

# “Trust, but Verify” – The Framing of the Nuclear Conflict between Iran and the West in UK and US media

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## Abstract

Historicity is an important concept in people’s self-conceptualization as well as in their conceptualization of the world around them. By knowing what was, we can interpret some of what is as a consequence of past actions and events and thus understand how it came to be and how to react appropriately. For our interpretation of current events in the world, we therefore frequently rely on history “as a source of meaning” (Leudar and Nekvapil 2011, 68). Since we relate to events in the world through mediation, i.e. the media, we accordingly understand world history through the historical context that is provided for us by journalists. In many cases, however, such contextualizations of events appear to foreground proximal – or synchronous (Blommaert 2005, 130) – factors over distal ones, thus restricting interpretation to immediate factors rather than describing them as a consequence of other actions or events in history. Due to global reach of today’s corporate media, such synchronous framing of the news can lead to a certain bias of attitudes (Philo 2004, 201–202), e.g., regarding the nature of conflicts between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to the effect that ‘we’ always appear as acting on logical, justifiable and altruistic grounds, while ‘their’ actions are irrational, unwarranted and self-serving. In this paper, I analyze the framing of the political conflict between Western countries and Iran regarding its nuclear program. I investigate opinion columns from various British and U.S. newspapers in order to explore the nature of the news framing of the issue and whether any distal factors such as Western interventions in Iran and Middle Eastern affairs are taken into account. The analysis will be conducted following the *Thematic*

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*Analysis* approach developed by the Glasgow University Media Group (Philo and Berry 2004/2011), but including also other conceptual categories such as Blommaert's (2005) notion of *synchronicity*.

*Key words:* media analysis, thematic analysis, historicity and synchronicity, Iran nuclear deal, media discourse

## 1 Introduction

On July 14, 2015, after years of political struggle, the nuclear deal between Iran and a number of Western powers was sealed. In exchange for disassembling its uranium enrichment facilities, Western powers promised to lift the crippling economic sanctions against the country. The deal was praised by politicians from all sides, but U.S. politicians – Republicans in particular – were cautious to outright oppose the deal, and a discussion was led on the dangers of Iran possessing nuclear weapons as well as potentially selling them to terrorist groups. This suspicion was based on the idea that it was a dangerous and anti-American regime and had clandestinely worked on acquiring all the necessary components to assembling a nuclear bomb.

The discussion felt very familiar, for after the attacks of 9/11, a similar debate had been led – about weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in possession of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, and about the danger of him handing these over to his supposed Al-Qaeda allies. None of this, it turned out, had been the case: there were no WMDs, and Al-Qaeda's grip on Iraq only developed after Hussein's downfall. The media, at that time, were largely echoing the official narratives put forth in press briefings by the Bush and Blair administrations. After the war, many journalists came out admitting that “if journalists had done [their] job ‘there is a very, very good chance we would have not gone to war in Iraq’” (Pilger 2014, online). Considering that Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, was part of former President Bush's ‘Axis of Evil’, it seems reasonable to ask whether in portraying the conflict between Iran and the US, the media this time tried to question the official narratives or whether these remained dominant in news discourse.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to analyze media discourse on the nuclear deal for interpretative dominance and perspective bias. It closely dissects 16 opinion articles/editorials from various UK and US news sources according to the Glasgow University Media Group's method of *Thematic Analysis* (Philo and Berry 2004/2011) and, in doing so, hopes to shed some light on the question of whose views are represented, underrepresented or not represented at all, and what effect this might have on the readers' understanding and interpretation of the issue.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis this paper is mainly based on an approach known as *Thematic Analysis*, which was developed by Greg Philo and colleagues of the Glasgow University's Media Group, but also attempts to incorporate Blommaert's notion of Synchronicity (2005). The purpose is to give a stronger theoretical foundation to Thematic Analysis by enriching it with more concepts that cover important aspects of the analysis, such as synchronous or historical background. Both approaches emphasize the importance of including or excluding historical background information in understanding the nature and meaning of (news) events in the world.

### 2.1 Historical Context and Meaning

According to Blommaert (2005, 126), "people speak *from* a particular point in history, and they always speak *on* history". By this, he means that whenever people engage in discourse, they do so from a particular viewpoint, and from a certain historical grounding. Such discourse always entails a statement on history, through reference and pointers of historical frameworks (ibid, 136). Depending on people's own place in the world, therefore, history would have a different meaning, as they would be contemplating and perceiving it from within a different historical and ideological context encoded in discourse. Since discourses within Critical Discourse Studies are seen as "ways of representing aspects of the world" (Fairclough 2003, 124), it follows that each discourse realizes a different view on the world (ibid). This is very closely connected to the notion of interpretative dominance, i.e. the power to interpret and give meaning to events, actions and states by contextualizing them in a way that gives credibility and reliability to one's own vantage point. Discourse, therefore, serves as a medium for transmitting ideas and – subsequently – ideologies that are used by competing groups within society in an attempt to "explain the world in ways which justify their own positions" (Philo and Berry 2011, 174), drawing on different historical contexts that affect how people will perceive and interpret information about the world.

Based on the idea that every discourse is historical, Blommaert proposes that "meanings [are] simultaneously produced, but not all of them consciously nor similarly accessible to agency" (2005, 126), a phenomenon he terms 'layered simultaneity'. Thus, when people assess information about the world, they do so by applying their own present world view onto it, and thus synchronize it to – and make sense of it within the context of – the contemporary present. In fact, however, the event, action, or state might be – and most probably will be – a product of a variety of different factors, some historical, some contemporary, which, through complex cause/effect relations, have all contributed to the current state of affairs. Yet in their common interpretation, these different factors are all collapsed into a contemporary and synchronous exegesis that does not take into consideration layers of historical complexity.

Blommaert illustrates the concept of layered simultaneity through the works of the social scientist Fernand Braudel who distinguished between three different time-scales that affect our understanding of the world, which he termed structural time, conjunctural time, and event time (Braudel 1981, cited in Blommaert 2005, 127–128). Structural time refers to “the slow, invisible transformation of systems and societies” (ibid, 127), largely equal to, if not exceeding, the human life span, and thus beyond the capability of individuals to consciously perceive. Conjunctural time, on the other hand, refers to a time-span of longer, cyclical patterns such as the lifetime of political regimes, while event time is defined as “short time, measured on individuals, everyday life” (Braudel 1969, 45–46, cited in Blommaert 2005, 128) and hence relates to individual events that evolve in real time, but that require both conjunctural and structural time in order to be comprehensible in their entirety.

In the interpretation of the world surrounding them, people have thus a limited view regarding cause and effect, because they only have a very restricted understanding for long-term developments that have led to the occurrence of events or to the manifestation of states. The current status-quo is therefore interpreted as pre-existing, as common sense, while changes to the status-quo are those that require interpretation based on people’s historical position within the established state of affairs. For Blommaert, this shows that

[w]e have a tendency to perceive only what manifests itself synchronically, but this synchronicity hides the fact that features operate on different levels and scales, have different origins, offer different opportunities, and generate different effects. Synchronicity, in other words, combines elements that are of a different order, but tends to obscure these fundamental differences (Blommaert 2005, 128–129)

It follows that, when people make statements about a state of affairs in this world, they will tend to synchronize the different factors, developments and histories that have eventuated in it into an explanation that is coherent with the here and now, i.e. an explanation that fits into their way of seeing the world at the moment of speaking (Blommaert 2005, 134). For example, within the current and dominant ‘War on Terror’ frame, any attack that is labeled by government spokespersons or by media as an ‘act of terror’ will immediately become interpreted through the familiar schema of the ‘War on Terror’ and be interpreted as a clash of cultures phenomenon, despite the fact that each might have their own particular histories and causal developments. Blommaert calls this act of collapsing different explanatory layers into one ‘synchronization’.

Through synchronization texts are embedded meaningfully into dominant contemporary discourses and are ‘saved’ from a level of complexity that might require a questioning of the status quo of our world views by challenging them through alternative accounts and long-term developments that elope the casual glance. Blommaert suggests that any profound analysis of discourse needs to take these different time-scales

into account, because if discourse is analyzed merely with reference to its synchronous meaning in event time, “we run the risk of squeezing the analytically crucial differences between the layers of historicity in a homogenised and synchronised event” (Blommaert 2005, 131).

### 3 Thematic Analysis

#### 3.1 The Nature of *Thematic Analysis*

*Thematic Analysis* (TA) is an approach to news analysis developed by the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) under Greg Philo. It positions itself as an alternative to (critical) discourse analysis, which it views as limited in its ability to account for extra-textual factors such as competing narratives and power conflicts, and their implications for text meaning as well as audience understanding (Philo 2007), something which TA attempts to take into account.

An in-depth analysis of historical, social or political background is an important aspect in TA. The purpose of this endeavor is to highlight the various arguments from different sides that journalists have at their disposal in their reporting, in order to be able to identify which of the arguments used in the news belongs to which of the interested parties involved (ibid). A particular focus of TA lies on extracting consistent patterns of explanations, of cause-effect relations that underlie texts. It therefore starts from the premise that

in any contentious area there will be competing ways of describing events and their history. Ideas are linked to interests and these competing interests will seek to explain the world in ways which justify their own position. So ideology (by which we mean an interest-linked perspective) and the struggle for legitimacy go hand in hand. (Philo and Berry 2011, 174)

In this ‘struggle for legitimacy’, all parties involved attempt to achieve interpretive dominance in order to succeed in the struggle for public opinion. Once this is achieved, the successful party’s view can be assumed to structure the nature of news coverage in the majority of events concerned, i.e. they become not merely reported, but endorsed by journalists, to the effect that it becomes the ‘natural view’ of the actions/events concerned (Philo 2007, 193).

This naturalization of perspectives eventually pervades into the macro-news coverage as such, underpinning its structure and pattern without relying on an explicit mention. Such structuring and largely implicit themes were termed *explanatory themes* by Philo and colleagues (Philo 2007, 181). An explanatory theme is thus an “assumed explanation” (ibid), which structures news content in such a way that news items will be created revolving around it. In one of their earlier studies from the 1970s, the GUMG

identified the explanatory theme of ‘strikes are to blame’ as patterning the coverage of economic problems in the UK. This theme was not only visible in explicit statements, but also in the overall focus of the coverage, including “going to a factory, interviewing workers, asking them about the strikes and crucially not asking the management about investment policies or their own mistakes and then perhaps listing in the bulletin other strikes which had occurred that week” (ibid). Such explanatory themes, therefore, imply histories, causes or responsibilities rather than naming them and thus suggest – through frequent and repeated exposure – to the audience that a certain aspect is at the core of a particular issue, rather than another.

### 3.2 TA and the News Production Processes

Media as an institution is infused by the notion of ‘balance’, i.e. that various views should be given representation, not necessarily in the sense that they should be equally present, but that at least they should be given a voice. In addition, media institutions are “intensely reluctant to be seen as simply the mouthpiece of the state or other major interests” (Philo 2007, 181) and hence put a certain emphasis on their position as ‘mediators’ rather than ‘propagators’.

Research by Philo and his colleagues, however, suggests that in cases where, for example, the state is very sensitive (as in the coverage of Northern Ireland, for the UK, or after 9/11), the perspectives given prominence were almost exclusively official ones, while alternative narratives are barely presented, and where they are, their representation is rather incoherent (ibid)<sup>1</sup>. The effect of the incoherent or fragmented employment of such alternative narratives is that – due to the lack of profound explanation and analysis of these – when they are mentioned, the audience cannot comprehend their intricacies and their macro-meanings, simply because they lack the necessary knowledge to do so. In their two large-scale studies on the Israel-Palestine conflict (2004; 2011), Philo and Berry were able to show that audiences in fact associate little to nothing with key terms such as ‘occupation’, ‘siege’, ‘curfew’, or ‘settlements’ due to the fact that they are hardly ever explained in any meaningful depth in the media, but their meanings are rather presupposed, which is problematic because “meaning cannot always simply be assumed using the cultural knowledge of the investigator” (Philo 2007, 184). However, in areas in which there is a lacking consensus among powerful groups, a greater variety of perspectives is represented (Cook 2005, 105).

It is thus in such areas with a general consensus among the ruling elites where an in-depth analysis of alternative narratives may be most revealing as these narratives may

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<sup>1</sup> An example for this was *The Guardian*’s explanations in the immediate aftermath of the Paris shootings in November 2015, which blended out any mention of it being in part a reaction to Western interventionist policies in Islamic countries. In a follow-up column to their coverage of the event, Chris Elliott admits that such explanations were left out on purpose because “[t]he idea that these horrific attacks have causes and that one of those causes may be the west’s policies is something that in the immediate aftermath might inspire anger” (Elliott Nov 23 2015, online).

be backgrounded or even absent in both official as well as media representation. Here, TA can provide valuable insights into the process and outcomes of news making by juxtaposing media narratives with the major narratives in existence in order to analyze which of these narratives eventually becomes dominant and/or endorsed, and to what effect.

## 4 Methodology and Research Questions

This paper will apply Philo et al.'s (2004/2011) *Thematic Analysis* to editorials and opinion columns from British and American news outlets on the topic of the Iranian nuclear deal. For the purpose of the analysis, the paper will first outline the various narratives regarding the strained history of Iranian-Western relations before exploring which of the narratives are expressed and/or endorsed in the articles in question. There will also be an analysis of intertextual and interdiscursive (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) elements in the texts.

### 4.1 Corpus Data

The corpus used for this analysis consists of 16 editorials and opinion columns taken from 8 different news outlets (4 from the UK, 4 from the US) and from across the political spectrum. This genre was selected because of its inherent quality of providing a (subjective) gist of the event in question and therefore of summarizing those aspects of an issue that are seen as salient as well as relevant for giving a meaningful account. All articles were published in temporal vicinity to the signing of the nuclear deal (immediately after/up to 3 months before it). Two articles were taken from each source, one from before the deal and one from after the deal, with the exception of the *Daily Mail* whose online version included no opinion articles before the deal was sealed. The news outlets and articles are shown in Table 1.

| Country         | News outlet            | Date  | Headline  |
|-----------------|------------------------|---|---|
| UK              | <i>The Guardian</i>    | 03 Apr 2015   | “Diplomacy shows its worth”   |
|                 | <i>The Guardian</i>    | 14 Jul 2015   | “A triumph of democracy”  |
|                 | <i>The Independent</i> | 13 Jul 2015   | “Forget Isis, it’s Iran’s push for nuclear weapons that could herald the end of the world”                                  |
|                 | <i>The Independent</i> | 15 Jul 2015   | “Nuclear thaw: The deal between Iran and the big powers is of historic importance, but its risks must be carefully managed” |
|                 | <i>The Telegraph</i>   | 03 Apr 2015   | “Iran is leading the West by the nose”  |
|                 | <i>The Telegraph</i>   | 17 Jul 2015   | “The Iran nuclear deal is worse than we could have imagined”  |
| US              | <i>The Daily Mail</i>  | 14 Jul 2015   | “Why Iran’s nuclear disarmament deal might NOT be the great foreign policy victory that Barack Obama craves”                |
|                 | <i>The Daily Mail</i>  | 14 Jul 2015   | “The Iran nuclear deal was a gamble, but one the West had to take”  |
|                 | <i>New York Times</i>  | 01 Jul 2015   | “A Good Bad Deal?”  |
|                 | <i>New York Times</i>  | 18 Jul 2015   | “The Morning After the Iran Deal”   |
|                 | CNN                    | 27 Feb 2015   | “Don’t ignore Iran dangers”   |
|                 | CNN                    | 14 Jul 2015   | “Iran deal misses the point”  |
|                 | <i>Washington Post</i> | 02 Jul 2015   | “The worst agreement in U.S. diplomatic history”  |
|                 | <i>Washington Post</i> | 14 Jul 2015   | “Mr Obama’s complex and costly deal with Iran”  |
|                 | <i>Fox News</i>        | 02 Apr 2015   | “Iran nuclear deal dangerous step in wrong direction”   |
| <i>Fox News</i> | 15 Jul 2015            | “How global terror network will get a boost from Iran nuclear deal” |   |

Table 1: News outlets and articles selected

## 4.2 Research Questions

In conducting a TA of these texts, this paper intends to tackle the following questions by applying the following criteria:

1. How is the Nuclear Deal with Iran conceptualized in US and UK media?

This question aims at how events and actors in the texts are represented and whether there is a black/white dichotomy that attempts to render these complex issues in simpler terms than is warranted. For this purpose what will be analyzed are:

- a) the right to speak: who is privileged by getting their perspective on the issue represented. This is important because these voices have the power to impose a particular frame on the story (e.g. the official narrative). (Chomsky and Hermann 2002; Fairclough 1995)
- b) the text population: This is a term from critical language studies (Talbot 1992; Goatly 2000) and refers to entities and events which ‘inhabit’ a text and which are the main forces in its narrative. In order to do this, the text will be dissected for references to the text population as well as to any kind of modifiers applied to them.



- c) explanatory themes (chapter 3)
  - d) synchronicity and historicity: as Philo et al. (2004; 2011) have amply shown, in conflict situations it makes a vital difference at which point in time the narrative starts as this is essential for the point of origin of cause-effect relations and thus for the question of who is ultimately to blame for the state of affairs. Generally, it can be expected that each side selects its dates in a way that their interests and their point of view will be supported by historical evidence, while blending out dates that would weaken their stance (Lippmann 1922, 123). Following Blommaert (2005), it could be expected that synchronous – or proximal – factors prevail, in that they coincide with people’s everyday experience, i.e. they connect to narratives that people are familiar with from daily discourse and thus do not create dissonance.
  - e) interdiscursivity (large-scale discourses the news articles draw from in discussing the issue) and intertextuality (connections drawn to other events in the past)
2. Which aspects from U.S.-Iran relations are drawn on in explaining the causes for the crisis? Which aspects are backgrounded?

For this question, the results of question 1 will be compared to the official and alternative narratives outlined in chapter 5 in order to obtain an overview regarding which narratives are favored and foregrounded and which ones are backgrounded.

3. What is the effect of this?

In answering this, the results of both question 1 and 2 will be drawn from to suggest an effect that the identified discourse might have on an audience without any additional background knowledge, i.e. for whom news information is the only information available on the issue.

## 5 Historical Background

The history of US-Iranian relations dates back to 1856, but the genesis of their current troublesome nature lies in 1953. After the democratic election of the social-democratic National Front party to government in 1951, Prime Minister Mossadegh set out to nationalize the country’s oil industry which had so far been under British control. Angered and humiliated by this move, Britain encouraged and supported a CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Mossadegh, planned in the US embassy in Tehran. Together they successfully deposed the Prime Minister and reinstalled the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in the following assisting him in the creation of SAVAK, Iran’s much feared and brutal intelligence agency (Shoamanesh, online). Official US sources only admit that

the coup was “supported by the United States and the United Kingdom” (U.S. Department of State 2015, online).

In 1979, the Iranian Revolution – a reaction against the Shah’s long and brutal regime and against Western interference in Iran – swept through the country, leading to the ousting of the much hated Shah, who was forced to flee the country and eventually found refuge in the United States for medical treatment. Even though the revolutionary movement is frequently associated with radical Islamists, it actually “commenced as a popular revolution comprising many sects and factions [...] Iranians from all walks of life wanting to expand their political freedoms and improve their country” (Shoamanesh, online). Ayatollah Khomeini, the symbol of the revolution, returned from his exile in France to call for “the expulsion of all foreigners” (Del Viscio et al. 2014, online). In November of the same year, the US Embassy in Tehran was stormed by Iranian revolutionaries who took 52 American diplomats hostage for a period of 444 days (Shoamanesh, online). They vowed “to occupy the building and hold the employees hostage until the Shah [...] is returned to Iran to face trial” (Del Viscio 2014, online). This led to the breaking of diplomatic ties between the US and Iran (U.S. Department of State 2015, online). Although being undoubtedly a violation against international law, Shoamanesh (online) argues that “to the Iranian revolutionaries it made ‘rational’ sense to seize the Embassy given their fears that the same Embassy who had overthrown the country’s democracy years earlier might be used again to reinstall the Shah (a second time)”. The 1979 revolution still accounts for much of the distance between the two countries.

In the aftermath of the revolution, the US unilaterally raised economic sanctions against Iran, which were continuously tightened under Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama (Del Viscio 2014, online), and which “have had little impact on the ruling establishment but have cost the Iranian people dearly, diminishing in turn support from the same base the US wants to empower” (Shoamanesh: online). From the beginning, the Iranians tried to negotiate an end to the sanctions, but their pleas were consistently ignored (Porter 2014).

The following year, 1980, saw the invasion of Iran by Iraqi military forces, with considerable support by the US. Iraq used chemical weapons against Iranians, killing not only military personnel, but also thousands of civilians. Besides supplying arms to Iraq, the US also engaged its own forces against Iran, such as in Operation Praying Mantis (1988), where US forces attacked Iranian Oil Platforms as well as naval vessels (Shoamanesh, online; Del Viscio 2014, online). In the same year, the US Navy shot down Iranian Airflight 655, an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 civilians (Del Viscio 2014, online). Besides military standoffs, the US has also been encouraging separatist movements in Iran as well as attempting to destabilize the government in the decades since 1979 by supporting – sometimes extremist – opposition groups in addition to intensifying efforts to isolate Iran internationally, factors that have led to increased tensions and suspicions (Shoamanesh: online).

The issue that has shaped US-Iran relations most in the public eye, however, has been the crisis regarding Iran's nuclear program. After encouraging the construction of a nuclear power plant during the Shah's rule (Del Viscio 2014, online), US policy changed after the storming of their embassy in 1979, when the Reagan administration put increasing pressure on countries such as France not to provide nuclear fuel to Iran. This forced Iran to make a choice between either giving up its right to peaceful use of nuclear technology under the Non-Proliferation Treaty or to start its own uranium enrichment process, which was eventually initiated in the mid-1980s (Porter July 25, 2015, online; Porter 2014, 27). This program was discovered in 2002 through documents shared by "The People's Mujaheddin of Iran" (or MEK), an exile opposition group, which the "US State Department had listed [...] as a terrorist organization during the Clinton administration", but all of a sudden had become a trustworthy ally (Porter 2014, 64). Porter argues that "Iran did not inform the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Authority] [...] because of the continued US attempt to suppress the Iranian nuclear program" (July 15, 2015, online). Following an international outcry, Iran agreed to inspections by IAEA (Del Viscio 2014, online), but the US saw the clandestine nature of the enrichment program as proof that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons (Porter January 10, 2015, online) and called for tougher and multilateral sanctions.

In 2006, after the election of Mahmoud Ahamdinejad as Iranian president, and when negotiations between Iran and Western powers came to a standstill, Iran resumed its uranium enrichment program, leading to a concerted effort by the US and Israel to sabotage Iran's enrichment facility in Natanz through a massive cyberattack in 2009 in an attempt to force Iran to abandon their nuclear program, followed by another cyberattack on Iran's oil and gas industry in 2012. (Porter July 15, 2015, online), while even further tightening the sanctions regime, which the US has always argued was "imposed on Iran because of its sponsorship of terrorism [i.e. its support of the Lebanese Hezbollah], its refusal to comply with international obligations on its nuclear program, and its human rights violations" (U.S. Department of State 2015, online).

The policy of coercion, i.e. of attempting to force Iran to concede to Western terms, suddenly changed in 2013, after it had become public that Iran had started to speed up its uranium enrichment process in order to enable an enrichment level of 20%, i.e. a level where the uranium can be used in nuclear weapons (ibid). It was after the disclosure of this information that negotiations started between the US and Iran. From the Western perspective, however, the reason for the start of negotiations was the sanctions regime. In a statement on the agreement's framework from April 2, 2015, President Obama stated,

I made clear that we were prepared to resolve this issue diplomatically, but only if Iran came to the table in a serious way. When that did not happen, we rallied the world to impose the toughest sanctions in history – sanctions which had a profound impact on the Iranian economy.

Now, sanctions alone could not stop Iran’s nuclear program. But they did help bring Iran to the negotiating table. (Obama 2015)

In the same statement, Obama also maintained that the nuclear question was only one of many issues with Iran and that “our concerns will remain with respect to Iranian behavior so long as Iran continues its sponsorship of terrorism, its support for proxies who destabilize the Middle East, its threats against America’s friends and allies – like Israel” (Obama 2015). Eventually, the Iran Nuclear Deal was successfully sealed in July 2015.

## 6 Analysis

The analysis will first present the major voices that get to comment on the deal before exploring the articles’ respective text populations as well as identifying the dominant explanatory themes.

### 6.1 Who speaks?

A variety of voices is represented in the articles, but the negative voices show more variation. Simply put, those praising the deal are those who were involved in sealing it, while those opposing it appear as uninvolved and thus more ‘neutral’.

| Positive comments         | Negative comments   | General comments resulting in a negative framing of Iran |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Barack Obama              | NCRI (National Council of Resistance in Iran)’s Shahin Gobadi                   | George W. Bush   |
| Hassan Rouhani            | Israel  | Ronald Reagan  |
| [Iran’s] foreign minister | Top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell   | The CIA  |
| The West                  | Israel’s prime minister   | Then-Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz                |
| John Kerry                | A distinguished US general  | Then-Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak                 |
| Iran                      | Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at Carnegie Endowment                          |  |
| The [US] administration   | Foreign Policy specialist Michael Mandelbaum                                    |  |
|                           | Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who until 2005 was the Saudi Ambassador to Washington |  |
|                           | London’s Asharq Al-Awsat  |  |
|                           | Lt. General Michael Flynn   |  |

Table 2: Who gets to speak?

## 6.2 Text Population

The discourse on the Iran nuclear deal reveals a fundamental dichotomy of ‘us’ vs ‘them’, with regard to the sides involved in the conflict, i.e. the West and Iran (and those countries/groups seen as affiliated with them). Tables 3 and 4 illustrate these references.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Tehran  | Iran  |
| its foreign minister  | the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani           |
| Iran’s Shia militias  | Hard-liners                                     |
| Regime  | Islamist regime                                 |
| the medieval mullahs of Teheran   | the chief Shia power                            |
| the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei  | the Iranian theocracy                           |
| Iranian hardliners  | the Iranian threat                              |
| the Iranians  | the Middle East’s biggest power                 |
| the Shia mullahs of Iran  | the Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force            |
| Shia Iran   | the Iranian regime                              |
| Syria’s murderous dictator, Bashar al-Assad   | one of the world’s most dangerous regimes       |
| a very dangerous regime   | the regime in Tehran                            |
| Shiite allies and other militants in the region   | its puppet regimes in Syria and Iraq            |
| Iran and its proxies  | a pariah state                                  |
| an expansionist state exporting terror across the globe   | an aggressive state                             |
| a repressive regime with imperial ambitions   | the Tehran regime                               |
| moderates in Iran   | Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif           |
| al-Qaeda  | Iran’s leaders                                  |
| anti-American Houthi  | the Islamic republic                            |
| fanatical Islamist regime   | the world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism |
| a country that has been a determined American enemy for 35 years  | a dangerous threshold nuclear state             |
| a Persian Shiite power that can dominate its Sunni neighbors  | an atomic Ayatollah                             |
| Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other groups that have killed Americans, Europeans, Israelis and others |   |

Table 3: References to ‘them’

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|  |  |
|--|--|
| Washington   | U.S./United States   |
| its European allies  | (President) Obama  |
| Peaceful nation  | World powers   |
| Five great power partners  | the tireless US secretary of state, John Kerry                 |
| America's partners   | Capitol Hill   |
| the Senate   | our naïve Western politicians                                  |
| the ineffable John Kerry and Co  | Congress   |
| the world's six largest powers, including the United States                              | the Western powers   |
| the White House  | Britain  |
| United States, European Union and UN   | Washington and most European governments                       |
| the fellowship of peaceful nations   | the United States and its five great power partners            |
| the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany and Britain                            | Israel, the region's lone democracy and America's closest ally |
| world leaders  | the strongest military and economic power on earth             |
| the United States and its partners   | Israel and U.S. Arab allies                                    |
| the chief Iranian opposition movement, the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI) |  |

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Table 4: References to 'us'

### 6.3 Explanatory Themes

There are several dominant themes and assumptions that structure the narrative about the Iranian nuclear deal and that were extracted from the articles analyzed. Table 5 below presents them in their entirety as derived from the articles analyzed, but only the most salient ones will be more closely discussed.

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1. Iran wants the bomb
  2. Iran is ruthless and aggressive
  3. Iran is a sponsor of international terrorism
  4. Iran has imperialist/expansionist ambitions
  5. Iran plays a destabilizing role in the Middle East
  6. Iran is radically anti-American
  7. Iran is untrustworthy
  8. Sanctions forced Iran to negotiate
  9. Iran is mainly responsible for its bad relations to the West
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Table 5: Major explanatory themes

### 6.3.1 Theme 1 – ‘Iran wants the bomb’

The idea that Iran aims to possess a nuclear bomb can be seen as the main premise underlying the discourse on the nuclear deal, for obvious reasons. It is the main rationale as well as the primary argument put forth by Western politicians for why the situation with Iran was considered dangerous.

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“[The nuclear deal] **makes it almost impossible for Iran to go for a bomb** in the next decade” (Guardian)

“And then, when we are all distracted by the next Assad- or Putin-generated crisis, the Iranians will choose to quietly cross the point of no return in **their meandering advance towards nuclear armament**” (Independent)

“the West forlornly claims a ‘breakthrough’ in trying to talk the Iranian regime out of its **unshakeable resolve to build a nuclear bomb**” (Telegraph)

“Ever since it started its nuclear programme in the mid-1980s [...] it has lied about its **quest for nuclear weapons**” (Daily Mail)

“for the past year every time there is a sticking point – like whether Iran should have to [...] account for its **previous bomb-making activities** – it keeps feeling as if it’s always our side looking to accommodate Iran’s needs” (NY Times)

“does the Supreme Leader want ‘**a bomb**’? **Some bombs? An arsenal of bombs?** Or merely the capacity, like Japan, to have weapons at a time of its choosing?” (CNN)

“for the next 15 years, the Islamic republic will be **restrained from producing a nuclear weapon**” (Washington Post)

“To those people who see Iranian nuclear weapons as a threat and genuinely want to **prevent the medieval mullahs of Teheran from obtaining the means of mass slaughter**, it is a dangerous step in the wrong direction” (Fox)

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Table 6: Text samples for explanatory theme ‘Iran wants the bomb’

### 6.3.2 Theme 2 – ‘Iran is untrustworthy’

Another major theme that structures news reporting is that Iran cannot be trusted. This can be seen as somehow complementary to Theme 1 in that the untrustworthiness of Iran is provided as one of the rationales for why the West cannot allow Iran to possess nuclear capacity.

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“in 2002, with the genesis of the present crisis, when the Iranians were found to be **withholding the truth** about their nuclear programme” (Guardian) “Iran has a long **track record of cheating**” (Independent)

“Under the final agreement, Iran has the right to deny international inspectors access to any undeclared nuclear site. The denial is then adjudicated by a committee – on which Iran sits. It then goes through several other bodies, on all of which Iran sits. Even if the inspectors’ request prevails, the approval process can take 24 days. And what do you think will be left to be found, left unscrubbed, after 24 days?” (Telegraph)

“President Obama has taken a gamble by making an agreement with a government with a **long history of mendacity and double dealing**” (Daily Mail)

“Only the facts of the program are clear: secret fortified nuclear facilities, **undeclared** work on centrifuge advances, **concealment** of enrichment activities, plutonium and uranium experimentation, nuclear component casting documentation, a heavy water facility **unnecessary to any peaceful nuclear program**, high-power explosives testing facility, destruction of **suspect** sites, plans for a nuclear missile payload” (CNN)

“Nuclear inspectors will have to negotiate and receive Iranian approval for inspections. Which allows them denial and/or crucial delay for **concealing any clandestine activities**” (Washington Post)

“If the inspection regime is not rigorous and unrestricted, it will be nothing more than a cover **for Iranian cheating**. Even if it is perfect, it will not be able to look at facilities that it does not know about” (Fox)

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Table 7: Text samples for the explanatory theme ‘Iran is untrustworthy’



### 6.3.3 Theme 3 – ‘Iran is a sponsor of international terrorism’

Iran’s financial and military support of so-called terrorist groups is frequently mentioned as another factor for the existing mistrust, to the extent that news reporting is structured around this theme, and as an explanatory theme, it ties in with the aforementioned notion that Iran is untrustworthy.

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“It [Iran] deserves none [no sympathy], however, for the murderous policies of its rulers, and for its **persistent support of terrorism** abroad” (Daily Mail)

“see Iran as an **expansionist state exporting terror** across the globe through radical groups including Hezbollah and Boko Haram” (Daily Mail)

“that an Iran armed with new financial resources [. . .] will have the resources to **export further terrorism around the world**” (Daily Mail)

“Iran remains the world’s **most aggressive state sponsor of terrorism**, fueling the murderous efforts of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other groups that have killed Americans, Europeans, Israelis and others.” (CNN)

“it has **worked with al Qaeda** since 2007 to target U.S. interests in Saudi Arabia and Dubai” (CNN)

“the **world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism**” (Washington Post)

“Iran’s **sponsorship of terrorist groups and proxy armies** from Lebanon and Syria to the border of Saudi Arabia” (Fox)

“the Iranian threat network – a nefarious web of insurgent, criminal and **terrorist allies**” (Fox)

“the network now includes **proxies in Yemen and Iraq**, where the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its elite Quds Force are **training sectarian militias**” (Fox)

“Iranian **accomplices including Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon**” (Fox)

“Iranian **sponsorship of terrorist organizations**” (Fox)

“the Iranian regime is still a **major sponsor of terrorist groups** opposed to the United States and its key allies throughout the Middle East, North Africa and the Persian Gulf region” (Fox)

“keep pressuring Tehran to cease its **support for terrorist and insurgent groups**” (Fox) “Iranian **funding of terrorist groups**” (Fox)

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Table 8: Text samples for the explanatory theme ‘Iran is a sponsor of international terrorism’

#### 6.3.4 Theme 4 – ‘Iran is fervently anti-American’

Another important and recurring explanatory theme in the overall discourse on Iran is their hostility towards the West, in particular towards the United States, which is occasionally used to justify the critical stance the US take with regards to Iran.

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“the regime [...] will not want the enthusiasm over the American détente to get out of hand. Ever since 1979-80, the Iranian theocracy has rested on **hostility to the west**” (Guardian)

“**The strained relationship** between Washington and Tehran did not begin with the 1979 Iranian revolution. But...” (Guardian)

“a thaw in relations between the West and, arguably, the Middle East’s biggest power, **in the deep freeze since the Islamic revolution of 1979**” (Independent)

“The agreement between Tehran and the world’s six largest powers, including the United States, signals the end of **decades of hostility** dating back to the Iranian revolution which brought the Ayatollahs to power” (Daily Mail)

“the regime in Tehran has been [...], most fundamentally, **anti-American** in its approach. ‘Death to America’ has remained a popular chant at parliamentary sessions and government-orchestrated public rallies” (CNN)

“Iran continues to pull out all stops to protect Syria’s murderous dictator, Bashar al-Assad, by sending forces to help Syria’s army fight the U.S.-backed rebels. It’s also extending its reach in the region by backing the **anti-American** Houthi rebels who recently overran Yemen’s capital and **forced its U.S.-backed President to resign**” (CNN)

“the world’s most dangerous weapons will remain in the hands of a regime that’s driven by **fervent anti-Americanism**” (CNN)

“a fanatical Islamist regime whose foundational purpose is **to cleanse the Middle East of the poisonous corruption of American power and influence**” (Washington Post)

“a country that has been a **determined American enemy** for 35 years” (Washington Post)

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Table 9: Text samples for the explanatory theme ‘Iran is radically anti-American’

### 6.3.5 Theme 5 – ‘Iran was forced into negotiations/negotiations were initiated by the West’

Another common narrative in official statements on the negotiations with Iran is that sanctions forced Iran to the negotiating table and that negotiations in general originated from Western political leaders, while their Iranian counterparts did not show any particular initiative. As Table 10 suggests, this narrative has become axiomatic in mainstream media reporting as well.

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“a heartening success in the global quest to halt nuclear proliferation. **Credit goes to the tireless US secretary of state, John Kerry, but also to America’s partners:** Germany, France and Britain, including the former European high representative on foreign affairs, Baroness Ashton, and, in spite of tensions over Ukraine, **also to Russia, and,** to a lesser extent, **China. Credit, too, to the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani,** who has had to face down suspicious hardliners at home” (Guardian)

“For **politicians, ‘Iran fatigue’** set in long ago. They **have been trying to find a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear problem** ever since it was first discovered that Iran was in breach of the Non-Proliferation Treaty back in 2002. From the moment he was sworn into office, US president Barack **Obama has tried to make dismantling Iran’s vast nuclear infrastructure into his legacy issue**” (Independent)

“President **Obama has chosen to go down the diplomatic route**” (Daily Mail)

“**The US** has often in the past been accused of resorting too readily to force to impose its will. Now, it **is being seen to move heaven and earth to achieve some sort of diplomatic accommodation with Iran**” (Daily Mail)

“But the **United States** seems to deserve credit for **attempting the experiment of treating the state that has been for three decades one of its bitterest enemies as an honest negotiation partner.** It is inviting the Iranians to abandon international terrorism and to live, trade and work with us at peace” (Daily Mail)

“The deal **owes much to the perseverance of US Secretary of State John Kerry** who – having failed to deliver on an Israel-Palestinian peace deal – turned his attention to forging curbs on Iran’s nuclear capability” (Daily Mail)

“A combination of the oil **sanctions** and in recent years financial sanctions starved Iran of capital and credit, and **are seen as having forced the country to the bargaining table**” (Daily Mail)

“To his credit, President Barack Obama led global efforts to further tighten the screws on Iran, which threatened that nation with economic collapse and **coaxed Iranian leaders to the negotiating table**” (CNN)

“Iran stands to reap a potential windfall of billions of dollars that has been held up by international **sanctions designed to cripple the Iranian economy and bring Tehran to the negotiating table**” (Fox)

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Table 10: Text samples for the explanatory theme ‘Iran was forced into negotiations’

## 6.4 Historical contextualization

A crucial element in the construction of the Iran-West nuclear confrontation is the element of history as it provides the context against which the issue is to be interpreted.

Broadly speaking, there are six different causes that are identified as having triggered the deterioration in relations between the Iran and the West, most of which take place in

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 Mutual responsibility

“For the past 13 years, the standoff between Iran and the US, backed by its European allies, has threatened to escalate into war. In his 2002 state of the union address George W Bush lumped Iran in with North Korea and Iraq as part of the ‘axis of evil’, and he later heightened tensions further by increasing naval deployments to the Gulf. For more than a decade, Israel, with its own undeclared nuclear arsenal, has regularly warned that it was prepared to mount a pre-emptive air attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.” (Guardian)

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## (Concealment of) Nuclear program

“we did not want one of the world’s most dangerous regimes to possess (and potentially use or distribute) the world’s most dangerous weapon” (CNN)

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## Sponsoring of terrorism

“major sponsor of terrorist groups opposed to the United States and its key allies” (Fox)

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## Anti-Americanism

“Iran continues to pull out all stops to protect Syria’s murderous dictator Bashar al-Assad, by sending forces to help Syria’s army fight the U.S.-backed rebels. It’s also extending its reach in the region by backing the anti-American Houthi rebels who recently overran Yemen’s capital and forced its U.S.-backed President to resign” (CNN)

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## Threats to Israel

“Meanwhile, Iran’s leaders continue to threaten to eliminate Israel, the region’s lone democracy and America’s closest ally, and, under the emerging deal, Tehran has not promised to halt those threats.” (CNN)

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## Iranian Revolution (and aftermath)

“The strained relationship between Washington and Tehran did not begin with the 1979 revolution. But the storming of the US embassy and the taking of American hostages scarred US attitudes in the decades that followed. The prospect of conflict heightened in 1988 when the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290. Tensions rose again in 2002, the genesis of the present crisis, when the Iranians were found to be withholding the truth about their nuclear programme, with the discovery of two previously undisclosed facilities at Natanz and Arak, giving rise to fears that Iran was hellbent on securing a nuclear weapon” (Guardian)

“Ever since 1979-80, the Iranian theocracy has rested on hostility to the west” (Guardian)

“Just possibly, the agreement [...] could signal the start of a thaw in relations between the West and, arguably, the Middle East’s biggest power, in the deep freeze since the Islamic revolution of 1979” (Independent)

“a country that has been a determined American enemy for 35 years” (Washington Post)

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Table 11: Text samples for proximal and medium-term factors for the conflict between Iran and the West

a gray zone between event time and conjunctural time: the concealment of Iran's nuclear program, Iran's sponsoring of terrorist groups, Iran's anti-Americanism, Iran's threats to Israel, the Iranian Revolution, as well as – to some extent – mutual responsibility in terms of a tit for tat between Iran and the West and its allies.

As Table 11 demonstrates, *The Guardian* is the only one from among the media analyzed to mention that the escalation of the conflict was due to actions from both sides and also the only one to allot more space to a basic contextualization of the conflict, while in all the other media, Iran is almost exclusively the one to be blamed for the tensions.

Historically, most of the articles trace the conflict back to the Iranian revolution of 1979, with *The Guardian* being once more the only news outlet to include a more detailed historical account of events following the Islamic Revolution by mentioning the storming of the US embassy and the ensuing hostage crisis as well as the shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane by US forces and the Iranian concealment of its nuclear program.

The only mention of long-term causes occurs in the *Daily Mail*, which states that “Iran deserves some sympathy because it has suffered centuries of humiliation at the hands of Westerners, and it is determined to walk taller in the future”, but immediately neutralizes any sympathies by adding “[i]t deserves none [no sympathies], however, for the murderous domestic policies of its rulers, and for its persistent support of terrorism abroad”.

## 6.5 Intertextuality and interdiscursivity

The discourse on the Iranian nuclear conflict is naturally not seen in isolation, but it is contextualized by its embedding into popular narratives. In the corpus used for this analysis, two elements of intertextuality as well as interdiscursivity could be identified, namely references to the Cold War and to the ‘War on Terror’ narrative.

### 6.5.1 Cold War

Possibly triggered, in part, by the nature of the conflict, some of the articles analyzed showed elements relating the nuclear conflict with Iran to the major confrontation between the Western and the Eastern Block after World War II. This is, on a fundamental level, engrained in the discourse by the construal of an antagonism between Iran and ‘the West’ as a monolithic block, but is also visible in certain intertextual references to the Cold War era (“nuclear domino effect”, “nuclear arms race”, “nuclear disarmament”), in the intertextual reference to a major Cold War conflict (“Cuban missile crisis”) as well as in the quoting of a famous Cold War public figure, namely Ronald Reagan and his motto “Trust but verify” that he proposed for dealing with Soviet Russia, and by reinterpreting this as a viable strategy for dealing with Iran.

### 6.5.2 War on Terror

A second frame that is constantly invoked is global terrorism. Ever since 9/11, the fight against Islamic terrorism has become a paradigm of contemporary society. The word ‘terrorist’ has become narrowed down to refer only to a particular kind of terrorism – namely that perpetrated by fanatical Islamists, mostly against Western targets or targets in which the West has vested interests. Therefore, whenever a text refers to terrorism, what is evoked through this is the ‘War on Terror’ frame, to the effect that when news articles mention ‘terrorism’, ‘terror’, ‘terrorist groups’, ‘Islamist terror’ or ‘Islamist regime’, this directly connects to collective memories of terror attacks against the West and its allies.

| Word        | Frequency |
|-------------|-----------|
| terror      | 4         |
| terrorism   | 9         |
| terrorist/s | 8         |
| Islamic     | 13        |
| Islamist    | 2         |

Table 12: Frequency count of words relating to ‘terror’ and ‘Islam’

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

The corpus of opinion articles and editorials analyzed in this paper draws a very clear picture of the nuclear conflict between Iran and the West. This is already indicated by who is awarded the right to speak and whose perspective dominates.

As Table 2 illustrates, there is a relatively strong numerical advantage for those who speak out against the deal with Iran. Besides the numbers, however, there is also the fact that no one speaks in favor of the deal who has not themselves a vested interest in its success. On the other hand, the people who oppose the deal seem to be ‘independent’ sources, whose authority and credibility derives from the very fact that they were not involved. What adds to their credibility are the descriptions awarded to them (“a *distinguished* general”, “an Iran *expert*”, “foreign policy *specialist*”), which suggest that they are in a neutral position to know and judge.<sup>2</sup> The effect of such representation may be to suggest a clash between professional opinion and natural bias.

<sup>2</sup> One aspect that needs to be addressed is that, while labels such as ‘expert’ or ‘specialist’ for opponents of the deal may suggest an unbiased view, some are in fact politically invested in the issue or contested with regard to their credibility. Asharq Al-Awsat, for example, is a Saudi-funded newspaper with a strong affiliation to the Saudi Royal Family and thus naturally opposed to Iran. The NCRI (or MEK), an Iranian opposition movement, in fact was listed as a terrorist organization up until the year 2009 because of accusations of violent actions such as assassinations aimed at regime change in Iran (Porter 2014).

The description of the text population also shows certain representational tendencies. Table 3 demonstrates that a large number of negative modifiers are used to describe ‘them’ (“dangerous”, “fanatical”, “aggressive”, “expansionist”). The Iranian government is consistently referred to as a “regime”, a term that implies an illegitimate nature of government as well as an anti-Western attitude of said government. It is inconceivable that it would ever be employed for governments – democratic or undemocratic – that are aligned with the West, such as Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran is primarily defined as an Islamic state (“Islamist”, “Ayatollah”, “Shiite power”, “theocracy”), i.e. in terms of its religion, and associated with terrorist groups (“the world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism”, “an expansionist state exporting terror across the globe”), which serves as an umbrella term for a great variety of groups, but pragmatically is almost exclusively understood to mean terrorism in the framework of the WoT. The description of ‘us’, on the other hand (see Table 4), draws an entirely different picture. First of all, the West and its allies are frequently represented by official institutions (“Capitol Hill”, “the Senate”, “Congress”, “the White House”, “the National Council of Resistance in Iran”), which conveys a strong notion of legitimacy. In addition, the word “power” is frequently used when referring to the West as a collective (“world powers”, “five great power partners”, “world’s six largest powers”, “the Western powers”, “the strongest military and economic powers on earth”), suggesting that the West has both the upper hand in the conflict as well as authority in speaking for ‘world opinion’. This is further underlined by the use of very positively connoted terms in reference to countries working with the US (“its European allies”, “America’s partners”, “the fellowship of peaceful nations”, “five great power partners”, “Israel and U.S. Arab allies”), as opposed to the terms used for Iran’s ‘partners’ (“its proxies”, “Shiite allies and other militants”, “its puppet regimes in Syria and Iraq”). This creates the impression that while the US cooperates with its partners democratically on the same level, Iran is merely attempting to control others to force their will on the region.

The dominant explanatory themes identified in the articles, also, provide a very straight-forward construction of actors and events, causes and effects. Firstly, in all articles, the blame for the crisis is – with varying degrees of intensity – identified to lie with the Iranians. ‘Provocations’ by the West are mentioned – most notably in *The Guardian*, but within the overall explanatory framework that attributes a variety of negative features to the Iranian government, such casual mentions hardly make a difference. Consistently, it is being implied that negotiations were initiated by the West in order to avoid military conflict which – it is suggested – is something the Iranians would take their chances with. The picture is that of a powerful alliance of nations that choose to waive their power for the good of humankind, while the Iranians are portrayed as having been forced by the sanctions regime to concede and give up their dreams of nuclear weaponry. This argument seems to be used, therefore, to justify harsh economic sanctions as a valid instrument of conflict resolution, backgrounding at the same time the suffering these sanctions have caused on innocent civilians. This is identical to the offi-

cial narrative that is propagated by most Western politicians (Obama 2015; Netanyahu 2015), and takes no account of alternative narratives which present Iran as the active part in seeking negotiations, with the West refusing to accept this request until Iran had a sufficiently big leverage through its potential to enrich uranium to 20% (Porter 2014). The only news outlet to mention an active involvement by the Iranians at the sidelines is *The Guardian*, which acknowledges the effort put into current negotiations by Iranian President Rouhani. All other news outlets not only do not mention any active role by Iran, but also structurally make it clear that the West was the agent, Iran the patient in the defusing of the nuclear crisis, in spite of the clear evidence of Iranians proactively seeking to reestablish relations (Porter 2014).

Secondly, the official claim that Iran strives to obtain a nuclear weapon is presupposed throughout all media in the corpus and is never questioned. The implied reason for why Iranians are believed to pursue this goal lies in the secretive nature of their nuclear program that was exposed in 2002, i.e. in circumstantial evidence. Not one of the articles questions the validity of this very central claim and none takes into account the fatwa against chemical weapons that was issued by Ayatollah Khomeini twice (which is even mentioned in Obama's statement), and which was the reason why Iranians did not respond in kind to chemical attacks by Iraqis during the Iraq-Iran war. The articles also ignore the dubious origins of the documents used to implicate Iran with seeking nuclear capacity, which was provided by what Porter calls "the Iranian exile terrorist organization Mujahedeen E-Khalq (MEK)", and which according to then-IAEA director general El Baradei were never authenticated (Porter January 10, 2015, online). They also neglect the Iranian viewpoint claiming that they never actively pursued a nuclear weapon – striving only for a civil use of nuclear power – and that they merely started the uranium enrichment program to pressure the West into serious negotiations.

Thirdly, the accusation that Iran is a sponsor of international terrorism, frequently put forth by various U.S. administrations, is also very prominent in the corpus. In many cases, this sponsorship is also presupposed rather than explicitly mentioned, and the tendency to ascribe such affiliations to terror groups is admittedly stronger in US papers, so it appears to be a more dominant aspect of the US narrative. What is interesting in this respect is to see that some articles attempt to affiliate Iran simultaneously with Al-Qaeda, which is a Sunni extremist group, as well as with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, which are Shia, while simultaneously insinuating that Iran and Saudi Arabia were engaged in a Sunni-Shia religious conflict, creating an unresolved contradiction; however, few readers are bound to be aware of this for lack of required background knowledge. Notably, also, the usage of the various lexemes related to 'terror' manages to achieve the affiliation with Al-Qaeda or ISIS even without explicit mention, through its association with the 'War on Terror' narrative. This obscures the fact that Iran is backing groups with more local interests, which are – mostly – not directing their attacks against the West, and not groups such as Al-Qaeda, which have global reach and ambitions. The frequent use of 'terror' in connection with Iran (see Table 12) can be



argued to create a very tight connection between the two in the readers' mind, to the effect that any means necessary appear to be justified against Iran as they – via the WoT frame – are seen as a vital threat to Western civilization.

Fourthly, the notion of anti-Americanism or of an anti-Western attitude is also employed across the media outlets with some consistency, and thus positions Iran as a natural opponent of 'our' way of life. However, while this notion is being invoked, there is no exploration or even mentioning of any potential reasons for this negative attitude. In omitting any cause-effect references, the Iranian hatred appears as an intrinsic part of their ideology and therefore only solvable by a defeat of those holding such ideology. As the historical origin is traced back to 1979, i.e. the Islamic Revolution, the anti-Western sentiment thus ties in with Islamism and the attacks on Western targets it has spawned, so that again the 'War on Terror' frame is activated and reinforced. None of the articles specifically mention any events before 1979 that may account for the revolution happening or for negative sentiments evolving; the only mentions in *The Guardian* ("The strained relationship [...] did not begin with the 1979 Iranian revolution") and the *Daily Mail* ("[Iran] has suffered centuries of humiliation at the hands of Westerners") remain superficial, isolated and lacking in meaningful context. The overall effect of this is to locate the blame for the strained relations with Iran, since the narrative starts with their actions, whose further causal motivations are not or insufficiently explored.

On the other hand, there are quite a number of intertextual references that attempt to frame the issue in a particular way, by drawing on well-known historical narratives. Besides the WoT narrative, which was already discussed, the second major narrative is the Cold War narrative, both of which serve to provide the readers with a ready-made interpretational pattern through which to make sense of the unfolding events. The Cold War frame, here, evokes the threat of constant annihilation that was propagated and consequently felt on a regular basis during that period. It suggests that at any point in time, Iran – being thus likened to the Soviets – could decide to initiate a nuclear holocaust. The reference also suggests that the two parties involved are equally strong, similar to the U.S. and Soviet Russia, as well as it implies that Iran is pursuing hegemonic goals in the region, comparable to the goals the Soviets pursued through the Eastern Block or their invasion of Afghanistan.

Such a frame, however, can be argued to critically under- or even misrepresent crucial aspects of reality by drawing on an already established narrative. Most of all, it backgrounds the inequality of power between 'the West' and Iran, which investigative journalists such as Porter (July 15, 2015) consider to be the main reason for why negotiations with Iran were delayed for so long. Furthermore, it represents Iran in a way where readers may get the impression that Iran is the only country in the region to have or want nuclear weapons (e.g. by references to a nuclear arms race). However, Pakistan, India and Israel, for example, already own nuclear weapons, which was never seen as an issue. The Cold War frame, thus, serves as a powerful narrative to determine a-priori who is the good party and who the bad in this conflict and thus ignores the complex

and nuanced nature of the standoff and may prevent people from inquiring whether the question of responsibility is more multidimensional than officially assumed.

In summary, the historical contextualization of the issue is rudimentary at best. Most of the historical references are synchronous in nature, i.e. they refer to aspects and issues that people are familiar with from daily news discourse, such as terror, nuclear threat or anti-Western sentiments. There are no meaningful references to what Braudel calls 'Structural Time', i.e. no attempts to explain the issue in its historical complexity. Of course, it can be argued that this is not the function of opinion articles, but the fact that no distal factors are even mentioned to account for current tensions indicates that there appears to be a general lack of awareness or critical attitude, as the synchronous factors put forth in the articles very closely reflect official narratives propagated by Western politicians – in some parts even literally (Obama 2015 on the reason for the sanctions and on what brought Iranians to the negotiation table) – and do not take into account any alternative narratives.

The lack of a larger historical context, in connection with the genesis of the conflict being pinpointed to 1979, creates a particular cause-effect relationship in which the West does have a part ('provocations' in the *Guardian*), but in which the spark was and continues to be initiated by Iran. The specific choice of date affects readers' conceptualization of the nature of the conflict thusly that whatever the West does, this is seen merely as a reaction to previous provocations by Iran. However, a closer look at the historical development of Western-Iranian relations would show that, in fact, the converse is more likely to be true. The events of 1979 themselves, rather than appearing as the origin of the conflict, would seem like a reaction to Western intervention and to the brutality of the Western-backed regime of the Shah, and would turn the dominant narrative upside-down, by questioning the very axiom underpinning all the articles analyzed in this paper – the axiom that the West is fundamentally benevolent, and that all violent acts initiated by it are – almost by definition – a reaction to preceding acts of violence by another party and hence always justified. This notion is emphasized by the use of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, which manage to relate the conflict between the West and Iran with the frameworks of the Cold War and the 'War on Terror', in which the sides have been paradigmatically set – 'we' are good and 'they' are bad – a categorization that is automatically projected onto the issue at hand, but critically misrepresents it.

The discussion of explanatory themes has clearly shown that all of the media outlets – some more than others – reflect, endorse and thus naturalize the official narrative of the nuclear conflict between Iran and the West. Juxtaposing their accounts with the historical overview presented in chapter 5, it becomes apparent that alternative explanations that radically call into question the dominant discourse on the topic are not included, and where they are, they remain so isolated, unexplained and decontextualized that it is hard to imagine that readers would be able to meaningfully and coherently employ

these in their interpretation of the issue unless they already have in-depth knowledge of it.

Media discourse appears to follow the familiar patterns, including the orientalist and stereotypical, yet unquestioned, dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which by extension also passes a value judgment reflecting a two-dimensional, black and white thinking in all but name. It positions the Iran issue within the paradigm of the clash of civilization (Huntington 1996) and in doing so foregrounds cultural and religious differences – as well as possibly envy-based hatred of the civilized West – to account for what essentially is the incarnation of a geopolitical and socioeconomic problem which has its origin in Western postcolonial policies. The potential effect this has on the reader is to reinforce existing stereotypes of the Islamic ‘other’ by connecting to already existing conceptualizations from our everyday lives. A very complex topic is thus interpreted through the lens of contemporary discourse in which – in Blommaert’s sense – different explanatory layers collapse into one, and thus a multidimensional issue becomes a two-dimensional one in which dominant narratives are reinforced rather than questioned.

“It can be dangerous,” says the historian Margaret Macmillan, “to question the stories people tell about themselves because so much of our identity is both shaped by and bound up with our history” (2009, 47). The same is the case with the dominant narratives of the Nuclear Deal with Iran. Yet these stories need to be questioned, in particular by journalists as the fourth estate in a democracy, if the mistakes that have led to a certain dismal state of affairs are not to be repeated. History can be a great teacher, but only if we are willing to look further than the officially propagated narratives, and accept that what we may find might not resonate with our view of the world, but instead create a wholesome dissonance.

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