



## A Strategic Narrative Construction of the Trump Administration on Iran's Nuclear Program

### Trump Yönetiminin İran'ın Nükleer Programına Yönelik Stratejik Anlatı İnşası

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#### Abstract

This study mainly aims to explore the strategic narrative that the Trump administration constructed about Iran's nuclear program. The study tries to identify what kind of strategic narratives the Trump administration constructed during the period of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and its re-imposition of sanctions against Iran. For this purpose, the study was conducted by analyzing the official statements, remarks and speeches of U.S. foreign policy-makers, which make up the primary data source of the study. The qualitative method was adopted for data survey and collection, and the analysis of the obtained data was analyzed through the technique of qualitative content analysis. By using the qualitative method, the paper seeks to ascertain meaning construction in the discourse of foreign policy-makers. During the research process, it was observed that the Trump administration utilized strategic narratives on three different levels: issue narratives, identity narratives, and system narratives. The research concludes that the Trump administration employed the strategic narrative as a tool to legitimize its foreign policy decisions derived by the "maximum pressure" strategy that aimed to restrict Iran's increasing power capacity and to reduce its regional influence in the Middle East.

#### Keywords

Strategic Narrative, the Nuclear Deal, Sanctions, Trump Administration, Iran

#### Öz

Bu çalışma, özü itibarıyla Trump yönetiminin (2017-2021) İran'ın nükleer programı hakkında inşa ettiği stratejik anlatıyı incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, ABD'nin nükleer anlaşmadan çekilme ve İran'a yönelik yaptırımları yeniden uygulama sürecinde Trump yönetiminin nasıl bir stratejik anlatı inşasında bulunduğunu tespit etmektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda çalışma, birincil kaynaklar olan siyasi elitlerin resmi demeç, bildiri ve açıklamaları incelenerek yürütüldü. Veri tarama ve toplama sürecinde nitel yöntem benimsenirken, elde edilen verilerin çözümleme işlemi nitel içerik analizi tekniğiyle yapıldı. Araştırmaya sürecinde Trump yönetiminin olay anlatısı, kimlik anlatısı ve sistem anlatısı olmak üzere üç farklı düzlemde stratejik anlatı inşasında bulunduğu gözlemlendi. Araştırma, Trump yönetiminin Orta Doğu'da İran'ın artan güç kapasitesi ve bölgesel etkinliğinin önüne geçmek amacıyla uygulamaya koyduğu "maksimum baskı" stratejisi uyarınca aldığı kararları uluslararası kamuoyu nezdinde meşru göstermek amacıyla stratejik anlatıyı bir araç olarak kullandığı sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Stratejik Anlatı, Nükleer Anlaşma, Trump Yönetimi, ABD, İran

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## Introduction

The Donald Trump administration (2017-2021) abandoned the “constructive engagement” strategy of the USA towards Iran during the period of Barack Obama (2009-2017) and imposed the “maximum pressure” strategy (Pompeo, 2018a). Under the Trump administration, the U.S. Middle East policy changed greatly. Adopting the “maximum pressure” strategy against Iran, the U.S. has once again started to behave with unilateralist and interventionist foreign policy in the Middle East (Walt, 2019). Such foreign policy has led to deteriorating U.S. relations with hostile regimes like Iran. Exposed to a “maximum pressure” strategy, Iran has behaved more aggressively with policies that have jeopardized regional stability and security. As a result, even though the Trump administration said that it tried to ensure regional stability and security in the Middle East, this strategy has not served this purpose.

Acting in line with this strategy, the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the nuclear agreement signed between Iran and P5+1 countries (2015) in May 2018. Behind this, the Trump administration both reinforced financial sanctions against Iran and decided to impose an oil embargo and largely prevented Iran’s oil export. Although the United States has the opportunity to behave more flexibly than other countries in its decisions and practices concerning its foreign policy thanks to its status as a super power in the global distribution of power, it needs to legitimize in international public opinion the attitudes and behaviors that it displays in line with its own strategic interests. The US decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, which suspended Iran’s nuclear program, required the persuasion of the international community, especially Russia, China, Germany, Britain and France, which are parties to the nuclear agreement. Moreover, the fact that Iran acted in accordance with the terms of the agreement urged the Trump administration to make a great effort to justify its decision to international public opinion. It is for this reason that the significance of using strategic communication as an effective tool in foreign policy comes to the fore.

Decision-makers employ strategic communication as a valuable means for expressing and explaining their attitudes and actions to international audiences. Strategic narrative constitutes one of the techniques of strategic communication. However, to understand the strategic narrative, it is necessary to have knowledge of strategic communication. This discussion has been done in the conceptual framework of the article. The new technological paradigm and new media ecology, especially based on how developed the level of information and communication technology is, have made strategic communication an important instrument in national security strategies for states in international politics. This new international communication ecology contains both opportunities and threats simultaneously for states. At the current stage, the increasing suspicion that people can easily access alternative sources in the process of obtaining information and that the information presented reflects the reality draws states and non-state actors into an intense war of information. For this reason, two issues arise regarding strategic communication in international politics. First of all, even if foreign policy-makers are right in their foreign policy decisions and practices, they may prove to be weak against their rivals unless they can explain themselves to international public opinion by using strategic communication effectively. Secondly, foreign policy-makers have to endeavor to justify their foreign

policy decisions before the international community in line with their national interests and strategic goals. Thus, a convenient discourse climate is built in the process of reaching the desired strategic goal.

This study deals with the strategic narrative constructed by the Trump administration to justify its decision to withdraw from the deal signed with Iran and impose sanctions against it in the eyes of international audiences. The study aims to contribute to the literature on formation and projection of strategic narratives in foreign policy. The purpose here is not to judge any country, but to scientifically analyze the strategic narrative construction. In this context, it seeks an answer to the question of what is the strategic narrative that the Trump administration constructed in order to legitimize the “maximum pressure” strategy pursued towards Iran.

This study, based on the conceptual basis of the notion of a strategic narrative in international communication, focuses on the construction of strategic narratives at three levels: issue narrative, identity narrative, and system narrative. The qualitative method is used in the research process, and the data obtained are analyzed via the technique of qualitative content analysis. The data collected and classified in accordance with the codes and categories specified with the qualitative method were visualized via tables.

### **Literature Review**

Although scientific studies on the use of strategic narratives as a tool in foreign policy are quite new, the literature on this field has gained a very rich content in the last two decades. The first scientific study using the strategic narrative as a tool in foreign policy was conducted by Roselle (Roselle, 2006). In the study concerned, Roselle examines the strategic narratives used by the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, to explain to both domestic and international public opinion their defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan during the Cold War and why they had to retreat. Roselle concludes that the political leaders of the period, aiming to cover up their military defeats in the field and prevent any damage to their superpower identities, tried to justify the withdrawal of the USA and the USSR from Vietnam and Afghanistan, occupied by them, on the basis of the narrative that “the local allies took control in the field and therefore the goal was achieved”. In addition, this study focuses on how television is used as a media tool in the process of delivering the strategic narrative produced by political leaders to target audiences. Using the concept of strategic narratives in his later work, Roselle (2010) focuses on how the strategic narrative is instrumentalized through social media in the process of establishing and maintaining alliances in international politics.

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle (2013) conduct case studies in their work in which they handle the concept of strategic narratives in a systematic manner. One of these case studies deals with the strategic narrative produced by the parties in the process of the power struggle between Israel and Arab countries. The study examining the 2002 Israel-Palestine conflict and the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war indicates that both sides were engaged in counter-strategic narrative production in order to gain the support of national and international public opinion. In their narratives, while the Israeli side claimed that it was trying to overcome the dangers to its national security, the Arab side emphasized the resistance against the occupation and the Zionist regime. This case study sets an example

of strategic narrative competition. Another case examined in the study is the strategic narrative forged and implemented by the USA and European countries about the Iran nuclear program. The study examined the differences and similarities of the narratives produced by the USA and EU-3 countries (France, Germany and the U.K.) between 2000 and 2010 regarding the Iranian nuclear program. It focused on the narrative produced by the USA and the EU-3 countries about the international system and the place that Iran's nuclear program occupied in it. In addition, the identification of narratives for the study was made not through what is published by media organs, but through official statements and security documents of the countries. During Khatami's period, the US labeled Iran as an "axis of evil" and a "rogue state" and suggested the use of force, while the EU-3 countries drew attention to Iran's right to have a peaceful nuclear program and put the words "dialogue" and "negotiation" to the fore.

Hellman and Wagson (2015: 6-23) deals with the strategic narrative rivalry between the government and opposition groups in the national public opinion regarding Swedish military personnel taking part in NATO in Afghanistan in 2010. The study reveals that the Swedish administration was trying to legitimize the presence of soldiers in Afghanistan through the narrative of "ensuring security and stability and building a democratic system". The study also points out the competition of rival narrative in the form of a hegemonic narrative and a counter-hegemonic narrative thanks to the opportunities provided by social media. Szostek (2017) examines the statements of the Russian foreign policy-makers during the Winter Olympics in Russia in 2014 and the identity narrative about Russia in Russian television news. The study argues that through the anti-American and anti-Western narrative produced, an identity was built that projects Russia as the "great European power".

Unlike the studies mentioned above, Schmitt's (2018: 1) study examines not only the formation and projection of the strategic narrative, but also its reception. It examines whether the strategic narrative produced by Russia based on anti-Americanism is accepted by French public opinion. The main argument of the study is that Russia's system and identity narrative about anti-Americanism finds a response among anti-liberal groups in France. The study by O'Shea (2018:4) covers what strategic narrative is used in the Japanese media regarding the American military base Okinawa Japan. The study concludes that the conservative Japanese media justified the necessity of a military base through the narrative that "it is a deterrent to the Chinese threat." Bilgin (2018) examines the projection of the "war on terror" narrative in American cinema, which aims to legitimize the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the eyes of domestic and international public opinion in the post-September 11 period. In the study, Bilgin concludes that in the 2012 American film *Zero Dark Thirty*, the US war in Afghanistan was legitimized by reflecting the war in Afghanistan as part of the fight against terrorism (Bilgin, 2018:126).

Miskimmon and O'Loughlin's (2019:279-280) study compares how the European Union is evaluated by the Israeli and Palestinian elites and media. Barthwal-Datta (2020) discusses the strategic narrative constructed by the Bush administration to legitimize the nuclear cooperation agreement with India (2005) to the national public. The study, covering an issue narrative, concludes that the Bush administration presents the nuclear

cooperation in question as an “unprecedented opportunity” for the US (Barthwal-Datta, 2020: 12). Chacko and Barthwal-Datta (2020) compare the narratives of regional order put forward by India and Australia in the Asia-Pacific region. The study argues that while India constructed a “multipolar regional order” narrative that included the USA, China and Russia, Australia constructed a US-centered narrative of “maintaining the regional status quo” after the Second World War (Chacko and Barthwal-Datta, 2020:4). Yang (2021) focuses on the system narrative of the Chinese administration regarding global governance reform during the Xi Jinping era. The study reveals that the Beijing administration has a narrative language to review the current system according to the interests and values of China, taking into account the power status it has achieved, instead of destroying the global system (Yang, 2021:14). Lastly, Deverell et al. (2021) compare the strategic narratives of the Russian state-sponsored media Sputnik about the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) in the period 2014-2019. The study draws attention to the fact that although there are differences between them, Russia is building up a narrative that tries to weaken the Western Bloc countries by disrupting the internal harmony within them (Deverell et al., 2021:16-17).

In conclusion, judging by the literature on the use of strategic narrative in foreign policy, it is possible to divide the current studies into four essential categories. Firstly, they are divided into two essential categories as national opinion and international public opinion in terms of the target audience. Secondly, in terms of the materials examined in the process of determining strategic narratives, these studies are divided into three categories: official statements of political leaders, media outlets and cinema. Thirdly, they are divided into three different groups in terms of the types of strategic narrative: system narrative, identity narrative and issue narrative. Fourthly, they are divided into three separate groups in terms of the process stages of the strategic narrative: forming, projection and reception. Our study concerns the international public in terms of the target audience; focusses on official statements of foreign policy-makers in terms of the materials studied; covers issue, system and identity levels in terms of the narrative level and deals with the formation and projection of narratives in terms of process stages.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The great progress achieved in information and communication technologies in the post-Cold War period had extremely significant repercussions for the course of international politics. As a result of the widespread use of mass media, the new communication ecology, where the time and space barriers to accessing information have disappeared but at the same time information is exposed to manipulation and distortion to such an extent, has made international communication more complicated. While Castells (2009: 23-24) defines this situation, arising due to information and communication technologies, as “a new technological paradigm”, he argues that it brings along new conditions that he calls “network society” and “information age”. For this reason, states, the core actors of international politics, need more than ever to justify their decisions and actions before national and international public opinion. This new situation urges states to use strategic communication techniques effectively in international relations.

Two important developments at the beginning of the 21st century played a key role in the increasing importance of the strategic narrative in international politics. These are

the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003. It required the effective use of a strategic narrative that the USA needed to overcome the difficulties it faced in persuading the national and international public opinions about its occupation of these two countries. Although the United States tried to legitimize its military intervention in Afghanistan through narratives of “war on terror” and “self-defense”, it began to forge a new strategic narrative to reduce reactions displayed afterwards to its permanent military presence and to justify the drastic measures taken in the face of the increasing challenge of the Taliban. On the other hand, the fact that the UN Security Council’s permanent members Russia and China, and NATO members Germany, France and Turkey openly opposed the invasion of Iraq, put the Bush administration in a rather difficult situation. In order to manipulate national and international public opinion, the Bush administration created the strategic narrative “the global war on terror”. In addition, under the conditions of political instability and civil war in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-invasion period, the US’s failure to achieve success against rebel armed groups despite its military power made the use of strategic narratives inevitable in the process of persuading the local people. Conflict management became a major problem in American foreign policy for the first time after the Vietnam War due to the reactions of the national and international community.

### **Strategic Communication**

Strategic narrative constitutes one of the techniques of strategic communication. Therefore, any effort to understand the concept of strategic narrative requires knowledge of what strategic communication means first. Strategic communication is a multidisciplinary concept used in different scientific disciplines such as political communication, international communication, business, public relations and marketing. Hallahan et al. (2007:3) define strategic communication as the systematic formulation and implementation of communication in order to achieve a predetermined goal. He also argues that communication is used for a specific purpose in the strategic communication process. Strategic communication, in its simplest form, is the strategic organization and execution of communication (Moss and Warnaby, 1998:131-140). Emphasizing that not all communication can be considered strategic, Zaharna (2010:6) points out that communication forms that are not pre-planned, systematic and goal-oriented are not to be considered within the scope of strategic communication. According to Freedman (2006a:73), strategic communication is the ability to turn public opinion in one’s favor, whilst maintaining public support. Paul (2011:3) defines it as “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives”. According to Farwell (2012), who sees strategic communication as an art, strategic communication is the use of actions, words, images and symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of the target audience in order to achieve the specified goal. In addition, Farwell considers strategic communication, which has an important place in national security discourse, as a critical power source in the process of informing, influencing and persuading the target audience.

## Strategic Narrative

Suganami (1999:379) suggests that social actors build both themselves and the social structure that they are in by producing narratives. For this reason, he states that the social structure in question presents a complex form of relationship in which three elements, namely actor, structure and narrative, are shaped by each other. Examining the use of the concept of narrative in the social sciences, Paterson and Monroe argue that narratives affect people's perceptions of political reality and their reactions to political developments. Therefore, narratives play a critical role in constructing political behavior and are produced in order to understand and interpret political reality (Paterson and Monroe, 1998:316). Roberts (2006:707-710), on the other hand, defines narration as the practice of telling stories about connected human deeds.

Freedman (2006b:22), who discusses the concept of strategic narrative in terms of political science and international relations, emphasizes how narratives can be used strategically in order to weaken the legitimacy of the enemy in military conflicts and argues that narratives help the public to understand why military power should be used. In addition, Freedman defines strategic narrative as a plot that allows persuasive explanation and inference to events. Using the concept of strategic narrative in the field of political communication, Roselle (2006:1) examines how the two superpowers (USA and USSR) presented / explained their defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan. In this study, Roselle reveals that foreign policy-makers try to legitimize their foreign policy decisions and practices both in the eyes of their own people and the international public by forging a specific narrative through the media. According to Antoniadis, Miskimon, and O'Loughlin (2010:5), strategic narratives provide "representations of a sequence of events" and a communicative tool which is used to give "determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives".

The strategic narrative makes problems understandable to the society concerned in case of uncertainty. A strategic narrative is needed to frame the issue, shape the debate and remove ambiguity because society gains knowledge/opinion about events and develops proper attitudes thanks to strategic narratives. As for governments, by convincing the public through strategic narratives, they become able to justify political decisions that would otherwise not be supported by the public. Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011:505-528) argue that if the political power produces a coherent and credible strategic narrative about its military interventions, the likelihood of gaining popular support increases. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015:4) draw attention to the fact that strategic narrative is a purposeful communication practice in which the actors in communication do act so as to reach their goals. Nissen (2015:45) states that the key function of the strategic narrative is to provide a framework that helps to shape the past, present and future of conflicts in order to gain and sustain power in the international system. Barthwal (2015:328-330) emphasizes that strategic narratives are built as part of a communication process that takes place in a very complex communication ecology that includes political leaders, non-governmental organizations and think tanks.

Stating that strategic narrative interweaves past failures, current challenges and the possible future with a good plot line, Krebs (2015:1-23) underlines that it has functional roles such as imparting meaning to global events, defining the boundaries of legitimate

politics and shaping national security policy. Defining strategic narrative as a basic tool that ensures the consent of society for waging wars, Bilgin (2018: 118) emphasizes that obtaining public consent gives great power to governments. Drawing attention to the instrumentality and teleology of strategic narratives, Madisson and Ventsel (2021:22) emphasize that the meaning of conflicts is shaped in a desired way thanks to these narratives and helps the target audience to make sense of the developments experienced.

Strategic narrative in international relations has become a more systematic concept with two different joint studies published by Miskimmon et al. in 2013 and 2017. These researchers, who have made a great contribution to the literature, introduced the most comprehensive and accepted definition of the concept. Miskimmon et al. (2013:1-14) define strategic narrative as a tool which shapes the thoughts and behavior of actors and which is used by political actors to influence perceptions of events, identities and the international system. Thus, strategic narrative is regarded as a useful instrument that states resort to in order to expand their sphere of influence, manage expectations, and create a favorable discourse environment. Strategic narratives determine the identities of political actors (who are we?), their desired goals (what do we want?) and what the obstacles are to achieving them and how to overcome them. Miskimmon et al. (2017:6) define strategic narratives as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.” In this way, political actors legitimize their actions against the target audience by using strategic narratives and influence the behaviors of the target audience.

In international relations, strategic narrative is produced on three different levels (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014:76). The first is issue narrative. Issue narrative regulates why a particular policy is needed in the face of any development, how this policy will be implemented and how it will be accomplished. Issue narrative explains what the conflict or issue is, who the key actors are, and how a particular course of action plan will resolve the issue. Thus, it communicates the fact that the politics followed by other foreign policy-makers and domestic and international public opinion are correct and accessible. Issue narrative is used to get engaged in the political course by shaping the discourse ecology in which the political decision is put into practice. In addition, issue narrative helps to demonstrate that the political stance of the decision makers on any issue is legitimate, attractive and applicable.

At the second level is identity narrative. Identity narrative explains what the story of a state or nation is and what values and goals it has. Thanks to identity narrative, political actors construct not only their own selves but also the identities of other actors. For example, American political leaders can present the US as a “superpower”, “pro-democracy”, “peace-loving” and “problem solver” actor. At the third level is system narrative. System narrative both sets out how any state defines the current global / regional order and reveals how it envisions a global / regional order. System narrative articulates how world politics is structured and operates and who the primary players are. States use system narrative to construct a perception of the structure of the international system. States produce narratives to establish and maintain a regional or global order that will be in their favor. While system narrative describes how the power is structured,

maintained, changes and transforms, it identifies who is challenging and threatening this current system. For example, expressions such as “Soviet Expansion”, “The Cold War”, “The Rise of China” and “The Global War on Terror” are part of the US narrative regarding global order.

To sum up, when these three narrative types are considered together, the general point to be reached is that strategic narrative is formed and projected in order to influence, direct and shape the thoughts, reactions and behaviors of the target audience. From this point of view, states that use strategic narrative to achieve goals and priorities concerning foreign policy aim to achieve the following four main objectives. To legitimize the foreign policy attitudes and behaviors of states in the international public opinion through strategic narrative (1). To prevent or reduce the possible opposition of other states to the foreign policy, attitude and behavior of any state about a particular development or a state (2). To gain the support of third countries in a policy that any state pursues towards a particular state (3). To delegitimize the attitude and behavior of the state for which the narrative is produced towards the policy pursued against it (4).

### **Method**

The present study examines how the Trump administration tried to justify its decisions to withdraw from the nuclear deal and impose sanctions in line with its “maximum pressure” strategy towards Iran in the eyes of the international public opinion. The study aims to reveal what kind of strategic narrative the Trump administration constructed for the purpose of influencing and persuading international public opinion about its attitude and behavior towards Iran. The scope of the study is determined by three factors. First, it focuses on the period when the US withdrew from the nuclear deal and then began to impose sanctions and embargoes. Second, it just tries to reveal what the produced strategic narrative is. Therefore, the reception of the developed strategic narrative or whether it was as well received as expected or not is beyond the scope of the study. Third, it focuses on the strategic narrative which was created to influence and persuade international public opinion. Therefore, the strategic narrative projected by political leaders for their domestic public is not within the scope of the study. In summary, considering that each strategic narrative has three stages –formation, projection and reception, the scope of the study is restricted to the analysis of the first two stages. The reception process that examines the effect of the constructed narrative on the target audience is beyond the scope of the study. To understand the reception of any constructed strategic narrative requires field research on the audience. The reception of the Trump administration’s strategic narrative about Iran’s nuclear program is the subject of other research.

The research population consists of all the official documents issued by the Trump administration about the Middle East and Iran between 2017 and 2020, as well as statements made by senior foreign policy-makers. The research sample consists of security strategy documents published by the Trump administration and the official statements of political leaders. In this connection, written texts and oral explanations constitute the primary sources of the research. Primarily the security documents published by the Trump administration at various times were examined. In addition, official statements, remarks and speeches by President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of

State Mike Pompeo regarding Iran's nuclear program and the sanctions imposed (Küpleri, 2016) were analyzed.

The study employs a qualitative research method. Source survey and data collection are carried out by using the qualitative method. The analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the survey of decision-makers' statements, remarks, and speeches is conducted via the technique of content analysis. Thanks to this method applied in the research process, it is possible to reveal the obvious or subtly hidden meanings and themes produced in written texts and oral ones transcribed, and it is attempted to identify the social reality which was built. Thus, it is thought that the strategic narrative produced by the Trump administration about Iran can be revealed by focusing on the meanings placed in the content of the texts examined.

The model of analysis categories used by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle (2013) was used to determine the meanings and themes which were focused on for the purpose of revealing the strategic narrative. This model provides a meaningful and systematic explanation of why and how political leaders use strategic communication to reach their foreign policy goals and priorities. This model requires the conduction of text analysis at three different levels: issue narrative, identity narrative and system narrative. The data obtained were classified according to these three categories, and then an evaluation was made on the findings achieved. It is thought that the model utilized will help determine how the Trump administration defines Iran's nuclear program and the nuclear deal signed (issue narrative), what identity it attributes to Iran (identity narrative) and, finally, what kind of vision of a global and regional order it has (system narrative). Thus, the Trump administration tried to legitimize their Iran policy by using the strategic narrative it developed and to convince international public opinion of its harsh attitudes.

In addition, while the Trump administration's strategic narrative is analyzed in reference to the above-mentioned categories, we use sub-categories. When it comes to the issue narrative, we adopt Robert Entman's (1993) familiar framing concept. He examined any political and social event in three elements: issue definition, causal relationship, and solution suggestion. Given the identity narrative, we examine it according to two factors that are self-identity and other identity. As for the system narrative, we split it into two sub-categories: regional and global system narrative. Lastly, when featured themes are determined in all these categorizations (issue narrative, identity narrative and system narrative) we prefer making division like main themes and sub-themes to make themes more meaningful and understandable.

## Findings and Discussion

### Issue Narrative

Table I

#### Issue Narrative

Subcategories	Featured Themes
<b>Issue Definition</b>	<p><b>Main Themes</b></p> <p>The (Iran) Deal;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• does not prevent Iran's nuclear program, but just postpones it for a while.</li> <li>• does not end Iran's ballistic missile program.</li> <li>• does not terminate Iran's aggression in the region</li> <li>• jeopardizes the security of the US, the Middle East, and the world</li> <li>• brings peace, stability and security neither to the Middle East nor to the world.</li> </ul> <p><b>Subthemes</b></p> <p>The Deal;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• does not have a strong control mechanism.</li> <li>• does not end Iran's ambition to become a "regional hegemon".</li> <li>• does not eliminate Iran's ambition to become a "nuclear power".</li> <li>• provides a large financial resource to Iran and this resource is spent on;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Financing terrorism</li> <li>❖ Welfare of the Regime</li> <li>❖ Nuclear and ballistic missile programs</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Causal Relationship</b>	<p><b>Main Themes</b></p> <p>The Deal;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As it left Iran with impunity, the regime's aggressive behavior in the region increased.</li> <li>• The threat of terrorism in the Middle East and around the world has risen as it does not constrain Iran's aggressive behavior.</li> <li>• As it lifted the financial and political sanctions on Iran, it widened its room for maneuver.</li> <li>• Unless Iran's nuclear program is terminated, the world's leading supporter of terrorism will have the world's most dangerous weapon.</li> <li>• If the US adheres to its commitments in the deal, Iran will continue to cause conflicts and turmoil in the region.</li> </ul> <p><b>Subthemes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Iran gained the opportunity to realize its regional ambitions.</li> <li>• Iran further disrupted peace, security and stability in the region.</li> <li>• Iran further increased its influence in the Middle East.</li> <li>• The deal sparked an arms race in the Middle East</li> </ul>

<b>Solution Suggestions</b>	<p><b>Main Suggestions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The production of nuclear weapons should be prevented for regional and world security.</li> <li>• The world should not stand aside watching indifferently while Iran produces nuclear weapons.</li> <li>• The US should never allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons.</li> <li>• In order to achieve peace, security and stability in the region and the world, the United States and its allies have to withdraw from the agreement and apply sanctions.</li> <li>• The US should prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons by withdrawing from the nuclear deal and imposing sanctions.</li> <li>• Sanctions should be imposed to cut the financial resources of the Iranian regime.</li> <li>• The sanctions should continue to be aggravated as long as Iran does not end its aggressive behavior.</li> <li>• Punitive action should be taken against Iran’s aggressive behavior and the previous administration’s mistakes should not be repeated.</li> </ul> <p><b>Sub-Suggestions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• US allies in Europe and the Middle East should stand by the US in this process.</li> <li>• Other countries should stay away from activities that will contribute to Iran’s nuclear and ballistic program and its economy; otherwise they should be punished.</li> <li>• Heavy defects in the nuclear deal must be fixed or eliminated so that the regime cannot produce nuclear weapons.</li> <li>• A new nuclear deal should not allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons, produce ballistic missiles, support terrorism and engage in aggressive actions.</li> </ul>
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Source: Themes were inferred from research sources listed in the appendix 1.

In Table I, the data regarding the issue narrative of the research is classified. The data classified here serves to identify the strategic narrative of the Trump administration on how it looks upon the nuclear deal, what policy should be pursued against it, how it will be implemented, who the primary players are, and how the problem will be resolved. First, looking at how the problem is defined, it is observed that the Trump administration characterized the nuclear deal with quite negative themes. What stands out as the most frequently used main themes are statements that the deal in question did not prevent Iran from producing nuclear weapons, but only postponed it, and it did not deter it from developing a ballistic missile program and displaying aggressive attitudes. In addition, it is pointed out that the nuclear deal does not bring peace, stability and security to the Middle East and the whole world, but on the contrary, it endangers its security. Sub-themes are the issues that the deal does not have a strong control mechanism; provides financial resources that give Iran a better living space; and that these resources are used for the nuclear and ballistic missile program, financing terrorism and the welfare of the regime. It is also stated that the agreement does not end Iran’s ambition to reach the status of becoming the “regional hegemon” and having “nuclear power”. When the keywords used in the whole process are looked at, it is observed that wherever the term “nuclear deal” is mentioned, negative words are quite often seen to co-occur with it. Words such as *flawed*, *scary*, *terrifying*, *corrupted*, *problematic*, *disastrous*, *unilateral*, *worst*, *controversial* and *unsuccessful* are frequently used expressions in the lexical environment of the “nuclear deal.”

Considering the causal relationship dimension, which is the second sub-category of the issue narrative, the themes that establish a cause-effect relationship between Iran's aggressive/expansionist behavior and the nuclear deal are observed. In this context, in terms of the main theme, it is emphasized that the aggressive behavior in the region increased because the deal left Iran unpunished, that the threat of terrorism in the Middle East and the world escalated since it did not restrict Iran's aggressive actions, and its maneuver space expanded in the region as the deal lifted the financial and political sanctions on Iran. If Iran's nuclear program is not terminated, we are warned that the regime, the world's leading terrorism supporter, will obtain the world's most dangerous weapon. In addition to these, sub-themes are observed that after the deal, Iran found the opportunity to realize its regional ambitions, increase its influence in the Middle East, cause an arms race and disrupt peace, security and stability in the region. As for the definition of actors, which is the third sub-category of the issue narrative, the Trump administration, Israel and Saudi Arabia are described as positive actors, while the Obama administration, the Iranian regime, Spiritual Leader Khamenei, Qasem Soleimani, the Revolutionary Guards, the Quds Force, Shia militias, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis and the Assad administration are profiled as negative actors. Apart from these, US citizens, the people of Iran, the people of the Middle East and the USA's allies are described as the suffering parties.

With regard to the fourth sub-category *solution suggestions* for the issue, a very detailed suggestion list is given. For the security of the region and the world, the main suggestion is frequently mentioned that the USA and its allies should not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons. Another main suggestion is also frequently expressed that the USA and its allies should withdraw from the deal so as to achieve peace, security and stability in the region and the world. Furthermore, it is suggested that the heaviest sanctions should be imposed in order to change Iran's behavior and cut its financial resources. It is pointed out that the previous administration's mistakes should not be repeated, that it is the right step to punish Iran and that if it does not change its unfavorable behavior, the sanctions will need to be further intensified. As a sub-proposal, it is stated that it will be for their own good for the third parties to refrain from commercial relations with Iran and avoid activities that will contribute to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile program; otherwise, they will also be punished with sanctions. Among the secondary suggestions, the sub-proposal comes to the fore that a new deal should be signed with the terms that Iran must not produce nuclear weapons, develop ballistic missiles, support terrorism and engage in aggressive behavior, thereby eliminating the severe flaws of the current deal.

### Identity Narrative

Table II  
*Identity Narrative*

Subcategories	Featured Themes
<p><b>Self-Identity</b></p>	<p><b>Main Themes</b> The USA;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strives for peace, security and stability in the region and the world.</li> <li>• tries to prevent Iran, which supports terrorist organizations, from disturbing peace, security and stability in the region.</li> <li>• strives to stop Iran from endangering the security of the world by producing nuclear weapons and executing a ballistic missile program..</li> <li>• fights terrorist Iran and the terrorist organizations it supports.</li> <li>• tries to make Iran act like a “normal state”</li> </ul> <p><b>Subthemes</b> The USA;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• makes efforts to end the long-standing suffering of the Iranian people.</li> <li>• tries to provide freedom and prosperity for the Iranian people.</li> <li>• Tries to hold Iran accountable for its malicious and destructive actions or policies.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other Identity</b></p>	<p><b>Main Themes</b> Iran;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is the world’s leading state-sponsor of terrorism.</li> <li>• poses a threat to the security of the region and the world by producing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.</li> <li>• supports terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda and the Taliban.</li> <li>• fuels civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine, and conducts proxy wars.</li> <li>• interferes with the internal affairs of the countries of the region, violating their sovereignty.</li> <li>• exhibits aggression in foreign policy.</li> <li>• threatens the national security of the countries in the region.</li> <li>• causes death, destruction and chaos in the region and around the world.</li> <li>• disrupts peace, security and stability in the Middle East.</li> </ul> <p><b>Subthemes</b> Iran;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• threatens global trade and international maritime transport.</li> <li>• tries to establish “regional hegemony” in the Middle East.</li> <li>• persecutes both its own people and the people of the region.</li> <li>• is dragging the region into an arms race.</li> <li>• violates international law and human rights.</li> </ul>

Source: Themes was inferred from research sources listed in the appendix 1.

As seen in Table II, the Trump administration’s identity narrative is analyzed in two categories: *self*-identity and *other*’s-identity. Firstly, with regard to the self-identity category, it is emphasized as one of the main identity themes which projects the USA as striving to ensure peace, security and stability in the Middle East and to prevent Iran from disrupting it. Another main identity theme is that the primary concern of the US is that it aims to prevent Iran from endangering world security by producing nuclear weapons and developing ballistic missiles. It is also among the main identity themes that the primary purpose of the USA is to deter Iran from supporting terrorist organizations, to restrain its aggressive behavior and ultimately to ensure it acts like a “normal state”. Issues such as

making Iran accountable for its malicious behavior, ending the suffering of the Iranian people and providing freedom and prosperity to them are observed as secondary self-identity themes. The USA is described with positive words such as responsible, leader/pioneer, troubleshooter, solution producer, pro-peace, anti-terrorism, freedom-fighter, provider of prosperity, advocate of law, anti-armament and justice seeker.

When it comes to the subcategory of other's identity, the statement that Iran is "the leading terrorist state in the world" constitutes the main theme of other's identity that is widely used. Iran is depicted as a state that threatens the security of both the region and the world, claiming that it is carrying out a nuclear and ballistic program, supporting terrorist organizations in the region, fueling civil wars and waging proxy wars. In addition, Iran is defined as a state that threatens the national security of the countries in the region, interferes with their internal affairs, violates their sovereignty, exhibits destructive and aggressive behavior and disrupts peace, security and stability. These core otherizations are enhanced by sub-marginalizations. Under the secondary themes regarding the subcategory other's identity, the themes are included that Iran persecutes its own people, disregards human rights and international law, endangers global trade and international maritime traffic. As for keywords, Iran is described with words or phrases with negative connotations such as Rogue state, aggressive, expansionist, malicious, terrorism exporter, terrorism sponsor, pro-violent, lawless, abnormal, destabilizing, spreading chaos, blood shedding, threatening, destructive, degenerated, corrupt, murderer, dictator, oppressive and cruel.

### System Narrative

Table III

*System Narrative*

Subcategories	Featured Themes
Global System	<p><b>System Themes for the Present</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The global security, stability and welfare order are endangered.</li> <li>• The free and open international order is at risk because of Iran's behavior.</li> </ul> <p><b>System Themes of Future</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional power balances should be maintained in the Middle East, Europe, East Asia and the Americas in order to maintain the global balance of power.</li> <li>• Efforts should be made to preserve the free and open international order.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Regional System</b></p>	<p><b>System Themes of the Present</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Middle East has a regional order characterized by insecurity, conflict and instability.</li> <li>• The regional order in the Middle East is shaken by Iran’s expansionism, civil wars, proxy wars, sectarian wars, regional rivalry, terrorist organizations and failed states.</li> <li>• Currently there exists an order in the region where states intervene in each other’s internal affairs and violate their sovereignty.</li> </ul> <p><b>System Themes of Future</b></p> <p>A regional order should be built:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• where a single regional power cannot dominate</li> <li>• where peace, security, stability and prosperity will be ensured</li> <li>• where any aggressive states will be deterred</li> <li>• which will not be a safe haven for terrorist groups</li> <li>• in which strategic sea routes in the region are safe</li> <li>• which contributes steadily to the global energy market</li> <li>• in which states respect each other’s sovereignty and their own peoples</li> </ul>
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Source: Themes was inferred from research sources listed in the appendix 1.

System narrative, which is the third level of strategic narrative, is discussed in two sub-categories in the study, namely the global and regional order narrative. With respect to the global order narrative, it is stated that Iran, together with Russia, China and North Korea, is a state which challenges the free and open international order. It is pointed out that global security and welfare is under threat due to the behavior of these states. These constitute prominent themes related to the current global order. Apart from these, there are also order themes for future. In order to protect the global power balance where the USA has the superiority, the regional equilibrium of power should be kept in strategic regions such as the Middle East, and efforts should be exerted to protect the free and open international order. As for the regional order narrative, the Middle East refers to a regional order dominated by insecurity, instability and conflict. In the Middle East, the regional order is described as being shaken by Iranian expansionism, civil wars, proxy wars, sectarian wars, regional rivalry, terrorist organizations and failed states. Currently there is an order in the Middle East where states intervene in each other’s internal affairs and violate their sovereignty. As the narrative of the future order, a regional order must be built where peace, security, stability and prosperity are ensured; a single regional power cannot dominate; aggressive states are discouraged; terrorist organizations are not involved; strategic sea passage routes are safe, and which steadily contributes to the global energy market and respects the peoples of the region.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the strategic narrative that the Trump administration built around Iran’s nuclear program. The research is the product of an effort to understand the strategic narrative developed by the Trump administration in order to legitimize the decisions under the “maximum pressure” strategy against Iran in the eyes of international public opinion. If the ultimatum published by Foreign Minister Pompeo (2018a) is examined, it will be realized that the most fundamental strategic goal of the Trump administration in the Middle East is to weaken Iran’s national power capacity and to reduce its regional

influence. Iran's increasing power capacity and its expanding regional influence mean that the current balance of power in the Middle East is turning against the United States and undermine its interests in the region. The Trump administration put into practice the strategy of "maximum pressure" in order to achieve the strategic goal it had set. This strategy involves its efforts to subject the target country to multi-dimensional (political, economic and military) pressure, pushing it to behave in the desired direction. However, the nuclear deal was a major obstacle to the Trump administration's ability to implement its "maximum pressure" strategy on Iran. For this reason, there was a need to create a favorable communication environment where the US could withdraw from the nuclear deal and re-enforce sanctions. When the speech texts of the American foreign policy-makers were examined, it was observed that strategic narrative was used as a technical tool in foreign policy in order to create the aforementioned strategic communication climate. As a result of the research carried out, three basic findings were reached.

The first finding was reached within the scope of the issue narrative. The issue narrative formed regarding the nuclear deal discusses the fact that it did not prevent Iran from producing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles; on the contrary, thanks to the sanctions lifted, which led to Iran having large financial resources, Iran was provided in a sense with both financial resources by means of which it could develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and a large room for maneuver in which to pursue aggressive behavior in the region. Therefore, it is alleged that the agreement brought peace, security and stability to neither the region nor the world, making Iran a state that supports terrorist organizations in the region, interferes with the internal affairs of the countries of the region and persecutes its own people. For this reason, a solution proposal was presented that it was inevitable for the USA to withdraw from the deal and re-impose sanctions, and that other states should assist the USA in this process to prevent Iran's aggressive behavior.

The second finding is reached within the context of the identity narrative. By making the distinction between *self*-identity and *other* identity in narrative construction, while the USA is profiled as a responsible/savior actor that solves problems, ensures peace and maintains security, Iran is presented as an irresponsible/abnormal regime that creates problems, and endangers or destabilizes regional and global security. Furthermore, it is claimed that Iran supports terrorist organizations intensely; therefore, Iran is profiled as a terrorist regime. moreover, Iran is presented as a state that violates human rights against its own people, violates international law, threatens global trade and disrupts international maritime transport. It is clear that all the negative identity references put forward are used to convince the international community of how necessary the stringent measures taken against Iran are and to guide the behavior of the states accordingly.

The third finding is about the system narrative. From the texts examined, it was obvious that the system narrative was constructed on two levels, global and regional. Judging by the global system narrative, it is emphasized that the US-led global balance of power is indispensably needed to ensure, protect and maintain world peace and security. Looking at the regional system narrative, the Middle East suggests an order characterized by conflict, war and disorder. The atmosphere of order and trust in the Middle East seems to have disappeared due to the civil wars, sectarian strife and proxy wars caused

by Iran's actions. The re-construction of a regional order is imagined where a single regional power (Iran) will not be able to dominate; peace, stability and prosperity will be ensured; aggressive states will be deterred; states will not interfere with each other's internal affairs and terrorist organizations will be denied a favorable atmosphere. Iran is presented as chiefly responsible for the negative portrayal drawn regarding the current regional order, and it is attempted to persuade the target audience about the necessity of the harsh policies pursued against Iran.

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## Appendix 1.

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