, 1992; Van Dijk, 1996). This situation makes it difficult for policy challengers to even enter the public debate (Pfetsch & Silke, 2011).

Nor does it necessarily mean favorable media coverage (Terkildson, Schnell, & Ling, 1998). Ideally, the media are political watchdogs that stand for truth, balance, and objectivity (Bennett, 1990, p. 5). In reality, these expectations are not usually supported (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In fact, most of the evidence indicates that on policy issues journalists gravitate to insider sources (e.g., government officials and think tank researchers) and either "rally round the flag," slanting coverage toward official views on an issue (Zaller & Chiu, 1996, pp. 385, 399), or create their own spin, reinterpreting messages from either side in a "media generated blend of messages" (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001, p. 184) that may take the form of "issue dualism" (Terkildson et al., 1998, p. 47)—an effort to seek balance by conveying a controversial issue as a political contest, a game or "horse race" in which arguments on either side are made to appear equally valid (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001, p. 205).

For a group tagged with the label of terrorist, the obstacles to gaining what they might consider adequate or appropriate coverage would be further magnified by the stigma of the terrorist label. Still, there is growing evidence that sustained efforts on the part of activists and policy challengers, even otherwise marginalized ones, can improve media capacity and standing, although this subject remains relatively understudied (Ryan et al., 2005).

The Role of Frames and Framing

The political process has been defined as a struggle over whose definition of social, political, or economic phenomena will prevail (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). To a large extent, this struggle is played out through language: "If policymaking is a

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struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives" (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994, p. 9).

A key component of this process is framing. Frames are interpretive schemata (Goffman, 1974) that simplify and condense the "world out there" by highlighting some aspects of reality to the exclusion of others (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). As such, they give "inferential cues" on how an issue should be understood and interpreted (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). Frames essentially define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest cures. As Entman has put it:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993, p. 52)

This aspect of political communication is significant since in any policy struggle, all players (activists, politicians, the media) want to control public interpretation; how the media covers an issue has been shown to be a powerful influence of citizen perception (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998) shaping opinion on topics as varied and controversial as racial politics (Kinder & Sanders, 1996), gun control (Callaghan & Schnell, 2000), hate crimes (Bramlet-Solomon, 2001), the war on terror (Ryan, 2004), affirmative action (Richardson & Lancendorfer, 2004), gay rights (Norris, 2006), legalization of marijuana (Golan, 2010), and European integration (Helbling, Hoeglinger, & Wuest, 2010). Moreover, there is good evidence that policy decisions are frequently made on the basis of how a problem is perceived and defined (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

The Role of Symbols, Rhetoric, and Sources

Frames and framing can be reinforced using other tools of language. Gamson and Lasch (1983) note that public discourse takes place in a symbolic environment that employs images and stereotypes to root positions. Groups with interests at stake may call on metaphors, catchphrases, condensing symbols, or rhetoric to create a positive or negative emotional image that reinforces or offsets a particular frame (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Terkildson et al., 1998). This can lead to framing contests around an image or even a symbol.

Players with interests at stake can also call on authoritative sources to reinforce or affirm or disconfirm a frame. Journalists are in a particularly strong position in this respect since they need sources "to fill news holes, meet deadlines, provide drama and add issue balance" (Terkildson et al., 1998, p. 48) but have the unique ability to "choose who speaks (or does not speak) in news coverage" enabling them "to frame news without appearing to do so (Schneider, 2012, p. 72). Journalists have the additional advantage of being able to employ explanatory cues to cast sources on

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one or the other side in a positive or negative light, and they can influence perceptions by calling on apparently authoritative but unnamed sources to give legitimacy to one or another side of an argument.

The Role of Credibility and Events

While framing, rhetoric, and selective use of sources play significant roles in policy debates, credibility and critical or focusing events (Kingdon, 1984) can also be key. Scholars have shown that credibility is critical to frame resonance. Frames must be consonant with cultural narratives and larger belief systems (Benford & Snow, 2000). In a word, they need to appear reasonable. The frame maker also has to be credible. But credibility is not a static attribute, that is, a simple matter of status. Actors can alternately enhance their own credibility and discredit their opponents using tactics such as self-aggrandizement on the one hand and vilification on the other (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Events too can impair credibility. Previous work has shown that critical or "focusing" events (Kingdon, 1984) can be exploited to alter or redirect the content or interpretation of a policy debate and mobilize opinion in new ways (Birkland, 1998; Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Cobb & Elder, 1983). In addition, parties to a policy debate "can use positive developments to boost their credibility," call on negative crisis situations to damage the legitimacy and credibility of their opponents and "thereby make rival frames more appealing" (Matesan, 2012, p. 678).

Research Focus

The central focus of this study was the extent to which advocacy inputs on the subject of delisting the MEK were reflected in journalist outputs. Specifically, I examined the extent to which the frames that advocates for delisting promoted in the opinion section of world news publications were adopted by journalists in news coverage. I also examined the role of critical or "focusing" events in drawing media attention and providing opportunities for policy challengers to shift or redirect the debate.

Based on previous research showing that media attention to policy issues increases when there is a compelling story to tell or an event that can be dramatized, I anticipated that the volume of media coverage of MEK delisting would be higher when an event occurred that could be sensationalized. Based on literature indicating that journalists tend to slant to official status quo positions, but that issue advocates can impact journalist frames, I anticipated that news coverage would incorporate at least some MEK advocacy perspectives, rhetoric, and frames over time. However, in view of other literature indicating that journalists create their own "spin," I also expected to find issue dualism and media generated frames (in particular a "horse race" or political contest frame).

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Methods

A content analysis of editorials, op-eds, and news stories was used to examine coverage of the MEK delisting controversy in the opinion and news sections of major world news publications from January 2003 through September 2012.

Sample Selection

Articles for analysis were retrieved through a Lexis Nexis search of major world news publications using the keywords "MEK," "PMOI," "NCRI," or "MOK" and terror "designation," "list(ing)," "blacklist(ing)," or "proscription."

The year 2003 offered a useful starting point. Although the United States first listed the MEK as an FTO in 1997, the listing became a salient issue in 2003 when the United States used it to rationalize bombing the group's base at Camp Ashraf in Iraq in March and the French subsequently used it to justify raids on MEK headquarters in Paris in June. The year 2003 is also significant since it was in that year, after the coalition bombing of Ashraf, that the MEK voluntarily disarmed, and all individual members then in Iraq signed documents renouncing violence and terrorism.

The time span (2003–2012) was a relevant one since it covered what Chilton (1987) has called "critical discourse moments" in the struggle of the MEK to get its name removed from terrorist lists in the United States, United Kingdom, and EU. These benchmarks included repeated court filings, repeated court rulings, the eventual reversal in the United Kingdom in 2008 and in the EU in 2009, as well as the announcement that the United States would lift the designation in September 2012. It also encompassed a sequence of events that affected the plight of the MEK, including the transfer of sovereignty in Iraq in 2004, the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and two fatal raids on the group's base at Camp Ashraf—one in 2009 and one in 2011. In addition, it included the period of post-delisting discussion after the United Kingdom and EU removed the terrorist tags in those jurisdictions and, more briefly, after the United States announced that it too would remove the tag in September of 2012.

I focused on major world news publications since there is good evidence that stories "spread vertically" within the news sector with editors at major newspapers setting news agendas (Nisbet & Huge, 2006). Opinion pieces (editorials and op-eds) were incorporated along with news since, as Hynds and Martin (1979) observe, opinion provides a forum to express political views in a robust market of open debate, and competing frames are especially visible in opinion. Additionally, inclusion of opinion allowed assessment of the extent to which journalists in news reporting adopted the frames used by outside commentators for and against delisting the MEK.

To guarantee relevancy, articles that were not substantially related to delisting, were duplicates, or non-articles (summaries) were excluded. A total of 367 articles

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made up the final sample. Of these, 131 were opinion pieces (op-eds, commentary, or letters to the editor) from outside commentators, 49 were staff-written editorials, and 187 were news or features penned by staff journalists.

Operational Definition of Framing

Framing, defined by Goffman (1974) as schemata of interpretation can refer to the complete process by which these phenomena are produced, selected, distributed, and adopted, or one aspect of this process. In this study, I focus on the definitional aspect, specifically the *arguments* stakeholders used to *justify* positions for and against delisting the MEK. In so doing, I rely on literature that suggests that to be effective, policy challengers have to put forward arguments that appear credible and easy to support. In particular, I rely on literature that uses Habermas's (1993) distinction of three types of arguments: utilitarian, identity related, and rights based (Helbling et al., 2010). This literature identifies utilitarian frames as ones that justify a position by focusing on its ability to achieve a goal or meet an interest that may be political, strategic, or security related. In contrast, identity-related frames focus on ideas and values that matter to a particular community. One category of this frame, as Helbling et al. (2010) observe, is a cultural/ideological subframe that is invoked to uphold an exclusive cultural, political, or religious identity or heritage. Rights-based frames, on the other hand, refer to moral principles and universal rights that can be claimed by anyone whatever their particular interests or cultural identity. Typical examples are humanitarian rights, civil rights, and justice before the law (Helbling et al., 2010). However, in view of evidence that journalists employ issue dualism, in which two sides of an issue are treated as equally valid (Terkildson et al., 1998), I also examine this category of framing.

Measures and Coding

The unit of analysis was the individual article. For all articles, I coded the following descriptive variables: name of the publication, where it was published (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Canada), date, Lexis/Nexis classification as news or opinion/commentary, whether the author was a journalist (editor or staff writer) or outside commentator, and the author's credentials (e.g., editor, staff writer, activist belonging to formal organization, politician, military expert, representative of international organization such as UN).

Media attention and the role of events. To track media attention and its relationship to events, I calculated the volume of coverage by year and assessed if coverage frequency waxed or waned with specific events.

Framing categories. In examining framing, I focused on what Entman (1993) describes as the problem definition aspect of framing, that is, the arguments

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that were mobilized to justify positions for and against delisting. In particular, I focused on utilitarian, identity-related, and rights-based frames as discussed earlier. I also coded issue dualism and an additional frame that crept into news stories in 2012, namely "ulterior motives."

Utilitarian frame. I coded a utilitarian frame (either "in our interests" or "not in our interests") if the article invoked an interest to support or oppose delisting. Typical interest-based statements in favor of the MEK cause focused on: the MEK's role in providing intelligence on Iran's clandestine nuclear program thereby protecting "national interests," "national security," or the "security of friends"; "empowering" or "unleashing" opposition to the regime to promote democracy; diverting regime attention and resources from "mischief making in Iraq," distracting them from their goal of "hegemony in the Persian Gulf," or from their support for terrorists and kidnappers; providing a political alternative or "third way" between military strikes on Iran (to deter their nuclear ambitions); and appeasement. Alternately, interest-based statements against the MEK cause stressed its negative effects, for example, undermining positive engagement with Iran, the possibility of backlash against other opposition groups.

Identity frame. I coded an identity-based frame if the article contained a statement or invoked identity or shared values to bolster a position, for example, if it portrayed the MEK as "someone like us" or alternately as "not like us," appealing to shared or disparate cultural or ideological values, traditions, or beliefs. Typical examples in favor of the MEK claimed the group as a "friend," a "partner," an "ally"; presenting the group as "moderate," "secular," "democratic," and committed to "gender equality." Such statements characteristically deplored "opprobrium for friends" or "branding friends as enemies." Conversely, identity-based statements on the side of not delisting focused on the "otherness" of the MEK depicting it as "strange," "odd," "bizarre," prone to "cult-like behavior," "violent," "anti-American," and "not a friend."

Rights frame. I coded a rights-based frame if the article contained a statement invoking a universal moral or ethical principle (e.g., justice), rights before the law, or humanitarian concerns. Typical examples on both sides of the debate included statements invoking legal rights, morality, and justice. On the side of delisting, humanitarian concerns (the possibility of a "disaster" even "wholesale slaughter" in the event the Iraqi prime minister followed through on his threat to expel the MEK to Iran) also loomed large and in some ways dominated this frame.

If a writer used or quoted a source articulating two separate frames—for example, arguing for delisting on the basis of strategic (utilitarian) *and* human rights claims—I coded those as separate frames and included both.

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Issue dualism. For news coverage, in addition to the above frames, I coded for issue dualism; that is, a "game" or "horserace" frame in which arguments for and against delisting were covered about equally in the same article.

Rhetoric, sources, and cues. To capture the role of rhetoric in reinforcing frames, I coded the use of symbolic words and catchall phrases applied to the MEK as a group. In particular, I tried to capture the extent of the use of positive descriptors—words such as "friend," "moderate," "secular," or "democratic" to reinforce a positive frame and conversely the extent of use of negative descriptors such as "strange," "odd," "bizarre," or "cultish" to reinforce a negative frame.

Since journalists rely on sources to shape their story lines, I also documented the sources for any verbatim quotations, whether they were named or unnamed, interest group spokespersons, government representatives, or other experts. I also examined journalist use of source cues, that is, descriptor words, to add luster to a quote or alternatively to discredit it.

Media slant. To examine media slant, I assessed whether a given article was for delisting, neutral on the subject, or against delisting. For opinion articles, I coded a pro-slant if the editorial or op-ed deplored the terrorist designation, urged delisting, and/or chastised proponents of continuing the listing (e.g., as appeasers); I coded an anti-slant if the opinion piece urged continued listing or criticized proponents (e.g., as paid lobbyists "shilling for terrorists"). On the other hand, I coded a neutral slant if no clear position could be determined. For news articles, I coded an anti-slant if the news report or feature included more attributed statements that favored delisting or slanted the article to indicate that delisting was a sensible choice; a pro-stance was coded if the news piece included more attributed statements favoring continuation of the terrorist designation or slanted the article to indicate that delisting was potentially risky or otherwise undesirable; I coded a neutral stance if the news piece contained equal numbers of attributed statements for and against delisting and/or if the overall message was that equally favorable arguments could be made on each side.

Data Analysis

I ran descriptive frequencies for all variables. For newspaper characteristics and framing, the unit of analysis was the individual article. For rhetorical words and symbols, sources and source cues, the unit of analysis was the number of instances.

Results

Overall Sample

The search criteria yielded 401 articles published between January 2003 and the end of September 2012. The final sample, after excluding duplicates and

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non-articles (summaries) was 367 articles. Of these, 131 were opinion pieces (op-eds, commentary, or letters to the editor) from outside commentators, 49 were staff-written editorials, and 187 were news or features penned by staff journalists.

Overall, the retrieved articles were regionally balanced for English language news. One hundred fifty-seven (43%) were published in major U.S. papers, 113 (31%) in major UK papers, 24 (7%) in Canadian news publications, and 10 (3%) in Australia/New Zealand publications. An additional 42 (12%) were from international publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor* and *International Herald Tribune*, and 15 (4%) were in prominent English language Israeli papers such as *Haaretz*. The U.S. newspaper that published the most articles on the topic was *The Washington Times* (83 articles). The UK paper that published the most was the London *Telegraph* (39 articles). These two papers tend to be conservative taking hardline, hawkish positions on Iran. However, there was a respectable showing of relevant articles in more centrist/ liberal news publications including the *Washington Post* (40 articles), the *Birmingham Post* (24 articles), the *Guardian* (11 articles), and the *New York Times* (11 articles).

My focus in this study was on how rival frames promoted in opinion fared in the news. I was also interested in the extent to which critical events made frames on one or the other side more salient for reporters and how rhetoric and selective use of sources were used to amplify frames. Before examining these topics, I want to make a few observations about the opinion sample, the role of events in driving media attention, and the overall slant of opinion and news.

Opinion Sample

Two observations can be made about the opinion sample. First, most of the outside opinion was penned by advocates *for* delisting the MEK. In fact, the ratio *against* was 8:1. Second, identifiable advocacy groups contributed only about one quarter of all opinion pieces on the topic and unaffiliated citizens contributed only about 15%. The bulk of the outside commentary came from politicians, academics, and military or security experts. Here, however, there was wide divergence between supporters and opponents in credentials. While all of the political leaders and most of the military experts offering commentary on the pro side of delisting were based in the United Kingdom, EU, or United States, all of the politicians contributing commentary against delisting were based in Iran or Iraq. Moreover, most of the advocacy/interest group representation on the side of not delisting was contributed by individuals affiliated with the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), a group that is known to advocate engagement with Islamic Republic of Iran and has long opposed delisting the MEK. This pattern of authorship was significant since frame credibility has been shown to be a function of source credibility (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2001) and while advocacy groups with known interests command less credibility than politicians and experts, these groups can be vulnerable in a changing political environment (Table 1).

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Table 1: Credentials in Outside Opinion (n = 131)

	Delisting supporters N = 117		Delisting opponents N = 14		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Identifiable advocacy group[a]	29	25	4	29	33	25
Political leader						
Politician United Kingdom[b]	32	27	0	0	32	24
Politician EU	5	4	0	0	5	4
Politician United States	3	3	0	0	3	2
Politician Iran or Iraq[c]	0	0	4	29	4	3
Citizen	18	15	3	21	21	16
Academic	17	15	1	7	18	14
Military/Security expert	11	9	1	7	12	9
International organization[d]	2	2	1	7	3	2

[a] Includes representatives of National Council of Resistance of Iran, Camp Ashraf residents, and Iranian American Society on the side of delisting and representatives of the NIAC and Foundation for Democracy in Iran on the side of opposing delisting.
[b] Includes op-eds from current and former members of the British parliament with about equal numbers from conservative and labor politicians.
[c] Includes op-eds from representatives of the Iranian embassy as well as office of the Iraqi prime minister.
[d] Includes op-eds from representatives of the UN and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

Media Attention and Critical Events

Figure 1 shows the volume of articles by year and type of authorship (outside opinion or journalist authored) over the study period. Table 2 gives more detailed information on the context by year and key events. An important finding in terms of media attention was that while outside opinion peaked in 2008 (when delisting was an intense topic of policy deliberation in the United Kingdom and EU), journalist coverage spiked when events created compelling stories to tell, for example, in 2003 when the coalition bombed Camp Ashraf and police raided the MEK compound in Paris and in 2009 and 2011 when Iraqi forces stormed Camp Ashraf killing dozens of MEK then residing there. These results highlight the key role of critical events as potential catalysts for policy debates (Birkland, 1998).

Media Slant

Table 3 shows the results for media slant. In the outside opinion set, pro-delisting op-eds and letters to the editor outnumbered anti-delisting pieces by a ratio of 8:1. Similar results were found for inside opinion: staff (journalist authored) editorials for delisting outstripped those against delisting by a ratio of 7:1. These results may say something about the gatekeeping function of editors in opinion sections who, faced with constraints of time and space, tend to favor outside opinion that is

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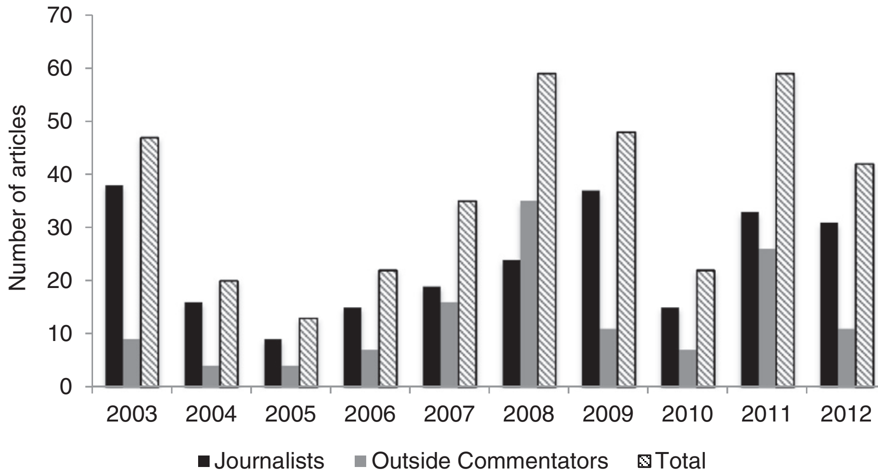

Figure 1: Media attention: Volume of articles on removing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) terrorist designation by year and author type.

consonant with the worldview of the publication (Golan, 2010). In this case, there was a preponderance of publications at the conservative end of the spectrum where more hawkish attitudes toward Iran prevailed. Alternately, the higher number of op-eds on the side of delisting may simply reflect more prolific submission by advocates for the MEK.

A different pattern emerged in the analysis of the much larger set of journalist-authored news and features set (n = 188) where the ratio of articles that could be coded as pro-delisting, against delisting, or neutral on the subject was much closer. Overall, 41% of news reportage took a neutral position or presented a mixed stance. Only 27% clearly slanted toward delisting, while 32% decidedly slanted toward continuing to list the group—either by using an excess of quotes from sources critical of delisting or by direct commentary.

The aggregate results for journalist-authored pieces, however, obscure changes over time. As shown in Table 3, the percentage of journalist-authored news and feature pieces that slanted against delisting clearly shrunk over the two five-year periods (from 41% for the period 2003–2007 to 24% for the period 2008–2012), while the percentage that slanted toward delisting almost doubled (from 17% to 33%). These changes, graphically depicted in Fig. 2, suggest that journalists began to align on the side of delisting over time, albeit cautiously.

Framing

Input (outside commentary). There were three key findings in the analysis of outside commentary. First, as shown in Table 4, framing was plainly directional, with

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Table 2: Media Attention: Number of Articles on Removing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) Terrorist Designation by Year and Key Events

Year	Number of Articles Retrieved	Outside Opinion	Journalist Authored	Concurrent Events
2003	47	9	38	Mar: United States invades Iraq. MEK headquarters at Camp Ashraf bombed by coalition forces. May: MEK in Iraq voluntarily disarm. Jun: Tehran tries to broker a deal with coalition forces—withdraw its military backing for Hamas & Hezbollah & give open access to nuclear facilities in return for MEK.[a] Jun: 1,300 French police raid homes of MEK dissidents and offices of NCRI in France.
2004	20	4	16	Jul: MEK in Iraq awarded "Protected Persons" status under Fourth Geneva Convention.
2005	13	4	9	May: Based on a listing of MEK attacks on Iranian government officials and interests in 1990s, Canada adds MEK to its terror list.
2006	22	7	15	Jun: 35 members of Britain's parliament apply to UK's Secretary of State to lift ban on MEK. Dec: EU Court calls into question EU's designation of PMOI/MEK as a terrorist organization.
2007	35	16	19	Repeated appeals to UK & EU governments delist MEK. Nov: UK court rules that PMOI/MEK is not concerned in terrorism and proscription cannot be lawfully justified. Dec: • Camp Ashraf responsibility passes from U.S. forces to Iraq. • Iraqi officials threaten to expel MEK from Iraq. • UK court reaffirms November ruling that listing the MEK as terrorist is unlawful.
2008	60	36	24	Jun: UK removes MEK for its terror list. Oct: EU Court rules that EU was wrong to blacklist MEK. Dec: EU Court rules for a third time that EU was wrong to blacklist MEK
2009	48	11	37	Jan: EU removes MEK from its terror list. MEK files petition with DC Circuit of Appeals for U.S. delisting. Feb: Iran urges Iraq to expel MEK.[b] Jul: Iraqi security forces raid Camp Ashraf leaving at least 11 MEK dead and 500 injured. The Iraqi government justifies the massacre as cracking down on terrorists.
2010	22	7	15	Jul: DC Court of Appeals orders State Department to review MEK listing based on finding that the agency violated the rights of the MEK. Nov: A bipartisan group of 110 U.S. Congress members urge State Department to delist MEK.
2011	57	24	33	Apr.: Iraqi security forces raid Ashraf again leaving at least 33 dead and more than 300 wounded. Dec: U.S. completes withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq.
2012	32	9	23	Jun: DC Circuit Court rules that the U.S. State Department has four months to decide whether to continue to designate MEK as a terror group. Sep 21: Media reports that the United States has decided to remove the MEK/PMOI from the list of Terrorist Organizations.

[a] In 2007, the *BBC News* reported uncovering a letter written after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in which Tehran offers to withdraw military backing for Hamas and Hezbollah as well as give open access to their nuclear facilities in return for Western action in disbanding the PMOI. See *BBC News* (2007a). See also *BBC News* (2007b).
[b] See AFP (2009). DC, Washington, DC; NCRI, National Council of Resistance of Iran; PMOI, People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran.

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Table 3: Media Slant/Position on Removing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) From Terrorist Lists (*n* = 367)

	Pro-Delisting (Challenger Position)		Neutral		Anti-Delisting (Government Position)		Total
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*
Outside Opinion[a]							
2003–2007	32	78	–	–	9	22	41
2008–2012	83	93	1	1	5	6	89
Overall	115	88	1	1	14	11	130
Journalist Authored Editorials[b]							
2003–2007	10	67	4	27	1	7	15
2008–2012	23	68	3	9	8	24	34
Overall	34	70	8	15	7	15	49
News & Features							
2003–2007	14	17	35	42	34	41	83
2008–2012	35	33	45	43	25	24	105
Overall	48	27	75	41	58	32	188
All Journalist	82	35	87	37	68	29	237

[a] Op-eds from outside commentators and letters to the editor.
[b] Staff-written editorials.

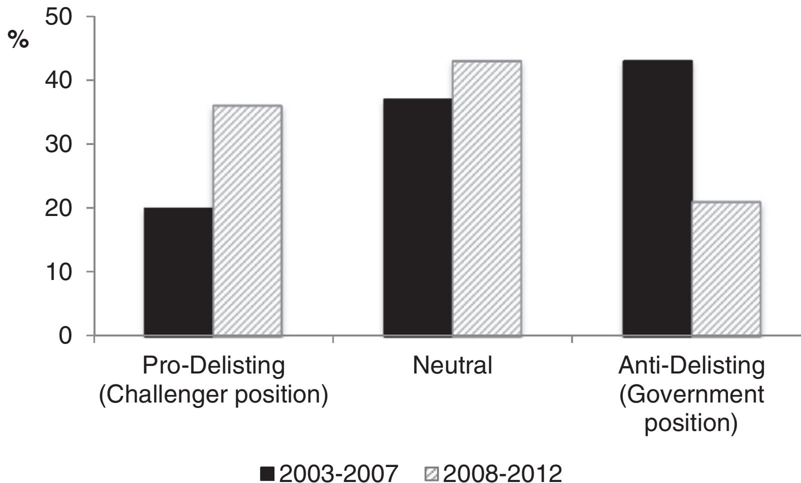

Figure 2: News and feature slant on removing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) from terrorist lists for two time periods (*n* = 188).

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Table 4: Input: Most Frequent Frames on Removing Terror Designation in Outside Commentary

Time	Pro-Delisting Challenger Frame	%	Time	Anti-Delisting Government Frame	%
2003–2007 ($N = 32$)	Delisting = in our interests	78	2003–2007 ($N = 9$)	MEK are not friends, not like us	78
	Not delisting = appeasement	59		Utilitarian: not in our interests	11
	MEK are our friends, allies	53		Simply terrorists	11
	Human rights/justice	47		MEK advocates have ulterior motives	11
2008–2012 ($N = 82$)	Human rights/justice	75	2008–20012 ($N = 5$)	Advocates have ulterior motives	100
	Utilitarian: strategic interest	46		Delisting = politically risky	100
	Identity: MEK are our friends	34		MEK are not friends, not like us	60
	Not delisting = appeasement	29		Utilitarian: not in our interests	20
Overall ($N = 115$)	Human rights/justice	67	Overall ($N = 14$)	MEK are not friends, not like us	72
	Delisting = in our interests	55		Delisting = not in our interests	14
	Identity: MEK are our friends	39		Human rights/justice	7
	Not delisting = appeasement	37		Simply terrorists	7

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 since some articles included more than one issue frame. MEK, Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization.

advocates for delisting using one set of preferred frames and opponents using another set. Second, delisting advocates were more likely than opponents to use combinations of frames (e.g., utilitarian + identity and/or human rights). In fact, almost half (48%) of the outside commentary opposing the terror tag used more than one frame. In contrast, commentary opposing delisting tended to employ a singular "not like us" (they are "odd," "different," "bizarre") identity frame with only 15% using an additional frame. Third, commentary on the side of lifting the terror designation showed greater flexibility in the choice of frames over time. In particular, there was a clear shift from away from predominantly utilitarian and identity frames to human rights and justice frames.

Output: journalist-authored opinion and news. To what extent did journalists adopt or align to frames on either side of the debate? Table 5 provides the most frequent frames used in journalist-authored pieces, including editorials and staff-written op-eds, on the one hand ($n = 49$), and news and features on the other ($n = 187$).

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Table 5: Output: Most Frequent Frames on Removing Terror Designation in Journalist Authored Opinion and News

Time	Editorials/Opinion Columns	%	Time	News Features	%
2003–2007 ($N = 15$)	Human rights	47	2003–2007 ($N = 83$)	MEK are not like us, strange	42
	MEK are our friends, allies	33		Political contest	28
	Delisting = in our interests	20		Delisting = in our interests	30
				Human rights/justice	17
				MEK are our friends, allies	12
2008–2012 ($N = 34$)	Human rights	70	2008–2012 ($N = 105$)	Human rights/justice	40
	MEK are our friends, allies	27		Political contest	34
	Delisting = in our interests	24		MEK are not like us, strange	20
	MEK are not like us, strange	15		Delisting = in our interests	11
				MEK advocates have ulterior motives	10
Overall ($N = 49$)	Human rights/justice	61	Overall ($N = 188$)	Human rights/justice	30
	MEK are our friends, allies	29		MEK are not like us, strange	29
	Delisting = in our interests	23		Political contest	31
	MEK are not like us, strange	12		Delisting = in our interests	19
	Ulterior motives	12		MEK are our friends, allies	10

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to use of multiple frames. MEK, Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization.

Staff-written editorials and opinion columns generally adopted pro-delisting frames in both periods, but especially in the second five-year period when 70% of editors called attention to the potential for a humanitarian disaster if the MEK were handed over to Iran. However, compared to opinion penned by outside challengers, lower proportions used additional identity and utilitarian frames to bolster their arguments (27% vs. 39% and 23% vs. 55%).

Turning to the larger set of news and feature stories, a different picture emerges. Human rights/justice frames were relatively infrequent, occurring in only 17% of news reporting in the period 2003–2007. Positive identity frames were even more rare, with only 10% using or quoting sources invoking the “MEK are our friends, allies” frame. An exception is a feature by *New York Times* writer Douglas Jehl who quotes Yleem Poblete, staff director for the House International Relations Committee’s subcommittee on the Middle East and Asia 2003:

> They are our friends, not our enemies. And right now, they are the most organized alternative to the Iranian regime, and the fact that they are the main target of the Iranian regime says a lot about their effectiveness. (Jehl, 2003, p. B1)

More typical in news reportage were frames conveying the “MEK are not like us,” “they are strange,” or “they are not liked,” infusing as much as 42% of news reportage in this period. Two examples, the first from *the Australian*, the second from *The Guardian*, are shown below:

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> Welcome to the quixotic world of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)—the principal Iranian resistance organisation which blends a strange mix of Marxism and Islam in its long-running quest to overthrow the Islamic republic in Tehran. ("Freedom fighter or foe," 2003, p. 9)

> [It is] a bizarre revolutionary army. (Leigh, 2005, p. 9)

Some journalists went a step further characterizing the group not only as strange but also as "cultish." Citing an Iranian journalist, Graeme Hamilton of Canada's *National Post*, for example, penned these words:

> Their ideology is strange. Internally, they are profoundly undemocratic and cultish and bizarre. (Hamilton, 2012, p. A1)

These results show the considerable hurdles MEK advocates faced in seeing their frames published in news and features.

Still, there was a clear reduction in the "not like us/they are strange" frame over time (from 42% of news stories in the period from 2003–2007 to 20% in the period from 2008–2012), and a corresponding shift in journalist reportage toward human rights/justice frames (from 18% of news stories to 44%). This shift quickened in 2008 as the reins of power in Iraq were passed to a new Shiʿite controlled government that took its cues increasingly from Iran. By the year's end, journalists such as Steven Edwards of the *Gazette* (Montreal) were quoting human rights advocates who warned that a "disaster in the making" loomed for thousands of Iranian dissidents in Iraq's Camp Ashraf (Edwards, 2008, p. A16). The summer of 2009 confirmed these fears as video footage circulated showing Iraqi troops, backed by Humvees and armored personnel carriers, storming Camp Ashraf and shooting at unarmed civilians, killing 36 and wounding hundreds more. Reporters, covering this development, gave weight, to be sure, to the U.S. government stance that the raid was "the legitimate act of a sovereign government" (LaFranchi, 2009, p. 2), but many also noted that human rights activists denounced it as a violation of international law and the Geneva Convention.

This was a time when election protests, following the disputed victory of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, were also in the news. In op-eds and letters to the editor, MEK advocates called attention to the Iranian regime's use of the designation to justify arresting and executing its opponents. News reporting began incorporating this theme. Quoting European lawmakers, *Washington Times* journalist, James Morrison, for example, noted that:

> the [terrorist] designation provides justification for the Iranian regime to execute its opponents under the pretext of "Moharb" (waging war against God) and "terrorist." . . . By maintaining the MEK/PMOI terrorist designation, "the United States is alienating the pro-democracy Iranians who yearn for a democratic and nuclear-free Iran." (Morrison, 2010, p. A8)

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Journalists continued to insert human rights themes into their stories in 2011, a year that saw the "Arab Spring," but also witnessed Iraqi security forces bulldozing their way once again into Camp Ashraf, opening fire and leaving as many as 33 unarmed civilians dead and hundreds more injured. In a feature for *The Guardian* that displayed photos of Iraqi soldiers patrolling near burned trailers at Camp Ashraf, journalist Kate Allen, for example, asked the world to take notice of this "massacre" of Iranian exiles suggesting that it will provide a window on the country's "human rights progress":

> . . . the world should start paying attention to this forgotten story. How Iraq treats the residents of Camp Ashraf will provide an important window into how far Iraq has come in respecting human rights. (Allen, 2011)

Overall, these results suggest that over time, news reporters and feature writers moved, if cautiously, in the direction of frames used by delisting supporters. This may be because they needed frames that were more salient. It may also be because a cascade of events had damaged the credibility of those promoting alternative frames. At the same time, almost a third (31%) of the journalist-authored articles conveyed issue dualism. Moreover, about 1 in 10 (10%) opted to highlight new opposition complaints designed to cast doubt on the credibility of politicians on the side of delisting—they had "ulterior" motives, they were "paid lobbyists."

Symbols and emblems

The analysis of symbols showed that news and feature reporters adopted symbols and emblems from both sides of the debate in about equal numbers. The word "cult" or "cult-like," an evocative negative descriptor culled from a now discredited 2004 Human Rights report (Safavi, 2009), was used to describe the MEK as many as 242 times, mostly without source attribution or only with attribution to unnamed Iranian officials. The term "sect" was used at least 10 times, and the terms "violent" or "violence" (as in the MEK's "history of violence") were used 150 times usually without sourcing or explanation. Other negative descriptors (e.g., "radical," "extremist," and "leftist"), designed to evoke an undesirable image, were also common. But reporters frequently used positive words to convey a different image. For example, the word "democratic" was used as many as 244 times, the word "secular" 65 times, and the word "moderate" at least 34 times.

Source quotations

Since reporters are expected to avoid expressing personal opinions, they rely heavily on visible, influential, and convenient sources in constructing news and stories. Visible sources, defined as spokespeople for interest groups and carriers of expertise, and influential ones who hold positions in hierarchies, help them add an

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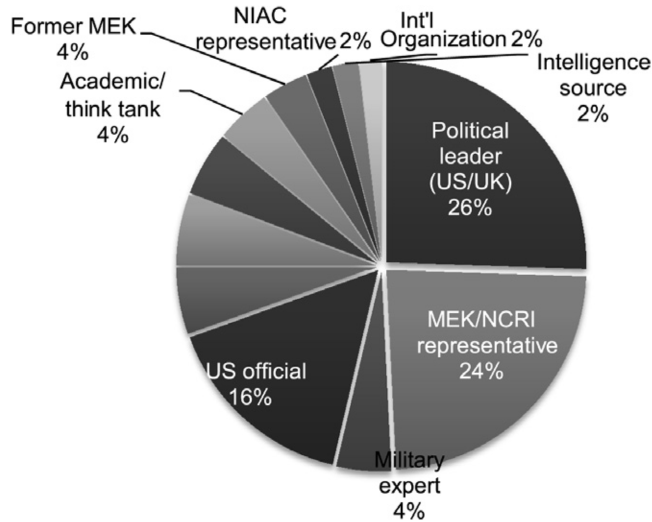

Figure 3: Breakdown of quotation sources on delisting the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) in news and feature stories.

air of legitimacy to news coverage while convenient ones help them cope with quick deadlines.

Overall, 75% (140/188) of the news articles contained at least one sourced quotation. As shown in Fig. 3, the most common sources of the 384 identified quotes were pro-delisting political leaders in the United States or United Kingdom (26%) and spokespersons for the NCRI (24%). Surprisingly, considering their direct role in the controversy, relatively few quotes were attributed to official representatives of either the U.S. government (16%) or the United Kingdom or EU (5%). However, 11% were attributed to representatives of the governments of Iraq or Iran. The remaining quotes came from military experts (4%), intelligence sources (2%), former MEK members (4%), "experts" from academia or think tanks, representatives of international organizations (4%), and MEK opponents in the NIAC, a group that is thought by some to be a pro-Iran lobby (2%).

Source anonymity. MEK/NCRI sources,[7] political leaders,[8] and military experts,[9] all quoted in support of delisting the MEK, were uniformly named. Iraq government sources,[10] usually critical of delisting, were also named. In most cases, however, quotes attributed to "official" United States, United Kingdom, and EU government and intelligence sources were anonymous, that is direct or paraphrased quotes to unnamed persons.[11] Quotes from government sources within the Islamic Republic of Iran were similarly anonymous. On the other hand "experts" in think tanks and former MEK members making statements on the subject were sometimes named and sometimes not named.

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This anonymity, granted almost exclusively to critics of delisting, allowed journalists to attribute blanket negative opinions to "official" or expert sources without sourcing them. Two examples of sourcing to *unnamed* authorities, both from Scott Peterson of the *Christian Science Monitor*, are shown below:

> "The Islamic Republic's policy toward the MKO is very clear—there is nothing hidden," says a foreign ministry official who asked not to be named. "In our opinion they are a terrorist cult." (Peterson, 2008, p. 6)
>
> Yet current U.S. officials and many Iran experts—hawks and doves alike—question the MEK's ability to change in light of the group's unique history and its cult-like characteristics. They say the fact that it is widely despised inside Iran makes it a dangerous tool to change Iran's Islamic regime. (Peterson, 2011, p. 3)

Source cues. While the proportions of quotes for and against delisting were similar (54% vs. 46%), this was not the case for cues to interpret these quotes. Beyond the words "official" and "expert," descriptive cues never preceded quotes attributed to government sources, intelligence or think tank sources, or sources in international organizations or in the NIAC, a group that opposes the MEK. In contrast, news reportage frequently parenthesized quotes from Maryam Rajavi, the acknowledged head of the MEK and president of its parliament in exile, with negative descriptors characterizing her, for example, as "autocratic," "cult-like," "charismatic," "zealous," "a self-styled leader," "a self-declared president-elect." Similarly, quotes in support of the MEK from political leaders were routinely prefaced with negative cues (e.g., "star lobbyist," "high profile lobbyist," "well-financed lobbyist"). These cues allowed journalists to cast a distinct cloud on the credibility of MEK supporters while adhering to a journalist norm of quoting sources.

Discussion

This study tried to examine the interplay between efforts by activists and political players to gain media visibility and journalist coverage of the MEK listing debate. The data allowed comparison of inputs, using opinion from interest groups and political players, with outputs in the form of news and feature reportage. My expectations, based on the literature, were: (1) that news coverage would be greater when there was a dramatic event to cover, (2) that supporters and opponents of delisting would both have preferred frames, and (3) that journalists in news reportage would generally slant to official perspectives (i.e., take the side of delisting opponents) and align with government frames. But in view of other literature indicating that journalists create their own "spin," I also expected to find issue dualism and media-generated frames and in particular a "horse race" or political contest frame.

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The results largely supported these expectations. There was clear evidence that reporters paid less attention to delisting when it was purely a policy matter and more attention to it when it could be connected to events that had story-telling potential. These results support earlier research highlighting the role of drama plays in news agenda setting (Hamilton, 2004). Other research on agenda setting has shown a strong correlation between the emphasis the mass media place on an issue, based on amount of coverage, and the importance attributed to it by mass audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While the results shown here cannot tell us the degree of importance the public attributed to the issue at hand (that would require a different study), they do suggest that the media played a role in orchestrating a sense of importance by virtue of selective coverage.

The results for media slant were more mixed. Over the entire time period, about 4 in 10 (41%) news articles conveyed neutrality or issue dualism, as if both sides had equal merits. About 3 in 10 (27%) took the side of delisting supporters, while another 3 in 10 (32%) took the side of delisting opponents. These results support theories of press independence (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). Still, there were distinct changes in slant over time with the percentage of articles slanting toward approval for delisting almost doubling from 17% for the first period (2003–2007) to 33% for the second period (2008–2012), while the percentage slanting against delisting decreased from 41% to 24%.

These changes paralleled changes in framing. In particular, there was a clear shift toward humanitarian/justice frames and a shrinkage in the use of the "they are not like us," "they are strange" frames from the first five-year period to the second one. These changes in journalist output may have been, in part, a function of changes in advocacy group input. Analysis of opinion arguments indicates that MEK advocates not only used a greater range of arguments, but also adapted their arguments over time and in relation to events. This was especially evident in the way they shifted toward a greater use of humanitarian arguments, which would have had more mainstream resonance after 2007. In contrast, opponents tended to promote a singular hostile identity frame based largely on the "otherness" of the MEK. This frame, one that lent itself to hyperbole, was the chief one adopted by journalists in the initial phase of coverage. Over time, however, it appears to have had less resonance in the context of events and journalists began to align more with the human rights frames that had greater salience.

There are at least two important limitations to this study. First, the content analysis is limited to major world newspapers in English. Different results might have been obtained if the study had been extended to a wider range of sources (newsfeeds, TV and radio media, daily papers, and blogs) and non-English language news sources. Second, advocacy group influence is known to vary depending on the visibility of a campaign and on the ideological cast of an issue (Kingdon, 1995). The ability of MEK advocates to influence media framing may not be generalizable to policy debates featuring a less visible campaign or a different ideological component.

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Third, we cannot prove that frames promoted in op-eds and other opinion pieces or critical events influenced journalist frames although the evidence appears compelling.

Despite these limitations, the study provides several insights for policy challengers. First, for groups that want to get a message into the media, policy context makes a difference. The delisting controversy received relatively little attention from journalists *per se* when the policy process was mainly administrative or a matter for the courts and there was little opportunity to dramatize a story. On the other, hand critical or "focusing events" provided an opportunity for activists to help the media reframe and draw attention to their cause.

Second, framing can make a difference. Outside commentators commanded more attention (more opinion articles published) when they began to frame delisting as a humanitarian issue as they did from 2008 onwards.

Third, human interest matters. While journalists tend to slant toward official policy (in this case against delisting the MEK), there was evidence that a change in stance occurred when human interest was at stake. This was the case in 2009 and 2011, when residents of Camp Ashraf were under siege and dozens were killed and hundreds more were wounded. Under such dramatic circumstances, journalists may be more inclined to take the side of an interest group that is at risk.

Fourth, persistence and flexibility in framing can make a difference. There was clear evidence that journalists drew more on pro-delisting frames as time went on. As a result, journalist framing became less one sided in the latter period. Still, the obstacles were high. Most journalists gave equal weight to both sides of the debate, and even though MEK supporters routinely made themselves available as sources for quotes, journalists tended to go more often to unnamed government sources who bolstered the case against delisting. Finally, critical events matter in that they can damage the credibility of one set of frames or make them less salient.

Conclusions

The study findings show that the media took a visibly active role in directing how the MEK delisting story was told. In its selective use of frames, rhetoric, symbols, sources (named and unnamed), and leading source cues, it constructed a story that at first aligned mostly with input from delisting opponents who cast the MEK as odd, strange, bizarre, or "not our friends" and thus as somehow undeserving of removal from terror lists, no matter the merits of the case. As time went on, however, and a cascade of events damaged the credibility of rival frames and their articulators, many journalists began building a new storyline that adopted the frames and rhetoric of delisting advocates who cast the issue in humanitarian and rights terms. While journalists caged their bets, often conveying the controversy as a contest with equally valid points on either side, it is clear that even marginalized actors who persist and

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strategically nurture small opportunities can exert influence and expand the discourse.

Notes

1. The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), founded in 1981 in France, is the "parliament in exile" of the "Iranian Resistance." It is a political umbrella coalition of five Iranian opposition political organizations, the largest organization being the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (MEK). The NCRI was originally formed by MEK head Massoud Rajavi and former president of Iran Abolhassan Banisadr, who were joined by National Democratic Front and Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran. During the Iran–Iraq War, the NDF and Banisadr withdrew from the NCRI (Keddie & Richard, 1981, p. 256).
2. See Norman Kempster (1997, p. A4).
3. See interview with Martin Indyk, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs in Isikoff (2002, p. 2).
4. BBC Radio 4, Today Program interview with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, February 1, 2006, cited in Safavi A. (2010, March 31).
5. The evidence showed that the contractor killings that formed the basis of the original designation were carried out by a splinter group, not under the control of the group's leadership; that there was no credible proof that the MEK participated in the 1979 embassy takeover; and that the military operations, carried out by the MEK from Iraq, were the activities of a liberation army against military targets not terrorist acts against civilians. MEK advocates also noted that the leadership had specifically renounced violence and ceased all military operations in 2001 and that all of its members had voluntarily disarmed and renounced violence in 2003 following the coalition invasion of Iraq.
6. Issue cultures have been defined as "cognate sets of social problems that become a commanding concern in society" (Ungar, 2007, p. 81).
7. The most frequent named source for MEK/NCRI attributed quotes in news reportage was Maryam Rajavi, president-elect of the NCRI. Attributions, however, were also made to other named spokespersons, for example, Ali Safavi and legal representatives of the group, for example, Allan Gerson.
8. Quote attributions to political leaders were made, among others to: John R. Bolton (UN ambassador), Andrew Card (former White House chief of staff), Louis J. Freeh (FBI director), Tom Ridge (Homeland Security secretary), Howard Dean (Vermont governor), Bill Richardson (New Mexico governor), Togo D. West Jr. (Secretary of the Army), Edward Rendell (Pennsylvania governor), Rudolph Giuliani (former mayor of New York), Patrick Kennedy (Senator, Rhode Island), Howard Dean (former DNC chair), Bill Richardson (UN envoy); Lords David Alton, Robin Corbett, and David Waddington (MPs or former MPs in British parliament); and Lord Peter Archer (former Solicitor General).
9. Attributions to military experts were made, among others, to: Gen. Wesley Clark, Gen. Henry Shelton (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Gen. James T. Conway (Commandant of the Marine Corps), Marine Gen. Peter Pace (Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff), Marine Gen. James L. Jones (National Security Adviser), and Gen. Richard Myers.
10. Attributions were made, among others, to Nouri al Maliki (Iraq's Shiʿite prime minister and Adnan al-Shamani (a Shiʿ ite lawmaker).
11. To be sure, there were exceptions. Pressed by reporters, then National Security Advisor (later Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice) was specifically quoted in *Newsweek* as saying that the

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United States was not working with the MEK, and as acknowledging a lack of agreement in the administration on Iranian policy (Dicke, Hosenball, & Hirsh, 2005, p. 30). Similarly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was specifically quoted in the *Washington Post* in March of 2012 as stating that the MEK's cooperation in a planned relocation of its base in Iraq "will be a key factor in the delisting decision" (Associated Press, 2012).

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