

2020-09 Attaran vs The Globe and Mail

*February 25, 2020*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about a factual error in a January 8, 2020 opinion article, "Donald Trump is right on Iran" in the Globe and Mail.

Complainant Amir Attaran acknowledged the latitude afforded to opinion writers and made it clear he does not disagree with, or object to, the opinion stated. However, he said the statement "Iran did not abandon its nuclear ambitions, nor did it destroy its centrifuges. It merely put them on ice" was false. He pointed to reports from the Arms Control Centre and the BBC to support the view that Iran complied with destruction of nuclear infrastructure as required by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The Globe and Mail responded by noting the nuclear limitation plan "did not require Iran to end its nuclear program nor destroy even close to all of its estimated 20,000 centrifuges." It noted that the column's reference to "destroy its centrifuges" meant all centrifuges, therefore eliminating Iran's capacity to enrich uranium and end its nuclear program.

The news organization's response referred to a BBC article, published subsequent to the renewal of sanctions and breakdown of the nuclear agreement. That article noted the same facts cited by the complainant, and included U.S. estimates of the potential pace of Iran's nuclear recovery. The news organization pointed to those estimates as support for the statement that Iran did not abandon its nuclear ambitions or centrifuges.

It is worth noting that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action did not require destruction of all Iran's centrifuges or nuclear infrastructure. The statement in question did not state whether the writer meant Iran failed to destroy *all* its centrifuges, or whether it means Iran failed to destroy *any of* its centrifuges.

Interpretation will be in the view of the reader in light of context and point of view.

The NewsMedia Council is mindful that undue focus on a word can distort the intended meaning of a sentence. Context is crucial. In this case, the context is the opinion writer's analysis and view that Iran has been militarily aggressive in the region and needed to be stopped.

For that reason the NNC dismissed the complaint. It is of the view that while wording of the statement in question lacked precision that left it open to a question of inaccuracy, the question raised by focusing on a single statement did not substantially alter the overall argument of the opinion article.

It is worth noting that both parties made reference to allegations around defamation. The NNC views defamation as a strong allegation that should not be made lightly.