يات الإقصاء والإدماج التي تطال "الذات" و"الآخر من منظور الانفصال الأخلاقي في خطب الرؤساء الأمريكيين تجاه قضية فلسطين

EXCLUSION/INCLUSION OF SELF & THE OTHER VIA MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC ON PALESTINE

ALI B. MOHAMMED AL-RIKABY
د. علي بدين محمد الركابي
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب جامعة المستنصرية، بغداد، العراق

English Language Department, College of Arts Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, Iraq
alibadeen@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq

ABSTRACT

This paper explores moral disengagement as a discursive strategy in the political speeches of recent American presidents regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It argues that the processes of inclusion and exclusion of Self and Other in U.S. presidential discourse—specifically under Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—are shaped by distinct mechanisms of moral disengagement. In particular, the exclusion of Palestinians from the moral framework endorsed by the U.S. administration, and the corresponding inclusion of Israelis, is evident in how each group is framed as either deserving or undeserving of rights, recognition, and legitimacy. The study undertakes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of key speeches and public statements made by these presidents between 2009 and 2023. It aims to: (1) identify the discursive mechanisms of moral disengagement used to justify the differential treatment of Palestinians and Israelis, and (2) examine the ideological representations that underpin and legitimize these rhetorical choices. The analysis draws upon Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement and van Dijk's (1998) framework of binary oppositions in political discourse. Findings indicate that all three presidents have employed rhetorical strategies such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, dehumanization, attribution of blame, and binary framing to construct in-groups (Israelis and their allies) positively and out-groups (Palestinians or Palestinian leadership) negatively. These discursive practices not only shape public

perception but also contribute to sustaining particular policy positions and geopolitical alignments. The study holds implications for scholars of discourse analysis, international relations, and Middle East politics, as well as for practitioners engaged in policy development and diplomatic negotiation.

Keywords: exclusion/inclusion; critical discourse analysis; moral disengagement; ideological representations; U.S. foreign policy; Israeli-Palestinian conflict

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الانماط اللغوية المتعلقة بالانفصال الأخلاقي بوصفها أداة خطابية استراتيجية تم توظيفها في البيان السياسي للرؤساء الأمريكيين المعاصرين في تناولهم للصراع الدائر بين الشعب الفلسطيني والكيان الصهيوني . وتُظهر الدراسة بأن عمليات الإقصاء والإدماج التي تطال "الذات" و"الآخر" في الخطاب الرئاسي الأمريكية ــــ ولا سيّما في عهد باراك أوباما ودونالد ترامب وجو بايدن ــــ تتجسّد من خلال أنماط محددة من الانفصال اوالتفكك الأخلاقي. ويتجلّى هذا الانفصال بصورة واضحة من خلال تهميش الفلسطينيين واستبعادهم خارج الإطار الأخلاقي الذي تتبناه السياسة الأمريكية فيه، مقابل إدماج الإسرائيليين فيه، وذلك عبر تأطير كل طرف بما يعكس مدى استحقاقه للحقوق والاعتراف والشرعية.

اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النقدي في تحليل الخطاب السياسي الامريكي ولعدد من الخطب والتصريحات الرئاسية الامريكية البارزة التي أدلى بها هؤلاء الرؤساء ما بين عامي ٢٠٠٩ و٢٠٢٣، مستهدفة أولًا: الكشف عن الآليات الخطابية المعلقة بالانفصال الأخلاقي التي تم توظيفها لتبرير التفاوت في المعاملة بين الفلسطينيين والإسرائيليين، وثانيًا: الوقوف على التمثلات الأيديولوجية التي تؤطّر تلك الآليات وتمنحها شرعيتها السياسية والخطابية.

وقد استند التحليل إلى نظرية العالم ألبرت باندورا (١٩٩٨) حول الانفصال الأخلاقي ، والى نظرية العالم اللغوي فان ديك (١٩٩٨) القائمة على الثنائيات الأيديولوجية المتعارضة في الخطاب السياسي وكشفت النتائج عن توظيف مشترك للرؤساء الامريكيين الثلاثة لأساليب بلاغية مثل استراتيجيات التبرير الأخلاقي، والتلطيف اللفظي ، وتجريد الخصم من إنسانيته ، وتحميله المسؤولية دوما، إلى جانب اعتماد التأطير الثنائي الذي يرسم حدودًا صارمة بين جماعة الداخل (الإسرائيليين وحلفاؤهم) التي تُقدّم في صورة إيجابية، وجماعة الخارج (الفلسطينيين أو قيادتهم) التي تُصوّر بشكل سلبي. وتسهم هذه الاستراتيجيات الخطابية لا في توجيه الرأي العام فحسب، بل في ترسيخ سياسات قائمة وتثبيت تحالفات جيوسياسية ذات امتداد دولي. لذا تقدّم هذه الدراسة إسهامًا نوعيًّا للباحثين في مجالات تحليل الخطاب النقدي، والعلاقات الدولية، والسياسات الشرق أوسطية، كما تمثل مرجعًا ذا قيمة لصنّاع القرار والمشتغلين في مجال السياسة الخارجية والدبلوماسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الإقصاء/الإدماج؛ التحليل النقدي للخطاب؛ الانفصال الأخلاقي؛ التمثلات الأيديولوجية؛ السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية؛ الصراع الإسرائيلي-الفلسطيني.

1. Introduction

In the construction of their political discourse, state leaders - notably U.S. Presidents - have frequently employed certain moral language to create persuasive narratives of right and wrong to their audience, strategically framing political decisions as part of a larger moral order. Such narratives serve to legitimize their state policies, reinforce collective identity, and delineate boundaries between in-groups and out-groups (Sowińska, 2013; Afzal et al., 2023; McAlister, Bandura & Owen, 2006).

Through these discursive strategies, American presidents are often portrayed not merely as political figures but as moral authorities, guiding the nation through ethically charged language and imagery. Simply put, they mold their words or sentences to fall in line with such moral standards of right and wrong to become a practical guide for moral exclusion/inclusion of the Self and the Other.

The backbone that supports the construction of the above moral standards of right and wrong is the political speech, which is made up of powerful pragmatic, linguistic and literary tools (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Fairclough (1989, p. 23) states that "politics is not just conducted through language, but much of politics is language". Schaffner (1997, p. 1) goes further and maintains that language is "vital to the process of transforming a political will into a social action". She argues that political actions are essentially prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language. According to Partington (2003), since politicians often use pragmatic, linguistic and rhetorical devices to achieve certain effects through their speeches, critical (political) discourse researchers, in turn, should be interested in the rhetorical devices and ideological structures that they employ to drive their messages home to the masses. In this light, presidential speeches are more than rhetorical performances — they are discursive sites where ideologies are shaped, contested, and normalized through linguistic choices. Through a mix of metaphors, presuppositions, evaluative language, and intertextual references, these speeches enact power and project identities (van Dijk, 2000; Chilton, 2004).

Fundamentally, American leaders commonly build moral standards for individuals wanting to belong to an in-group (or certain in-groups), as well as for those not wanting to belong to other out-groups. Such standards of including/excluding of the Self and the Other (or Them) are constructed upon selected thematic, pragmatic, linguistic and literary elements that may embrace religious symbols, moral justifications, attributions of blame, coercion and dehumanization. For example, Ronald Reagan's Cold War-era characterization of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" invoked a religiously loaded binary between good and evil, mobilizing ideological support through moral polarization (Mercieca, 2012). Similarly, George W. Bush's post-9/11 addresses employed the language of divine justice and moral necessity to frame the War on Terror, embedding mechanisms of moral disengagement such as dehumanization and blame attribution (Cartledge et al., 2015). Barack Obama, while more inclusive in tone, also has used biblical references and themes of redemption and national purpose to foster social cohesion and civic engagement (Walker, 2015; Coe & Domke, 2006).

Therefore, the present study applies a discourse-analytic lens to investigate how selected U.S. presidents—specifically Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden— employ rhetorical strategies to construct moral hierarchies and justify political actions. Particular attention is given to the use of religious symbolism, moral justification, in-group/out-group categorization, and the discursive mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Sowińska, 2013). As it examines these elements and patterns as forms of moral disengagement, it is hoped that its findings will benefit not only politicians and security officials, but also instructors, students and scholars engaged in rhetorical analysis and politics of language.

2. Rationale

Political speeches continue to function as a core component of modern governance, playing a crucial role in shaping political agendas, guiding decision-making processes, and determining policy outcomes (Brown, 2009; Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Far from being merely ceremonial, such speeches actively shape political trajectories, institutional priorities, and public discourse (cf. Brown, 2009; Jackson, 2005). Empirical research demonstrates that presidential communication not only correlates with legislative effectiveness (Barrett, 2004; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006), but also significantly influences public opinion and contributes to the formation of national policy agendas (Hill, 1998; Lawrence, 2002). These findings highlight the strategic power of presidential discourse in mobilizing attention and framing issues in ways that resonate with the wider public.

Political leaders often deploy refined stylistic techniques—such as repetition, rhetorical questioning, and metaphorical framing—not merely to communicate, but to frame political issues in terms that resonate emotionally and culturally with audiences. Kotenko and Grinchenko (2023) demonstrate that the form of political speech is crucial in influencing listener alignment and persuasion. Similarly, Sudrama (2023) highlights how metaphors are deliberately calibrated to fit audience-specific cultural narratives, thereby reinforcing the intended framing and guiding public perception.

Drawing on the framework established by Cartledge, Bowman-Grieve, and Palasinski (2015), who identify specific moral disengagement strategies in George W. Bush's "War on Terror" rhetoric, this study extends that inquiry to examine how similar rhetorical devices are employed in U.S. discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By focusing on discursive strategies such as moral justification, dehumanization, euphemistic labelling, and attribution of blame, the study seeks to

understand how U.S. presidents discursively construct the Palestinian Other and the American or Israeli Self.

This research is also situated within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tradition, particularly influenced by the work of van Dijk (1998), Chilton (2004), and Wodak (2015), who emphasize the role of discourse in the (re)production of ideology, power, and social exclusion. Analysing such rhetoric is essential to unpack how dominant narratives sustain geopolitical inequality and normalize exclusionary practices under the guise of moral legitimacy.

On the other hand, Political discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, legitimizing foreign policy, and reinforcing ideological boundaries between Self and Other. In the context of U.S. presidential rhetoric on Palestine, language is not a neutral vehicle of communication but a powerful tool of representation—used to construct moral hierarchies, obscure asymmetrical power dynamics, and justify controversial policies. Presidential speeches, in particular, are ideologically loaded performances that often deploy mechanisms of moral disengagement to frame U.S. actions as ethical and necessary, while positioning Palestinian actors as aggressors or illegitimate entities.

In light of this, examining the content and structure of U.S. presidential speeches on Palestine becomes crucial—not simply to understand what is said, but how language functions to persuade, justify, and reframe complex geopolitical realities. This study takes seriously the view that language is a site of ideological struggle, and that presidential rhetoric serves as a key discursive space through which inclusion, exclusion, and moral legitimacy are constructed.

3. Aims of the Study

This study aims to critically examine the ideological function of U.S. presidential rhetoric in shaping the discourse on Palestine, with a focus on how moral disengagement is employed to construct the boundaries of Self and Other. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Investigate the discursive mechanisms of moral disengagement—such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, attribution of blame, and dehumanization—used by U.S. presidents to legitimize their foreign policy stance on Palestine.

2. Identify and analyse the ideological representations of Self and Other embedded in presidential speeches, particularly how Palestinians are positioned as morally deviant or threatening, and how the U.S./Israel is framed as morally superior, peaceful, or righteous.

3. Explore how these rhetorical strategies function to justify the inclusion or exclusion of specific actors from moral, political, and humanitarian consideration in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. Political Discourse in Times of Conflict: Moral Agency and Disengagement

Political discourse plays a crucial role in shaping collective understandings of morality by defining who is included as the ethical Self and who is excluded as the threatening Other. During times of moral panic, for example, such as conflicts or crises, political leaders often use rhetoric that strategically disengages moral agency to justify aggressive actions and policies (Jackson, 2005; Krebs & Jackson, 2007). This process enables the normalization of violence and exclusion by reframing harmful acts as necessary and morally acceptable within the constructed political narrative.

Political discourse serves as a foundational tool in contemporary governance, playing a pivotal role in shaping political agendas, processes, and outcomes (Brown, 2009; Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), as elaborated by scholars such as Chilton's (2004), Wodak (2009) and Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), provides a robust framework for analysing how language in political contexts not only reflects but actively constructs social realities and power relations. For instance, Chilton's (2004) analysis of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden's speeches demonstrates how both leaders utilized religious and ideological language strategically to frame their causes and mobilize support.

Wodak (2009) stresses that political rhetoric is strategically employed to legitimize certain actions and marginalize others, often by creating social identities that delineate who belongs to the in-group ('Self') and who is excluded as the 'Other.' Similarly, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) highlight how discourse practices such as framing and intertextuality shape public perception and reinforce dominant power structures. Through these processes, political speeches influence collective memory and agenda-setting by representing groups in ways that sustain hegemonic ideologies.

On the other hand, moral agency is an individual's capacity to judge right from wrong and act accordingly (Taylor, 2003). In times of conflict and moral panic, such as those surrounding the U.S. "War on Terror," this capacity can be reshaped to justify actions that might otherwise be considered unethical.

Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement explains how individuals and groups can selectively deactivate their moral self-regulation, enabling harmful behaviors while maintaining a positive self-image. This process is particularly relevant to political leaders who use rhetoric to

construct social realities, defining who belongs to the moral "Self" and who is cast out as the immoral or threatening "Other."

In U.S. presidential speeches concerning Palestine- Israel conflict, moral disengagement mechanisms often serve to exclude the Other—portrayed as dangerous or subhuman—while including the Self as morally justified actors defending values and security. At the interactive locus, harmful actions such as military strikes are morally justified or euphemistically framed to reduce their perceived severity (Bandura, 1998; Smith, 2002).

At the agency locus, responsibility is diffused, minimizing individual accountability for collective harm (Bandura, 1998). At the outcome locus, the injurious effects on the Other are distorted or ignored, and dehumanization legitimizes exclusion and aggression (Haritos-Fatouros, 2002). Blaming the Other for their suffering further facilitates disengagement by framing aggressors as victims compelled to act (Bandura, 2004). These strategies work together to reinforce polarized identities—where the in-group (Self) is framed as righteous and the out-group (Other) as morally reprehensible—thereby justifying exclusionary policies and actions.

Although extensive research has addressed various linguistic aspects of war rhetoric (Lazar & Lazar, 2004), there remains a significant gap regarding how moral disengagement explicitly operates in U.S. presidential rhetoric on Palestine. This study aims to address that gap by critically analysing how moral disengagement functions to produce ideological representations that exclude or include groups, shaping public perception and political justification in times of moral panic. In fact, despite such valuable insights, previous studies have largely overlooked the moral disengagement mechanisms embedded in U.S. presidential rhetoric, especially in relation to contentious issues like Palestine. This highlights a critical gap and establishes the need for a CDA approach that investigates how presidential discourse employs moral disengagement to justify exclusion or inclusion of groups and to construct ideological representations of Self and Other that influence political attitudes and actions.

5. Theoretical Approach

The conceptualization of the discourse world as 'Us against Them' to govern the moral conduct of the public is the core element in Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement. At the behavior locus, he maintains that leaders transfer violent means into a moral standard through moral justifications, beneficial comparisons, and euphemistic language. At the agency locus, they frequently relieve themselves from blame and responsibility by shifting them to the Others. At the outcome

locus, the harmful results of the violent means are either overlooked or lessened. At the recipient locus, the enemies are dehumanized and blamed for creating the suffering to themselves (Cartledge, Bowman-Grieve & Palasinski, 2015).
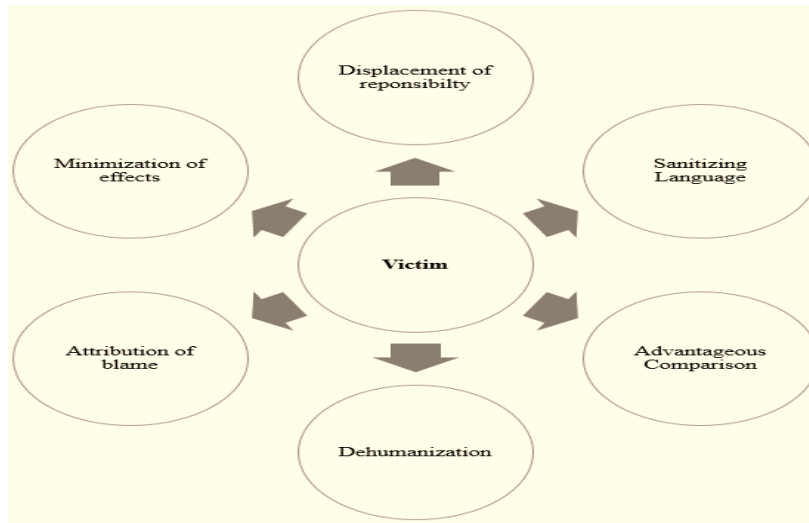

Figure 1. Moral Disengagement

Moral justification is the discourse of making harmful manners seem acceptable by rendering these manners as "serving socially worthy or moral purposes" (Bandura, 1999, p. 3). This discourse, which is commonly the use of language in a particular instance, is mostly used during war times because at such times the immorality of killing the victim would be given new meanings so that it can be performed free from worldly condemnation (McAlister et al., 2006).

The ideological square presented by van Dijk (1998) is significant in this study as it represents a dichotomy between the positive representation and the negative representation of the in-group and out-group members respectively. The word square denotes the four dimensions that may reveal and reinforce the existence of social inequality and polarization, comprising:
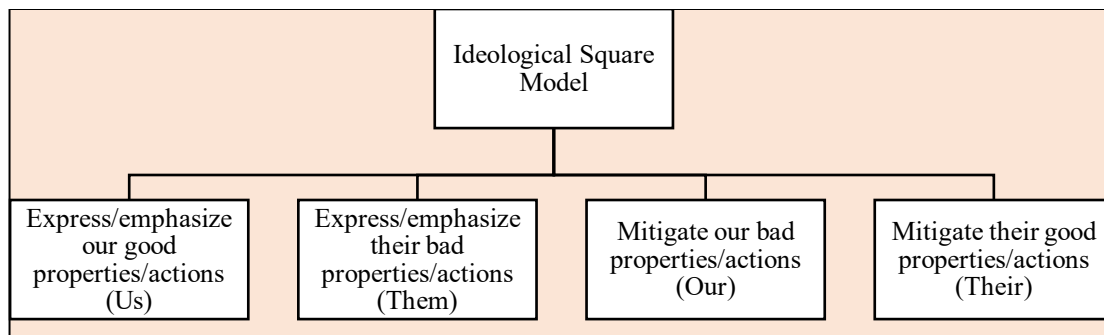
Figure 2 van Dijk's Ideological Square Model

This model of van Dijk's (ibid.) relates to the ideological representations of the in-group and out-group that can be mirrored in the linguistic micro-level as well as the level of communicative situation and the function of a text. Since in political discourse group identities and moral exclusion/inclusion are often conceptualized in terms of binary oppositions, van Dijk's model is used as an additional analysis tool for the structuring of ideological space with regards to in-group identity and solidarity in opposition to outsiders or out-groups. For he undertakes a close analysis of the linguistic and figurative structures on which the representation of the Self and the Other in political discourse relies. He gives special attention to these structures, including conditional and metaphorical clauses. Per his model, self-references using the pronouns 'I, we and us' primarily denote the defining of the in-group and its moral inclusion. Conversely, the exclusion of an out-group is denoted by the deictic pronouns, such as 'they, those and them'.

6. Methodology

There are two ways to relate the rhetoric of the state leaders to political discourse. The first is to start from the linguistic micro-level stage and identify the rhetorical structures used to fulfill strategic purposes (e.g., metaphor, word choice, syntactic structures) (Schaffner, 1997). The second is to start from the communicative situation and the function of a text and identify the literary and linguistic structures utilized to achieve desired outcomes. Though both ways can help in the analysis, the present study applied the latter approach (starting the analysis from thematic data). This is because language is functional and politicians often use it to achieve their purposive and conducive ends. In politics, these ends are both personal and political. Secondly, a close study of how politicians interact thematically will offer us a picture of the rhetorical and linguistic strategies adopted to attain their different ends.

Therefore, the study's design is qualitative but supplemented by a quantitative analysis; a thematic content analysis was conducted on the writing samples which were then analyzed quantitatively for mean length of main clauses per paragraph. Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement, and van Dijk's (1998) ideological square or binary concepts in political discourse are used to analyse the study's three selected speeches.

6.1 Corpus

The three presidential speeches analysed in this study were sourced from official government archives and presidential websites to ensure authenticity and accuracy. Specifically, the speeches include:

1. Barack Obama's A New Beginning speech delivered at Cairo University (2009), accessed from the White House archives;

2. Donald Trump's announcement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (2017), retrieved from the Trump White House archives;

3. Joe Biden's remarks on the Gaza conflict (2021), obtained from the White House Briefing Room.

These speeches were chosen because they represent critical moments in U.S. presidential discourse related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, spanning different administrations and political contexts.

6.2 Procedure

Using a descriptive and qualitative approach, the analysis followed these steps:

1   Each speech was segmented into thematic units related to conflict, moral justification, and political positioning. A frequency analysis was conducted to quantify the occurrence of moral disengagement mechanisms and ideological representations within the texts;

2   A political discourse analysis (PDA) was then applied, drawing on Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement to identify how ethical responsibility is framed or deflected and van Dijk's (1998) model of the ideological square to explore inclusion/exclusion strategies.

7. Findings and Discussion

This section provides an analysis of three key American presidential speeches delivered by Barack Obama (2009), Donald Trump (2017), and Joe Biden (2021). The analysis employs three critical frameworks: Bandura's (1998) Moral Disengagement Mechanisms and van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square. The aim is to explore how political frames identity, agency, morality, and conflict through discourse.

7. 1 Bandura's Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

As seen in figure 3, the mechanisms of moral disengagement were employed to various degrees. From a total of 60 coded items, about 33% of all the examples identified. This means that each leader framed their actions—even controversial ones—as necessary or morally right. For example, in his 2017 speech recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, President Trump claimed the move would help "advance peace," presenting it as a positive step rather than a political gamble. Similarly, Obama often spoke about America's military actions as part of a fight for justice and the protection of democratic

values, while Biden portrayed his administration's support for Israel as part of a broader moral duty to uphold peace. These kinds of statements help shape public opinion by making difficult decisions seem ethically responsible and even virtuous.
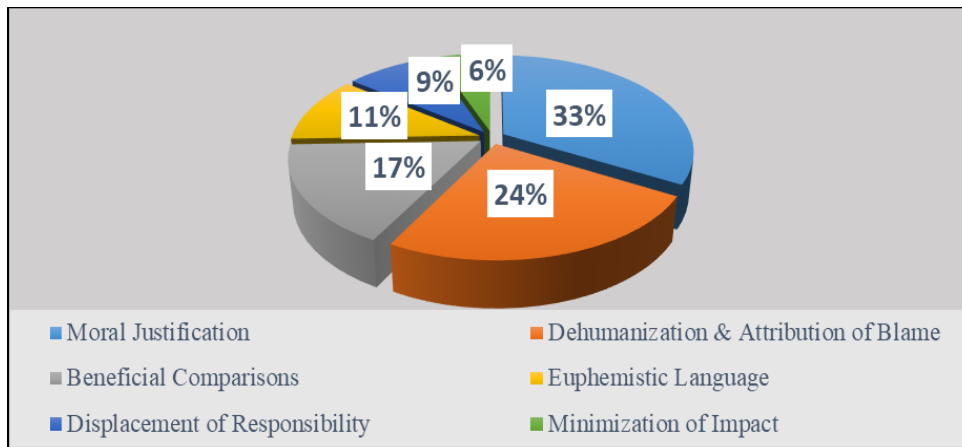

Figure 3: Bandura's Moral Disengagement Mechanisms in the three Speeches

Another frequently used strategy was dehumanization and blaming others, which appeared in 24% of the themes. Biden, for example, referred to Hamas as a terrorist group, removing any sense of personal identity and framing them only as threats. Obama and Trump did something similar when describing enemies as forces of chaos or violence, which made their own positions seem more defensible. We also saw beneficial comparisons (17%)—like painting America's actions as peaceful in contrast to others' aggression—as a way to boost the credibility of their own choices. Less common, but still present, were softer rhetorical strategies like euphemistic language (11%), shifting responsibility (9%), and minimizing harm (6%).

Mechanism	Obama (%)	Biden (%)	Trump (%)	Average (%)
Moral Justification	28	32	30	30
Dehumanization	19	25	23	24
Beneficial Comparisons	17	16	17	17
Euphemistic Language	12	9	10	11
Displacement of Responsibility	7	8	10	9
Minimization of Impact	5	6	6	6

Table 1: Distribution of Moral Disengagement Mechanisms by Each President

These techniques helped the leaders deflect blame or soften the public's perception of military or political actions. Altogether, these patterns show how each president used language to make their decisions feel morally acceptable to their audiences. Further examples include Trump referring to

Jerusalem as the 'eternal capital of the Jewish people' (moral justification), Obama stating that 'violent extremists have exploited these tensions' (attribution of blame), and Biden describing his administration's role as 'quiet, relentless diplomacy' (euphemistic language). These rhetorical choices allowed each leader to frame U.S. policy and action as morally defensible and grounded in shared human or religious values, thereby mitigating criticism and encouraging moral inclusion of American actions.

7.2 Self and the Other via Van Dijk's Ideological Square

Using van Dijk's ideological square, each speech showcased patterns of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. In President Obama's Cairo University speech (June 4, 2009), he strategically frames America in a decidedly positive light and contrasts it sharply with violent ideologies. He emphasizes that "America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition" (para. 4), presenting a unity-based "Us" rooted in democratic values and religious respect. He further constructs this in-group by stating that "freedom in America is indivisible from the freedom to practice one's religion" (para. 11), reinforcing the nation's identity as a support of pluralism. Conversely, Obama employs negative other-presentation by condemning extremists: "violent extremists… have exploited these tensions" (para. 12) and clarifying that America is not at war with Islam but with "those who pervert Islam" (para. 6). These choices align with exaggeration, generalization, and construction—highlighting U.S. moral clarity and casting extremists as deceptive adversaries.

and Negative 'Them' Table 2: Presidential Use of Positive 'Us'

President	Positive 'Us'	Negative 'Them'
Obama	"America and Islam are not exclusive…" (para. 4); "Freedom…is indivisible…" (para. 11)	"violent extremists…have exploited these tensions" (para. 12); "pervert Islam" (para. 6)
Trump	"Jerusalem as the capital of Israel…a sovereign nation" (paras. 5–6)	"Those who oppose this truth…" (para. 7)
Biden	"My administration has worked to bring about a ceasefire" (para. 1); "United States fully supports Israel's right to defend itself" (para. 1)	"Hamas…is a terrorist organization" (para. 3); "indiscriminate rocket attacks" (para. 1)

As in table 2 above, in President Trump's speech recognizing Jerusalem (December 6, 2017), a distinct ideological square surfaces through a strong projection of national authority. Trump officially recognizes "Jerusalem as the capital of Israel", "the capital the Jewish people established in ancient

times" and "sovereign nation" (paras. 5–6), positioning "Us" as assertive defenders of historical truth and national sovereignty. He reinforces this with another moral claim: "[We] recognize reality" (para. 6), employing exaggeration to justify bold political decisions. On the other side, the "Them" are implied as dissenting voices who oppose "this truth" and threaten peace (para. 7); this representation corresponds to both generalization and negative other-presentation. Similarly, in his remarks on the Gaza conflict, President Biden frames the United States and its allies in a strongly positive light. He emphasizes support for Israel's right to self-defense against "indiscriminate rocket attacks" by Hamas and other groups (para. 1). Biden highlights the collaborative efforts between the U.S. and Israel, particularly praising the Iron Dome system as saving "countless Israeli citizens" (para. 2). Throughout his speech, Biden reinforces the image of the U.S. as a committed peace-builder engaged in "intense diplomatic engagement" with regional actors to achieve a ceasefire (para. 3-4). This use of exaggeration, generalization, and construction positions "Us" as guardians of security, peace, and humanitarian responsibility. Conversely, Biden portrays "Them"—Hamas and allied militant groups—in a distinctly negative manner. He labels them as "terrorist groups" responsible for attacks that harm innocent civilians (para. 1, 6). The speech distinguishes between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, stressing that aid efforts will exclude Hamas to prevent "restocking its military arsenal" (para. 6). This delegitimizes Hamas and attributes blame exclusively to them for prolonging conflict. Such negative other-presentation aligns with Van Dijk's principles of exclusion through blame, dehumanization, and moral condemnation, contrasting sharply with the positive self-presentation of the U.S. and its allies as protectors and peace promoters.

8. CONCLUSION

At the heart of Bandura's (1998) theory of moral disengagement is the idea of framing the world as 'Us versus Them' to guide how people think about right and wrong. American leaders do this in several ways: they make violent actions seem justified or even necessary by using moral reasons, comparing their actions favorably to others, or softening the language they use. They also avoid taking full responsibility by shifting blame onto others. When it comes to the consequences, they tend to downplay or ignore the harm caused. Iportantly, they often portray their enemies as less than human, suggesting that these enemies are responsible for the suffering they experience themselves (Cartledge, Bowman-Grieve & Palasinski, 2015).

This study has taken a close look at how U.S. presidents use language to shape the conversation about Palestine, focusing on how they use these moral disengagement tactics to draw lines between "us" and "them." By examining speeches from Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden, it becomes clear that strategies like moral justification, euphemistic labeling, blaming others, and dehumanizing opponents play a big role in supporting U.S. policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moral justification came up most often, making up about 33% of the examples found, followed by dehumanization and blaming at around 24%, and beneficial comparisons at 17%. Other techniques like softening language, shifting responsibility, and minimizing harm appeared less frequently but still made an impact. These patterns show how presidents not only defend political and military actions but also shape public opinion—casting Palestinians mainly as threats or morally wrong, while portraying the U.S. and Israel as peace-loving and just.

What stands out in these speeches is a clear division: the U.S. and its allies are framed as the good people—morally upright, peaceful, and justified—while Palestinians are cast as violent, illegitimate, and dangerous. This Us-vs-Them framing fits with van Dijk's idea of an ideological square, which works to exclude Palestinians from moral concern, while putting the U.S. and Israel firmly within the realm of moral and political legitimacy.

Finally, this study highlights how powerful presidential language in USA is in shaping the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It shows how American presidential words can deepen divisions and make harsh policies more acceptable to the public by making violence seem necessary or defensive. Understanding these rhetorical strategies helps the researcher see how political narratives are formed, influencing not just decisions in government but also the broader social and political environment around this long-standing conflict.

References

Afzal, T., Ali Asghar, S., & Liaqat, S. (2023). A critical discourse analysis of macro structures in speeches of President Bush and President Obama. *Linguistic Forum – A Journal of Linguistics, 5*(2), 32–39. https://doi.org/10.53057/linfo/2023.5.2.5

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3

---------------(1998). Mechanisms of moral disengagement. In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind* (pp. 161-191). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., & Caprara, G. V. (1996). Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *71*(2), 364-374.

Barrett, A. (2004). Gone public: The impact of going public on presidential legislative success. *American Politics Research, 32*(3), 338-370.

Biden, J. R. (2021, May 20). *Remarks by President Biden on the Gaza conflict*. The White House.https://www.rev.com/transcripts/joe-biden-israel-hamas-ceasefire-speech-transcript?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Brown, J. (2009). Reconciliation, rhetoric, and the return of the political to its practical calling (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from **http://search.proquest.com/docview/304997039**

Cartledge, S. M., Bowman-Grieve, L., & Palasinski, M. (2015). The mechanisms of moral disengagement in George W. Bush's "War on Terror" rhetoric. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(11), 1905–1921. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/mechanisms-moral-disengagement-george-w-bushs/docview/1763647965/se-2

Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and application*. London: Routledge.

Coe, K., & Domke, D. (2006). Petitioners or prophets? Presidential discourse, God, and the national interest. *Communication Monographs, 73*(3), 375–392.

Eshbaugh-Soha, M. (2006). *The President's speech: Beyond going public*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.

Graham, P., Keenan, T., & Dowd, A. M. (2004). A call to arms at the end of history: A discourse–historical analysis of George W. Bush's declaration of war on terror. *Discourse & Society*, *15*(2-3), 199-221.

Hill, K. Q. (1998). The policy agendas of the President and the mass public: A research validation and extension. *American Journal of Political Science, 42*(4), 1328-1334.

Jackson, R. (2005). *Writing the war on terrorism: Language, politics and counter-terrorism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kotenko, O., & Grinchenko, B. (2023). *Linguistic and stylistic features of English public speeches*. World Journal of English Language, 13(4), 56–69.

Krebs, R. R., & Jackson, P. T. (2007). Twisting tongues and twisting arms: The power of political rhetoric. *European Journal of International Relations*, *13*(1), 35-66.

Lawrence, A. B. (2004). *"Does it really matter what Presidents say?" The influence of presidential rhetoric on the public agenda, 1946-2003*. Retrieved from http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/6463/1/LawrenceAB2004.pdf

Mansfield, L. (2006). *His own words: A translation of the writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri*. New York: TLG Publications.

McAlister, A. L., Bandura, A., & Owen, S. V. (2006). Mechanisms of moral disengagement in support of military force: The impact of Sept. 11. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *25*(2), 141-165.

Mercieca, J. R. (2012). *Founding fictions*. University of Alabama Press.

Obama, B. (2009, June 4). *Remarks by the President at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt*. The White House.https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09

Partington, A. (2003). *The linguistics of political argument*. London: Routledge.

Pilecki, A., Muro, J. M., Hammack, P. L., & Clemons, C. M. (2014). Moral exclusion and the justification of US counterterrorism strategy: Bush, Obama, and the terrorist enemy figure. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *20*(3), 285-299.

Schaffner, C. (1997). *Analyzing political speeches*. In C. Schaffner (Ed.), *Analyzing political speeches* (pp. 1–6). Multilingual Matters.

Sowińska, A. (2013). A critical discourse approach to the analysis of values in political discourse: The example of freedom in President Bush's State of the Union addresses (2001–2008). *Discourse & Society, 24*(5), 523–546. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513486214

Stern, J., & Berger, J. M. (2015). *ISIS: The state of terror*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, Kindle Edition.

Taylor, C. (2003). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.

Tileagă, C. (2015). *The nature of prejudice: Society, discrimination and moral exclusion*. London: Routledge.

Trump, D. J. (2017, December 6). *President Donald J. Trump recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and directs the State Department to begin preparation to move the American embassy to Jerusalem*. The White House. https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-recognizes-jerusalem-capital-israel/

van Dijk, T. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Sage.

van Dijk, T. A. (2000). *Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary introduction*. Pompeu Fabra University.

Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*. Springer.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. Sage.

Authors' Biodata

Ali Al-Rikaby (Dr.) is a lecturer and researcher presently attached to the College of Arts in Mustansiriyah University, Iraq. He previously served as the Assistant Director of the Studies Abroad Section in the Iraqi MOHSR, Head of the Translation Centre of Mustansiriyah University, and Head of the English Language Department at the College of Education in Libya. His research interests include language and literature studies, translation and discourse analysis.